

Jennifer Lynn Krohn

The Heads of Animals

We returned from father's funeral expecting to find our mother home. She spent the first half of the funeral, spine straight, hands folded in her lap, staring into the middle distance. When the pastor asked if anyone wished to speak, she stood up, walked out of the church, and drove away.

As the taxi turned on to the narrow drive that cut through the orchard, we heard a menagerie. The peach trees bloomed—not delicate pink buds—the heads of cats, goats, and frogs. All mewling, bleating, and croaking.

I paid the taxi driver as my brother dashed into the house. He asked each room the same question, "Mother? Mother?" There was no answer. I stepped through the front door as he yelled from the back, "I'm going to see if she's in the orchard."

Her car wasn't in the driveway, but I muttered "Okay." The clatter of the screen door confirmed that he was already gone. I entered my parents' bedroom. Mother had refused to sleep there once father entered the hospital. Spread across the bed was a quilt hand sewn by my paternal grandmother. The house was haunted by the legacy of her textiles. I wrapped myself in it and tried to pretend, like I had done when I was a child, that I was in a cocoon. All I had to do was go to sleep, and I would wake up transformed.

I woke to a bang and the sound of panicked cattle. It was in the blue hour of the evening and night puddled in shadows. I extracted myself from the bed. One of the trees was bearing cows. The heifers' heads weighed the branches down, like snow does in the winter, and one had snapped. I stared at the blank eyes of the dead cow. Its tongue stuck out. The other cow heads moored, their eyes jerking back and forth, thrashing against the branches that supported them. They wanted to run, but they were rooted to this place. "Hush," I whispered and patted their noses, "It's all right." Once I calmed them, I took the broken branch and the head away and buried it. I returned with all the two-by-fours and poles I could find in the barn and spent the

night shoring up the tree.

Brother hadn't returned in the morning, nor did he return the day after that. I first cleaned out father's belongings. I donated his shirts and jeans and threw away his underwear. I wrapped his middle school and high school track trophies in grandma's doilies and filled a box that I hid in the barn. I couldn't stand the reminders of what my conception had cost him. I tended the trees and the trees' livestock. In early summer, the frogs and lizards emerged fully formed. Their green-brown bodies descended like a plague that devoured every fly and cockroach before disappearing.

When I started to pack up mother's things, I discovered matchbooks in each of her pockets. I discovered them hidden in the folds of shirts and in panties and bras. Not a collection from hotels or bars. They were Diamond matches, bought at any grocery store.

Midsummer, the cats and weasels emerged from the tree. I would catch glimpses of the small predators darting around a corner of the barn, but they too disappeared.

In my brother's room, I found notes sewn into his mattress and taped to the bottom of the drawers. They were written in my mother's well-trained cursive on scraps of newspaper and receipts. One, dated my brother's first day of school, read "When I watched you ride away on the bus, I was the happiest I've been since before you were conceived, but you came home and ruined it." Another, dated to a time when he had jumped off the roof and broken his leg, read "Why couldn't it have been your head?" I never realized how many hiding places were in the house. Soon I found the notes mother had written me: "I didn't care if you were a boy or girl, as long as you were stillborn" and "If you are going hitchhike, the least you could do is end up dead in a ditch."

I had once accused mother of being incapable of unhappiness. I had refused to go to school after Samantha Jenkins discovered I wore a training bra, more aspirational than functional, and she had papered my locker with Sports Illustrated models, my head pasted on their bodies. Mother had said, "We are so blessed. We have so many good things in our life that Samantha Jenkins shouldn't seem all that significant." The

note she had hidden on that day read “I hope Samantha Jenkins eats you alive.”

Before I could finish reading the notes, I heard the coyotes. An animal none of the trees bore. I fetched my father’s shotgun from the barn and loaded it with birdshot. I spent the next few weeks patrolling the few trees that were not ready to harvest. Finally, the goats then the cows emerged from the branches. I watched as the branches rose, freed from the weight of their offspring. I sold the livestock. I tried to sleep in that empty house I’d mistaken for a home. Staring at the pile of notes, the unspoken anger of my mother, I took her matches. One for each note. If there are any matches left, I will use them on my father’s trophies, my grandmother’s quilts, the house, the barn, and the orchard, and, if there aren’t any left, I will use a lighter.