

## VENISON

*Michael Williamson*

For the fourth time in as many minutes, Garth Marker could swear the nighttime breeze carries a strange noise right into his ears. Like the bray of an animal in the distance, he thinks, but too pained and too protracted to be written off as stirring livestock. It is one in the morning, a Thursday, and he walks alone through the ditch alongside Palace's only stretch of road. Given the time, any sound made in Palace is unusual, this one all the more so because of the additional curiosity of what appears to be a light blinking in rhythmic intervals a football field's distance ahead. Were the sun up, he could see the whole of Palace's meager range, all sun-crikkled bent grass and un-gated cemeteries, stretching short into the borders of neighboring towns. With not even street-lamps to light his way, though, he finds he must squint and round his hands into binoculars in order to make out what lies ahead. Curiosity getting the better of him, he quickens his pace to investigate.

At mile marker eight of ten, he finds a scene that makes him regret this curiosity. Lit only by a shaft of moonlight, a deer lies in the bunchgrass, dying. Its hoofs twitch with vague remnants of life as though about to take flight while supine. Garth grimaces as a soft, unctuous tongue curls out the animal's mouth and erupts in its aftermath a loud, anguished bleat. The coppery stink of blood suffuses Garth's nostrils so vividly he thinks he might retch. The scene is disgusting, yes, but this is the least of Garth's concerns. From the ditch, he can see the source of the blinking light as well. A truck idles on the shoulder of the road and tosses lambent flashes of red from its taillights onto the pavement, a sight that frightens Garth some, though even still he can't help but measure it against his reasons for being out alone so late at night in the first place.

In all these minutes distracted by the noise and the light, he has not thought once of the power tools, which before had rested on his conscience with a boulder's weight. He had stolen the tools—every last one of them—from his Uncle Russ, on whose cot he has crashed for two weeks and of whom he has wrung dry of favors. Early this morning, Garth found the box of old power tools, fair and square, stashed beneath piles of old quilts and photo albums near his spot in the basement. He might have let them lie there, except

he has grown tired in recent weeks of Uncle Russ nagging him to drum up some money and to find a place of his own. And the tools, he knew, were worth something.

Five hours ago, once he was sure Uncle Russ was drunk in his bedroom upstairs and he was able to secret the box out the house, Garth dumped the tools on the glass counter of the Silver Star Pawn Shop, obscuring the jewelry and baseball cards and other ephemera underneath. Frank Riggins, the owner of the Silver Star, cast a mean glance at Garth across the counter, which Garth struggled to meet. Instead, he yammered his nerve-bitten fingernails against the glass. The borders of the neon sign in the window blinked patterns of light across both the men's faces. Garth shifted to avoid them.

Frank bulged his tongue across the inside of his lower lip and said, "Where'd you say you got these tools?"

Garth recited his response, which he'd rehearsed in the mirror before arrival, intent on constructing a lie that sounded as unrehearsed as possible. He'd gotten them from his mother, of course, before she died. Why else would he have so many power tools out of nowhere? He found himself in the moment unable to shut up, the lie going down new twists and paths in its final recitation. When he did force himself to be quiet, he struggled more than ever to

find Frank's eyes. Frank took up half the space behind the counter with beefy, unforgiving musculature, and in comparison Garth felt small and pursed, like a dried-out guppy.

"All right," Frank said. "I'll take them. But you're not getting more than thirty-five dollars for the lot."

"Thirty-five dollars? Are you kidding me? I'm a grown ass man, Riggins. Don't pull my leg."

"Thirty-five dollars, or I send you crawling back home to Russ with a whole mess of stolen shit."

So now the crumpled crush of bills sits wadded in Garth's pocket, having reared in him enough shame that there's no way he could go home with Uncle Russ still awake.

Now that it's late enough to return home, he finds himself here, in the ditch, where he stands above this dumb, dying animal. Another bleat from the deer rattles on the air, and Garth plugs his ears and sighs. Tiring as the thought of further intervention may be, to turn around now would only take him off his route. Palace has always had a habit of leaving him with no options but the worst ones.

He scales the hummock of grass out of the ditch. Bundled against the truck's grille rests Casey Copeland, a girl as known and unknown to him as anyone else in Palace. When she sees him, though he is sure he can't have entered her thoughts more than once or twice since she was a senior and he a freshman at Palace High, she picks herself up in an eddy of dirt and winds her arms around his neck in a gesture intimate enough to suggest close friendship.

"I didn't mean to hit it, Garth," she says. "Can't you help?"

He doesn't know what she means, and tells her as much, a statement she ignores as she continues to depress more of her weight on his shoulders. Trying for comfort, he percusses his palm against her shoulder blade, but can feel that his body language is laborious and wrong. From her hair, he whiffs a medley of scents—smoke and licorice, sweat and vanilla. A sunburst of attraction heats his midriff. He is grateful the darkness masks the reddening of his cheeks and ears.

She pulls from his grip, but maintains contact by gliding her hands down to his, her fingertips cold against his sweaty palms. She is, as ever, mighty pretty. Though her face is gaunt, it is captivating, with its long, piercing features. Flyaway strands of corn-yellow hair, though messy, filter into a bun teetered on the crown of her head. Her allure is interrupted, in fact, only by the

two-sizes-too-big hoodie that swallows her narrow frame, causing her spindly arms to jut from its sleeves like twigs from a snowman. It occurs to Garth that as Casey looks at him, she is likely to recall all the repeated rumors about his life. A life in Palace, after all, is necessarily a public life, and just as he's heard stories of her recent work as a stripper over in Bowling Green, so too must she have heard of his recent, messy firing, and the subsequent itinerant state of his home life. Though he cannot deny any of these details (indeed, their veracity shames him), he wishes he could worm his way into Casey's brain and whisper them away, explain all the ways in which these things have become ill fitting and remote from his personhood. He is certain, though, that if he were to see through her eyes, he'd want only to vanish on the spot.

"Are you going to help?" Casey says.

He adopts a hands-in-pockets, aw shucks sort of stance. "Whatever it is you want, I doubt I'm cut out to help."

"You're the only one I've seen out here for a half hour. Please, Garth. I can't have it suffer like this on account of me."

"What do you want me to do? Say a prayer for it?"

"Don't be a dolt," she says. "This was my daddy's truck. He kept a nine-millimeter in the glove compartment."

Garth clears his throat, directs his eyes downward, and gives his chin a long, prickly scratch. A vague unsteadiness rattles his knees.

“You’ve shot a gun before, right?”

He affirms his marksmanship with a nod, and says, “Sure.”

At once, Casey squeals out in thanks. The high country burr of her accent, made higher still by gratitude, pierces Garth’s ears as she again entwines him in her arms. He leaves her and finds on the other side of the truck a busted out headlight, with long brush strokes of blood smearing the passenger side door. Lucky, he thinks, she only grazed the thing. Through the rolled down window, he clicks open the glove compartment and finds there the promised handgun, where it sits dully like an old shoe, bunched between yellowed manuals and paperwork.

The sight of the gun stirs in him many feelings, though none of them much resemble the surge of masculine confidence he’d expected. All he must do, though, is present a guise of confidence to Casey, a feat he’s not sure he pulls off as he lopez in front of her and trudges back into the ditch. As he stands above the deer, he thinks for one foolish moment that it might die there in the grass of its own accord. When that, of course, doesn’t happen, he loses one quaking breath through his lips and raises the gun from his side. His pointer

finger lurches around the trigger and fills the night air with a distinctive *prap*, a sound which reaches far into the depths of his ears. Within seconds, he knows he's done it all wrong. The deer keens louder than ever, a frightful sound which battles with the gunshot's echo for space in the otherwise quiet night.

From the truck, fifteen feet away, Casey screams and asks what the fuck is going on.

Garth's voice stammers out of him like a jackhammer. "I shot it in the neck, I think," he says. "It ain't dead, though."

"By the sound of it, all of Palace knows it ain't dead. Why'd you pick the neck of all places?"

"I don't know! It's dark, or whatever. Besides, deers got to have jugular veins too, don't they?"

"Like I know about veins! Don't just stand there and let it holler itself to death. Shoot it for real this time!"

It's as though the gun, still rigid and smoking and useless at his side, had vacated his thoughts altogether in the previous seconds; remembering it now jolts him back into action. His heart streams adrenaline-fueled jitters through his limbs so that the chattering of his shoulders and forearms makes proper

aim impossible. With a bareness of intuition, he crouches low, careful to avoid the deer's hoofs as they slice the air, and jabs the gun barrel into the deer's eye socket. He doesn't even have time to repulse at its squishy give before he pulls the trigger again. The subsequent explosion of noise twins itself with a geyser of blood which spurts from the deer's face, quick and hot, and penetrates Garth's mouth and nose and drenches his shitty clothes. His mouth now coated with the metallic taste of blood, he falls onto his ass and wheezes out a series of tubercular gags. He knows Casey Copeland watches him still, but doesn't care anymore. He tosses the gun into the grass and flaps his shirt away from his chest. The heavy, soggy sound of it is like that of a waterlogged mast, but he can hardly hear it under the piercing tone of Casey's laughter, which gales and echoes over all the treetops in Palace. He swipes blood from his eyes and squints toward the road, where he sees Casey bent at the middle, slapping the fender of her father's truck to relieve the laughter.

"You look like one of them abstract paintings," she says.

### §

Number of lies he told Casey Copeland: one.

Number of times before this evening he has actually shot a gun: zero.

Truth is, in all his twenty-two years, he's only ever even laid eyes on guns in glass cases at the supermarket, and once as a child underneath a friend's father's bed. Ever since he was a boy, the presence of guns in Palace's culture has teased him. In junior high, his youthful peers would often regale him with stories of hunting trips with their fathers, going so far as to yank their t-shirt collars aside to reveal the purple bruises on their shoulders from shotgun recoil. The marks, however ugly, stirred in Garth a twinge of boyish envy so strong he devised a plan to smash his own shoulder with a rock to justify a story and a father of his own creation. He followed through, too, in his mother's yard, where the jagged collision of rock against bone hurt so much he collapsed in the dirt and wailed until his mother arrived home from work. Worst part is, his stupid shoulder didn't bruise even one bit.

But he sees no reason to share any of this with Casey. For all she knows, his shoulders are perennially bruised.

Other things he doesn't plan on sharing with Casey Copeland on this or any evening: that right now, as he sits in the bed of her truck where the buck's carcass jounces beside him and blood congeals in his hair from the fast wind of the truck's motion, his dick is rock hard. That after a lifetime of hearing objectifying groups of men lust after her, he can't believe his dumb luck being

the one invited into her home. That he is proud to have taken those tools from Uncle Russ, and prouder still to have shot the deer in the eye.

It is worth it to steal. Hell, for tonight, it is even worth it to kill.

But Casey doesn't need to know that either.

### §

Two rooms away, his clothes rattle in Casey's washing machine, soaping up stains that will never come out. Garth stands in her bathroom, fresh from the shower. Shirtless, he wears only a pair of Casey's too-tight, pink pajama bottoms. The steamy mirror unkindly reflects an image he regrets having to present to Casey as soon as he walks through the door—his round, lummo face, the tiny discs of his nipples that sag from the pink blush of his chest. He tills a hand through his hair in an attempt to lend it a messy nonchalance, but aborts this mission once he sees its pathetic results. He opts instead to cover as much of himself as he can with the towel draped across his shoulders.

When he pushes the door open, he finds Casey waiting for him in the hall, her hands knitted behind her back as though they might conceal a bouquet of flowers.

"I'd call you my knight in shining armor," she says, "except you're a little lacking in the way of armor. Look at this." She pulls one hand from behind her

back and reveals a rusty butcher knife seated in her palm. For a moment, Garth's eyebrows arch with fear, though she quickly appeases him. "Cool out, this ain't meant for you. Not in that way at least."

"I didn't think—"

"You ever skin a deer before?"

"I just got out of the damn shower," he says. "But something tells me I'm fixing to."

"That's the spirit. It'll be a night of firsts for you—first time you shoot a gun, first time in my house, first time you skin a deer." Just as he goes to offer a rankled reply, she continues. "Yeah, yeah, I could tell you'd never shot a gun before. It was pretty obvious. Don't go taking that the wrong way neither. Palace is full of enough gun-toting doofuses for two towns. Best not to blend in with that ilk, far as I'm concerned."

"Says you."

"Damn right says me. We're in my house, remember, it's all says me round here. Come on now, we've got a deer to butcher."

Though bewildered, he can't help but follow her out the house and into the driveway, where, together, they drag the deer carcass from the bed of the

truck. A trail of blood stains the gravel behind them on their way to the backyard. There, an uncovered bulb above the backdoor flares a circle of white light into the grass, where Casey plops her end of the deer and fumbles her hands through her pockets to retrieve and light a cigarette. On her phone, which she holds at chest level for Garth to see, she pulls up a video tutorial titled “HOW TO SKIN A DEER,” and shoves the knife into his hands.

He follows along with the deep-voiced man in the video and strings the deer up on a clothesline wired between two pawpaw trees. Without Casey’s assistance, the deer is much heavier, though he tries to limit his groans only to those with sufficient masculine timbre. With the dull knife, sometimes interrupted by Casey’s additional instruction, he tries to keep up with the tutorial. After one long incision to the deer’s belly, a mess of intestines spills from the cut. The organs glow shiny and pink in the white light and land on the ground with a squishy plap. Garth leaps backward to avoid the splash-back, but red flecks still dot him up to the neck.

“Hey,” Casey says and stomps a flip-flop. “Don’t go getting blood on my pajamas now.”

Garth looks down and remembers his barefoot, shirtless attire. When he returns to the deer, he can feel Casey staring at the skin on his back. He is

overcome with the urge to cover himself, or to turn out the light, but figures he's lost the opportunity to ask for either. Instead, he uses his hand to scoop more organs out from the deer, and then turns the knife to the meat itself. It is a clumsy attempt that leaves the meat jagged and disrespected, but he is proud of himself as he separates membrane from flesh, as he carves chunks of meat and plops them into the big, silver tureen Casey fetches from the kitchen.

"You're doing it all wrong," says Casey, her voice pursed by the cigarette that waggles from her lips.

The remark stings him, and births in him an unexpected hostility. "You're so confident," he says, "why don't you try?"

"All right," she says and shoves the tureen into his stomach so she can swap it in her hands for the knife from his. The sureness with which she does all this strikes Garth as discourteous, deliberately irreverent and sharp, and he can't help but feel wounded by it. He'd only been joking.

Once Casey gets going, though, he has to admit her superior proficiency. Where his cuts had been halfhearted and tremulous, Casey slices into the meat with confidence. She carves off long, spooling ribbons of meat that she folds into the tureen like a snake charmer in reverse. She moves quickly and pauses only to wipe her brow, or to drag from her cigarette.

“How come you’re so good at this?” he says after many quiet moments.

“Don’t try and flatter me now, Garth.”

“You could’ve gone first. You didn’t have to make me try.”

“But it was your kill,” Casey says with a wink before she crushes out another cigarette on the sole of her flipflop. “Figured you should get first hack at it.”

“Why make me kill it at all? You knew the whole time I couldn’t properly shoot a gun, and I bet you could’ve done it in a snap.”

“You kidding me? I didn’t want that blood on my hands. Figuratively, I mean, although literally, too, come to think of it.” She indicates with the knife the spots up to Garth’s forearms stained red with blood and lets out a sharp, breathy laugh. “Moment I saw you climbing out of that ditch, it was like Palace handing me a goddamn gift. I knew you wouldn’t have any qualms about the poor thing.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Garth. I hear the things people say.” “That’s just people saying things.”

“People wouldn’t say things if you weren’t out there doing things,” she says. “Come on, that’s enough meat for a couple weeks of meals or more.” She

drops one final strip of meat into the tureen and directs him to the sliding glass backdoor, through which he follows her. He wedges the tureen of meat between boxes of leftovers in the kitchen, and then turns on the tap and pumps soap into his hands. He smears the soapy water up to his elbows and across his chest and stomach too, and then he moves to a spool of paper towels to dry himself off.

After washing her own hands, Casey leans on the counter beside Garth. When he turns to look at her, she lights another cigarette.

“So,” she says, “are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?” He wipes a streak of water from his shoulder.

“What you were doing out on the street at one in the damn morning.” She blows a cocky plume of smoke in his face. “I can’t seem to think of a single reason that don’t paint you in ugly colors.”

Garth tosses the soaked paper towels into the garbage and then wipes his hands on the pink cotton wrapping his thighs. Before his shower, he’d squirreled the money from the power tools away in his shoe, so there’s no reason to betray anything to Casey now. With counterfeit confidence, he says, “Walking.”

“Errands to run? Overdue library book?”

“You know,” he says, trying and failing to still the rise of his shoulders, “I reckon I could ask you the same damn question.”

“Hey, I was just driving home from work. Nothing but honorable intentions for me, so help me.” Her cigarette held between two fingers, she dots an irreligious cross around her heart.

“Yeah, and where is it you work again?”

“At the strip joint over in Bowling Green,” she says. When she follows this up with a giggle, Garth knows she can read the disappointment in his drooping face. This had been, after all, his only opportunity for rebuke. “See,” she continues, “that’s the difference between you and me, Garth Marker. I know I can’t keep secrets in Palace, so I don’t go making none. You might’nt stick out like a sore thumb if you weren’t so goddamn sore all the time.”

“Can’t we talk about something else?” he says.

Casey laughs and says, “Whatever you say. I’ve got to piss.”

She pads away into the bathroom, and when she returns, it’s as though all the tension skitters out of the room only to replace itself with a different sort. Her eyes locked on his, she takes a deep pull from her cigarette and walks to the living room, where she splays her body along the couch and unzips her hoodie. Underneath, she wears only an off white camisole that barely contains

the muscular sheet of her stomach. She uses a foot to pat the cushion beside her and beckon him over, a command he follows. Once he stands over her, Casey raises her feet to allow him to sit on the couch and then lowers them like a drawbridge onto his lap. From above a crooked smirk, she measures him with her eyes. The room is quiet but for the sound of the buttons and zippers of his clothes as they smack the sides of the washing machine.

“Maybe,” Casey says as she luxuriates on the couch, “you’re just one of those nocturnal animals.”

“Like a wolf?”

“A possum, maybe.” “I’d rather a wolf.”

“That ain’t how wolves work, dummy.” Casey taps a finger against her temple, then sucks from her cigarette and expels it over her shoulder. “You were out there all by your lonesome. That’s typical possum behavior right there.”

“Ha, ha,” says Garth with what he hopes is an exaggerated roll of the eyes. “When I was a little girl, I knew a possum. Ugly little thing. You ever seen one up close? Those tails!” She pauses to fan her fingers across her chest and grimace in mock disgust. “Anyhow, this fella kept coming into our garage night after night, eating the cat’s food. Got to where the cat was all skin and bones

what with not having any food to himself. Some nights, I'd try my damndest to scare that damn possum off, by hollering, or tossing bricks at him, whatever I could think to do in the moment. But the sucker would just play dead, or else scuttle off into the woods only to come back the next night. But I was persistent, see? I camped out one night, by the cat's food bowl, with a big plastic tub from the basement, as a trap. Soon as I saw that thing coming for the garage, I stood and went to toss the tub over it, but all of a sudden he just dropped dead there in the driveway. For a moment, I thought god had done struck the thing dead or something, but then I looked over in the doorway and saw my daddy holding a BB gun. I started crying at him, telling him how unfair it was, that I wasn't trying to kill the possum, only to scare him off, but he kept repeating 'Don't go spreading kindness among pests, Casey.'"

"The hell's that got to do with me being a wolf?"

"Well," Casey says, "nothing, I suppose. All this talk of possums just brought it to mind."

"I ain't a possum."

"Well, in my house, you're a possum if I say you're a possum."

“You’d do well to remember you don’t know what I am,” says Garth. “You’ve been asking this whole time what I was doing in that ditch, and all this talk later, you still don’t know anything.”

“Not yet I don’t.”

“Nor will you ever. I’m telling you: I’m the king of keeping secrets.”

“Well, three cheers for you, Garth Marker,” Casey says, and exhales two puffs of smoke from her nostrils.

“I’m serious,” he says. And in that moment, as Casey adjusts her feet in his lap and gives him the same eye contact she’d given him beside the truck, Garth knows it is time to make his move. He sits up a little straighter, clears his throat, and says, “Why don’t you let me prove it?” With caution, but also with an attempt at suggestive eyes, he follows these words by cupping the curvature of her shin in his hand. He can feel the bristly beginnings of leg hair as he moves it upward, toward her knee.

When he sees the effect of his actions on Casey, Garth can’t help but feel knocked down a peg. At first, her jaw drops to a sardonic depth and a laugh bobs up from her throat. She perches her cigarette in an ashtray notch and scoots toward him, then lifts her ass into his lap. There, her face is kissing distance from his, though they do not touch—at such proximity, he can see every

dimple of her chapped lips, the edges where her cakey makeup trail gives way to natural skin. By no will of his own, his neck crooks and so does hers, though not in the expected direction. Instead, she bends well past his face and takes the whole of his small nipple into her mouth. At first, the feeling of her tongue on his skin is warm and velvety, and a moan pulls from his throat like taffy. But then she clamps down on his skin with her teeth and bites a perfect circle around his nipple. He yelps and squirms under her, tries to free himself. As she bears down harder and harder, he taps out on her back and yowls for mercy, but Casey does not relent until the washing machine's buzzer chimes its robotic bwaaaaaack. Grateful for the interruption, Garth takes a beat to massage the spot of soreness. Casey lifts her head up, already in a fit of laughter.

“What the hell was that?”

“If I was dumb enough to let you fuck me, Garth,” she says, “do you think you'd keep it a secret? Bless your little possum heart, Garth.” She pats his chest, which causes a whiffle of air to cool his enflamed nipple. “Let's move your clothes to the dryer.”

After they switch his clothes, Casey burrows among a nest of throw pillows on the couch's armrest, while Garth molds his body to the cushions on the opposite end, his arms crossed. Casey attempts to salve the mood with idle

chatter, but he is so busy stewing in a broth of rejection that his responses devolve into monosyllabic grunts, which Casey bares until she starts to give in to sleep under the tuneful hum of the dryer. And though sleep, too, stings the backs of his eyes, he resists it. Sometimes sulking has to take precedence over more bodily urges.

Mostly: he is sick of shame, of being made to feel it by others.

On past dawn, once the living room is made yellower by the sun ebbing through the curtains, he waits motionless until his clothes are ready, at which point he stands and slips his body into the dryer-warm folds of fabric. From there, he picks up his shoes from inside the bathroom and tiptoes to the front door. Casey mumbles in her sleep as he sneaks by the couch. Though he can't discern words from them, her syllables have a vague shushing quality.

He creaks the door open, then blinks and wags his head under the unwelcome light of morning. Looking down, he sees all the colors of his clothes have been washed out in a vomity shade of pink. Once he secures his thirty-five dollars in his pocket, he shades his eyes with his hand. Casey's yard is in full view for the first time: flower spikes in the garden bloomed to sharpened knifepoints, a whole swath of verdant acreage spread out before him like the

open pages of a book. A book he doesn't much care for, maybe, but one to which he is sure he knows the ending.

He sets off for home.

## §

As he walks home alone in the blooming sunrise, Garth feels shed of all burdens and reflects on his night with sleepy remembrance. He tries to cohere the night's happenings into something that resembles a dignified narrative. He'd brushed the edges of dignity, at least, and maybe that counts for something. Despite the embarrassments braided into the night, he can't help but smile as he recalls his nipple so recently in Casey Copeland's mouth, the undeniable power of wielding a gun, the thirty-five dollars still in his pocket. Seems like something just shy of a fantasy.

Good enough, for him.

Once home is within eyeshot, though, his thoughts are quieted by what he finds there in the yard. With long, confident strides, a doe hoofs through the grass in front of Uncle Russ's house, a wobbly fawn at her side. In the morning sun, their spotty brown pelts appear almost orange as they sniff through the dirt. Dazed and sleepy, Garth is ready to splay his body along the

lumpy cot in Uncle Russ's basement. But when he spots the deer, he finds himself unable to move. It isn't so much that he's afraid of them, he thinks, but he for sure doesn't feel able to take another step in their direction. Even from so many yards away, though, it doesn't take long for the mother deer to sniff Garth out and turn her eyes up to meet his. It is a quiet moment, intimate almost, punctured only by a distant chirp of birdsong and the volume of Garth's thoughts as they blare up once more. A couple weeks of meals or more, he can't help but think, over and over again. He averts his eyes from the doe's.

After Garth breaks eye contact, the doe continues her slow trek through Uncle Russ's yard. The fawn ambles behind her, its body teeter-tottering as it attempts a prance. Together, they move toward a dew-sogged cardboard box dumped at the bottom of Uncle Russ's porch steps and root through its contents with their snouts. Garth struggles to recognize the box and screws up his face to see what it might be. When he spots piles of his own belongings spilling out from the box's open flaps, a hook of worry scrapes against his insides and breaks him from his paralysis.

He runs and stumbles toward the box. The deer bound away at his approach and disappear into a nearby spinney of trees. By the time Garth reaches the spot where they'd stood, he is breathless, and he drops to the ground. The

grass is littered with his old t- shirts, yearbooks, and tangled-up cords of electronics that he crawls around to scoop into his arms. He crawls to the box and there, banded across the front like a scroll, he finds a ribbon of silver duct tape. A message is written on it in Sharpie marker, in an urgent, graffitilike scrawl:

*I know what you did with my tools.*

---

**Michael Williamson** was raised in Mississippi and Kentucky. These days, he lives in Chicago with his partner and their cat. More of his fiction can be found in journals such as *Natural Bridge*, *Hypertext Review*, and *Sweet Tree Review*.