

Arborifirm

I used to think I had the magic. The magic that, as we were told as children, would whistle in the fir trees to let you know it was near. Knowing it was like a sixth sense. As long as we were firmly rooted, it was with us and watched over us. It was what kept us happy. If you want to know the source of the magic, I used to say it was the hills, but now I know-it was the trees. For a long time, no one would cut down the trees immediately surrounding Lionel, as though they were sacred, and so the trees formed a protective barrier between us and the ever encompassing pastures of rotting stumps. But then one morning the hill behind our line of homes on the southern side of Lionel Pike was opened like a curtain, and for the first time the sun awoke me and our houses became the crown of the barren hillside, like a row of teeth piercing the gum.

We waited atop this hill until only the western barricade of trees was left. I felt the danger of our magic slipping away. I had heard about voodoo priestesses and I knew about the witches of Oz, and I knew that this magic was there for my taking if I could only call it back. Like so many times before, I gathered sticks and sawdust and remnant bits of wood from the slope behind our home, and used long matchsticks like a magic wand, and needles shed from our own Christmas tree. With my brother I made a fire in the fireplace and I conjured something in that fire. The next day our chimney toppled down the hillside. We had called the magic back, you could feel it pour in through the hole in our wall, cold and ancient like the breath of an endless cave. We could see the forest begin to regenerate, rows of small trees covering the earth in ranks. I thought it was my doing.

Somewhere along the lines, I began to wonder what I had really conjured in that fire. The ground started to give away underneath us. It was being reclaimed, and we were moved. We thought we were fortunate because our house was the first to become unlivable and the foresters paid us off quickly and quietly. We had the deed to another home and mom had got one of the coveted, year long, indoor positions at the new branch of Glenn Arborifirm in time for Christmas. Maybe it worked out that way because she had an in, an inside advantage in the company. And when I graduated and she married that inside advantage, the head of operations, I inherited her still-coveted job like a throne. Everyone knew it was given to me because of lineage and not merit, for until then I hadn't worked a day in my life. All day long at my post I wonder, if I hadn't made that fire and caused the bricks and mortar to expand and shift, if I hadn't so soon revealed that the hills weren't stable without the trees, how long we could have held out before the hill gave way. And when we would have finally left, I wonder how things would be for us now, because everyone who had waited for the settlement all got lots in Seven Trees and they all still live there together in a row, just as they did in Lionel. They waited through the gas leaks and broken water mains and sewage-flooded basements. They waited until the houses burnt to the ground, until a utility pole made from one of the very trees that was cleared to build the town, fell upon a house, dropping the transformer into the attic. But we left too soon, we were the first to go. There's a new shopping plaza in Seven Trees. Sometimes I drive the half hour to get there, just because if you want new clothes sometimes you don't have a choice but to go a little out of your way.

Glenn Arborifirm is the only nursery and tree farm in all of Natimoba with its own pine nut plant. It was started when they began seeding Pynon Pines in the green houses, and found another use for the bulk quantities of seed cones. I am a seed spinner, an easy job, for women only or so it seems, and I am glad I have one, as half the county is unemployed for at least part of the year. Sometimes I work the second shift one day, and first the next. Sometimes I work first shift, then second shift, back to back. Sometimes there is not enough labor, and I don't work at all. I am in charge of the Position Two squirrel cage, a large, rotating drum which separates the pine nuts from the cone after they have been heated. The cage is fed by a towering green hopper which was named "Candy" by my own mother. At

the base of the hopper is a pane of glass, yellowed with sap, spattered with crumbs of cones and loose seeds. When I notice that the top level of pine cones is reaching the base of this window, I press the yellow button on the post next to my squirrel cage, and a corresponding yellow light flashes overhead, supplementing the blink of the button. This signals the fork lift operator, my immediate superior, to refill Candy. The operator is usually Fredericks, the son of the plant manager, a boy who graduated only a year before me. He'll be the manager some day.

Fredericks takes trays of pine cones from the kilns, still warm, and raises them high overhead. When the extension arm of the lift has reached its apex, it locks into place, jerking the entire machine, causing the rubber tires to screech against the concrete floor. Several pine cones always topple from the raised tray. I rush to pick these up immediately and shove them into the crack between the mouth of the hopper and the open trap of the drum. Fredericks then inches the forklift forward and back until it is perfectly aligned with the top of the hopper, before dumping the tray of cones inside. The first load rattles and chimes like bells against the metal skin of the hopper, until they reach the bottom, completely covering the window. It takes five loads to fill the hopper, and a full hopper will last only three hours. Sometimes the hopper has to be filled three times during my shift. Sometimes I come and the hopper is already full. The amount of times that the hopper is filled will determine the quality of my day.

I long for the days when I come and the hopper is nearly empty. If I work the second shift, I will switch places with Anne. If I work first shift I will work side by side with Anne. Sometimes the forklift operator from the previous shift will be filling the hopper as I arrive, before I punch my time card. I prefer to fill it after I have been there for not quite an hour; this guarantees that I will have three intermissions, three times I will get to call Fredericks, or whoever is operating the lift, and I will get to stand back from the hopper and gather the falling pine cones. I get to strain my ears to listen to the ringing of the pine cones over the whir and hum of the plant. Sometimes, a pine cone will roll across and down the aisle, past Position Three, Four and Five, to the face of the kilns. The entire factory has a faint sweet smell of pine, but in time, in months of working, it disappears and you think you must have lost your senses. But at the kilns it is strong, and it whispers through the vents and brushes against my face in warm gusts as I crouch on the floor, retrieving the lost cone. It reminds me of the times I spent stooping before the fireplace in Lionel, stirring the ashes, breathing in the warm scent of the parched Christmas tree, placed too close to the hearth.

In October, the week before Thanksgiving, the weather became suddenly cold and a rain from the west covered the entire town of Glensbrook with a crystal varnish of ice. The rain passed over the county sometime in the deep of the night. When I awoke in the dark at half past four, I could see the moon sparkling over the rows of trees through the ice-screen on the window panes, and I thought I heard the wind howl in the trees. I had been assigned to work the first shift all week, and had to be clocked in by a quarter 'til six.

As I got myself ready for work, I watched the morning news to see if the plant had been closed. I knew there was little chance that Glenn Arborifirm would close for ice, when it would not close for three feet of snow, but I still hoped, because at one point, hope had been enough. After breakfast, I took the ice scraper from the chest beside the front door and headed for my car. It was the first time I had really looked outside. The sun was not yet up, but the street lights illuminated the road, making everything glitter. The grass crunched underfoot as I walked across the lawn. I cringed at the sound of the scraping blade, peeling the ice from the windshield. As I rounded to the driver's side I noticed my neighbor's porch light was on and there was a clean spot of asphalt along the curb where his car had been.

Haley had rode everyday to school with me and my brother only two years ago. There were hardly any children in Glensbrook, and the town never even had a school. The state paid for us to attend the nearest private academy, the last Russian Orthodox school in Canada, located on the outskirts of the Lionel. My senior year, the year my brother had dropped out, was the last year the school was open. I didn't know where the children went anymore. I didn't know who drove Haley there while her father was at work. I could see the form of her and her grandmother moving behind the yellow curtains of the kitchen window.

I could very well walk to work and many people from Glensbrook do. My mother used to walk to work when she still lived in our house. During the five minute drive I pass the other workers stooping along the edges of the fir fields, and I think of her walking that route, and taking us this very way on her day off, to pick out our Christmas tree.

Glenn Arborifirm is a coniferous conglomerate, but it's the Christmas trees that made the company famous. From September to mid December the fir fields are full of workers, tagging and cutting and hauling the trees. Truckloads of hundreds of trees drive down this road all day long, so wide that cars have to pull over so that they may pass. On my drive to work, although it is yet early, the fields are never empty. But on this morning, they were.

When I arrived at the plant there were two fire trucks parked in the lot, and all the employees were standing outside watching smoke pour from the windows. The other seed spinners were standing together and I joined them.

"What's wrong, is there a fire?" I asked.

"Yeah. In the kiln," Anne replied. She continued to watch the factory. I saw the smoke pouring most thickly from the windows of our division.

"I know, I mean, what's going on?" I asked. I noticed that the fire fighters were milling around with the employees, sipping coffee, and smiling.

"Something with the rain. The smokestack caved in last night. I don't know. It's just smoke."

The plant manager, Roger Fredericks, came forward clapping his hands. "Ok people, get back to work. Pine nutters, come here. Temporary reassignment." The crowd dispersed, but we stood in place. We knew a reassignment meant field work. "Let's tag some trees." Roger clapped his hands again, moving into the middle of the group of spinners.

We each were given a box of red tags, a box of yellow tags, and a clipboard with sheets of gridded paper. Each one of us was assigned to a team out in the fields. We were to meet the head of our team for instructions. I was assigned to section twelve, the farthest section you can get to without driving, and told to wander down the road behind the green houses until I found my team. I would be working under Haley's father.

The air was bitter cold, the trees were still covered in ice. I tried to ignore the clamor of chain saws and shouting and the diesel grumble and slapping exhaust flaps of the tractors hauling empty beds into the fields. I looked down every row of trees, and when there was one row without any person or any sign of human life, a misplaced clipboard or discarded coffee cup, I slowed down and watched how the branches glimmered pastel green and white, twinkling with each step forward. I heard the wind in the

branches, and felt a chill sweep up my neck. I remember coming here every December with one of the tree vouchers that Glenn Arborifirm would give some of the families of Glensbrook, mine included. My brother Ruthie and I would wander until we couldn't feel our feet, trying to find the best yellow tagged tree, the tag almost hidden like a canary sitting in the branches.

Walking to section twelve, I realized that my feet were numb now, too. I had not expected to be outside today, and was wearing only old sneakers. Every time a tractor passed and I had to move into the grass alongside the road, my feet would become encrusted, studded with bits of wet ice. I remembered a trick my mother taught me. When your feet are cold, tell yourself that you are floating. I don't know how this helps, but it feels real. I held the boxes stacked in front of me, the clipboard balanced on the top. I could feel how parched my hands were already. It took me more than ten minutes to reach my section. Haley's father was waiting for me, holding his walkie-talkie up to his mouth.

"All right Rog. She's here," he said.

"All right then Ben," Roger's voice rasped through the speaker.

"O.k. Karly, here's what you do. See that tree there?" He pointed to a fat, full balsam fir tree to our left. "That's a red tag. Red means it'll be a Christmas tree," he said. "A nice end, for a nice tree, right? O.k. Now see that one?" He pointed to a short sparse tree, missing its top, that was growing across the gravel.

"Yes, that ugly one?" I asked.

"Yeah. That's a yellow. Scrap trees. The branches for wreaths, the wood for pellets and animal litter and the like." His walkie-talkie hissed in its holster. "If you aren't sure, mark it red." He grabbed the clipboard from the top of the boxes and examined the papers. He took the pen and began writing numbers across the top, starting with six.

"This is row six of section twelve," he said. "Each time you mark a tree, tally it under the left or right, red or yellow. Then add them all up at the bottom and move onto the next row." He put my boxes on the ground and grabbed a handful of each color and put them in some plastic bags he had in his pockets. "You don't need to drag these everywhere." Then he took off his gloves and handed them to me. "You're going to need these, too. All set?"

"I think so," I said. "Thank you."

He nodded, and walked towards the group of men, the saw crew. They had all been waiting for me. I put the gloves on my hands. They were warm and dry, worn thin at spots with balls of lining in each finger tip. I pulled the gloves down as far as I could and tightened the wrist band. They were still much too large and it took me several moments to fish out a red tag from the plastic bag for the first tree he had pointed out. I looped the pointed end of the tab around the end of a branch and poked it into the small hole at its base. As soon as I had done so, the cutting crew came forward to remove the tree. I tallied it under the 'Red' column.

I never was told to take a morning break, and by lunchtime my feet felt like they had been soaking in a bucket of ice water. I had long lost the saw crew, the trees had completely thawed, the air was heavy and misty, every branch was covered in beads of water. My arms ached from reaching up and

into the trees, and I had begun tagging them below waist level. Each row had nearly a hundred trees, and I was just beginning to tag my fourth row, row nine. I was already on my third bagful of red tags, my face was scratched and sticky from leaning into the trees, my nose cold, the cuffs of my jacket were yellow and hardened by the sap. But every time I spotted a truly defective tree, a rise came up within me. I was excited to tag it yellow, the occurrence so rare. I was still on my first bag of yellow tags. I felt pity for the tree, fated to be hacked apart, rearranged into a garland or swag, chopped into a thousand chips, but at the same time I was so thrilled to reach into that yellow bag, to not have to see another red flag of plastic. I don't know if it was the old familiarity of the yellow tags, or the monotony of the red, but at the start of each row, I would pause, scanning the expansion of trees, just trying to spot a defective tree, topless, brown-needled, and bare spotted.

Just as I had tagged my first yellow tree in the fourth row, Haley came bounding up behind me. "My dad says it's time for lunch. And you have to be back at eleven." She was wearing a pair of old canvas shoes, gray-blue, darkened by the wetness of the grass in the fir fields. Her nose was red, and in her hand was half of a sandwich, grape jelly dripping from the bread.

"Day off from school?" I asked.

"I wish," she scoffed. She skipped and twirled down the row and I began following her, walking towards the gravel road. I still couldn't believe that at only half past ten, I was already getting my lunch. The only relief of the first shift is that you are home by three. Pulling off the gloves, I set them on the box of tags still at the base of row six. I walked towards my car, where I had left my lunch. I didn't notice Haley disappear somewhere into the trees.

The next day at work, I was put back into the fields to tag the trees, while the other seed spinners were asked to clean the soot from the machines and windows of the plant. Haley's father had requested me to help him again. I fell into a steady pattern of tagging: find a jutting branch, tuck the clipboard under my arm, hold the tag in my left hand, twist and loop the arrowed-ended band into the hole in the tag with my right hand, grab the clipboard, put a tally under 'Red.' There had only been five yellow tags so far, and I moved even slower than the day before, not even making it to the fourth row by the time Haley had found me.

"Lunch time," she said, darting into a row of trees. I followed her.

"Hey Haley!" I called after her, but she was gone. How a fourth grade child could be here, in the middle of a school day, I did not understand. I walked to the end of the row. I was wearing Haley's father's gloves again, and I placed them on the boxes of tags. By the end of the day I was so exhausted that I forgot to remove the gloves, wearing them the entire ride home and only noticing when they stuck fast to the steering wheel. I had tagged a total of eight yellow trees.

On Wednesday I was placed back at my station at the squirrel cages. I was relieved to be manning the squirrel cage again, to be in the warmth, and was almost getting used to eating lunch at midmorning. I had gotten to fill the hopper three times, even chased the cones over to the kiln twice. When I got into my car to leave at three, I saw the gloves sitting on the passenger's seat. I had never returned Haley's father's gloves. He must of had to tag all the trees with his bare hands.

When I arrived at home I saw that Haley's father's car was not back yet, but through the window I could see Haley and her grandmother in the living room. As I approached the house I could see Haley

was arranging something inside a green shoe box. When she saw me, she quickly put the lid on the box, and answered the door.

"I feel awful," I said to her. "I forgot to give your dad his gloves back."

Haley shrugged.

"What are you doing home from school?" I asked. "Are you sick?"

"No." She did a two step on the carpet. "Grandma teaches me," she shrugged again. I watched her grandmother for a few minutes, listening with her to the radio. She was nearly deaf, and had the volume turned up loud enough to rattle the window panes. The news was on, and she tapped her feet with every musical sound clip as Haley toe-danced before her like a ballerina.

The music stopped and Haley's grandmother continued to strike her hand on her knee to keep time for the dancing, which had progressed into a tap routine. "Doesn't she have the spark?" she asked me. "She got it from me." I nodded and gazed around the room.

On the coffee table was a neat stack of construction paper cut into narrow rectangles, about the size of the shoe box. Next to these rectangles was an orange plastic molded cowboy riding a bucking mustang. There was a picture encyclopedia opened to an article entitled "The Cattle Industry." The box itself was worn around the corners, and had a hole cut in the middle of the lid, and another, smaller, in the end. There was a pile of little figurines and toys on the floor.

"What are you making?" I asked her.

She stopped dancing. "A diorama. For the Wild West," she replied. She stepped in front of the table, blocking my view. "You can see it when I'm done."

"O.k. Haley." The clock chimed quarter after. "Give your dad these gloves, then." I stepped away from the coffee table, out of the radius of warmth around the kerosene heater. The cold air came with such force through the cracks around the door, that I could feel it tousle my hair. I left the gloves lying across the arm of the sofa. "Goodbye!" I shouted over the weather report. Haley's grandmother held up her hand, her pointer and middle finger raised together, as if in blessing. The radio predicted snow showers.

The next morning I expected to peer out the window into a flurry of falling snow, but instead I saw only the dark of the morning, the blue night sky, and blue rows of trees, blue grass, blue mountains. There was no ice to scrape from my windows, no fire at the plant. The hopper was full when I arrived. I quickly fell into a steady pace, flipping the switch to open the hopper trap door, flipping it back to close the door. I pressed the button to activate the squirrel cage. I pressed the button to stop the squirrel cage. I flipped the switch to dump the de-seeded cones into the refuse box. I flipped it back to close the opening at the base of the cage. I didn't bother to completely empty the cylinder, to spin and re-spin the cage until all the cones were settled over the door. When the bin below the squirrel cage would become full, I pressed the yellow button to signal Fredericks to take the bin away. He came from the other side of the contraption, and I could only see glimmers of yellow painted steel through the gaps between the hopper and the revolving pine cones. I could hear the faint sounds of the hydraulics lowering the arm to the floor, scooping up the bin, and dragging it from my sight.

After lunch I returned to my machine. The cones had been spinning alone for half an hour, and were ready to be removed. As I switched off the cage, I noticed a distinct clunk. The pine cones jolted against the metal walls. When I restarted the machine I heard it again. Clunk. Every few minutes, a clunk. The clunking sometimes happened in clusters of three, or four, or larger. I began noticing patterns. The noise grew louder and more frequent, it mixed and droned with the whirring machine. One, two, three, clunk, clunk, clunk, like a box step. A pause in the clunking and I could hear just the whir of the plant, the forklift wheels on concrete. Then again. Clunk clunk, clunk clunk, like a train on the tracks. Clunk-clunk clunk, clunk-clunk clunk, like a running horse. I signaled Fredericks to come and listen.

"It's nothing," he said. "Loose mechanism."

"Nothing?" I repeated. "It sounds like there's something galloping around in there."

"I'll tell Roger that you found a horse in the pine cones."

Roger agreed, it was nothing.

The noise grew louder, more frequent. I imagined a horse at the races. I imagined a Conestoga wagon, pulling a load of pine trees. I imagined Haley's diorama, and the little horse riding through the thick woods, and then through the fir fields, fields of stumps, into the open prairie land. She would use sticks for the trees, and construction paper for the grass. There would be little green tissue leaves and red berries glued to the trees. The man on the horse would ride to a stream and let the horse drink. Its feet would splash on the banks. The man would shoot at the sky with his guns, clunk. He'd ride all day, clunk-clunk clunk, clunk-clunk clunk. The horse would stop at the top of a knoll, and the cowboy would scan the horizon, looking for indians, for black angus cattle. The wind would blow the grass around him and whip his bandana, tug at his ten gallon hat and whir in his ears. Then again, clunk-clunk clunk.

As I arrived home from work Haley was waiting for me on my porch. I stepped from my car, and walked up to the stoop.

"Hello Haley."

She was grinning. "I finished my diorama. You told me you wanted to see it." She jump down the front steps, prancing to her house.

On the kitchen table was the green shoe box. There was a rubber band around its middle, securing the lid. "Can I open it?" I asked.

"No. Don't move it!" she gasped. She held my hands down, before I could reach them out to pick up the box. "You have to look through the hole."

In the front of the box there was a small circle. Haley motioned for me to crouch upon the floor with her. I peered into the box. At first I could see nothing, but a light spot glowing on the ceiling of the box, where the hole had been cut. As I looked closer, I could see the figurine on the horse, dimly lit, barely visible. But I could see nothing else. The box was too dark.

"If you remove the lid Haley, I could see everything you did." I told her. "It's so dark in there. I can't see anything."

She only shrugged. "You can't take the lid off, it's like a peek box."

"But it's awful hard to see. I want to see all you've done," I protested. "Maybe you could make more holes in the lid."

"No. That's the spotlight." She was not listening to me, but was tapping her hands on the edge of the table. Her grandmother turned the radio off, and looked our way.

"Back to school, Haley," she said. She turned the radio on again.

"Well, it's really neat, Haley," I said.

"Thanks."

"What are you going to do in school now that you're done with it?"

Haley's grandmother glanced over to us again. Haley motioned to the radio, as an announcement concerning a visit from the Queen broadcast over the speakers. "I'm learning about her Majesty."

That night I dreamt about the clunking drum. I would wake and find my fingers tapping; my eyes would swirl and jerk the shapes in my room as though I'd been twirling in circles in my sleep. I saw the horse running in the drum like a hamster in an exercise wheel. I saw the cowboy at the plant, shooting a hole into the ceiling, light pouring in, illuminating him on his horse. The next morning, I called Anne, and asked if she would switch her Saturday shift for my shift that day. I couldn't pull myself from bed, I was too tired. I slept until late in the afternoon. The next night, I only dreamt again.

The clunking became louder yet on Saturday morning. I began noticing the different types of clunking, all around me. The bedroom door clunked when I closed it before work, my parking brake clunked when I arrived at the plant, the toilet seat clunked in the employee rest room, the squirrel cage clunked, louder and louder. I kicked the squirrel cage, it clunked more. The clunking lost its rhythm. I went to the break room, to try to escape the noise. A half an hour before the end of my shift, I left my station and stood before the kiln, smelling the warming pine cones as they stretched open their wooden scales, feeling the air on my face. I stood there long past the last batch of pine cones was finished shedding its seeds, until Fredericks opened the door to the kiln to get another tray of cones.

"Get back to work," he said.

"O.k.," I said. I glanced at the clock; it was almost three and so I went home.

Haley was waiting for me again when I got home. Before I got out of the car, she was standing in front of the driver's side window. I cracked the door open and the cold air rushed in.

"I'm done with the Queen," she said.

"The Queen?" I asked.

"I made her house."

"Buckingham Palace?"

"Want to see it?" She led me into her house again, to the kitchen table. It was covered in silver glitter. In the middle of a table was a green shoe box. I crouched down in front of the box and looked inside. After a moment I could make out a smaller box below the light. Its contents shimmered like a lost treasure under that one penetrating beam.

"What's that?" I asked Haley.

"The crown jewels," she replied. "Over here," she pointed to the front of the box, "are the palace gardens. They look ugly this time of year because they are sleeping." She pointed to the side of the box. "Here are the guards, but they don't do much but stand."

"And the Palace?" I asked.

"Here," she said. She pointed to the area underneath the little skylight.

"I guess you have it all figured out," I told her.

"It's not that hard," she replied.

I looked around the room. There was a box of paper scraps. Solid squares of color carefully clipped from newspaper pictures, paint chips, old pay stubs, napkins, and blue facial tissues. A yellow times table. There were mason jars of colored glitter: red, green, blue, silver, gold, purple, their caps marked '10c.' There was a pair of plastic scissors with two-toned handles, blue and white. I saw the stack of construction paper, cut to size, that had been on the coffee table. "Do you make a lot of dioramas?" I asked her.

"Mostly dioramas," she replied.

"Where do you get all of the shoe boxes, then?"

"From my new sneakers I got," she said, "when I started school." I looked at her sneakers. They were the same old shoes she had worn in the fir fields last week.

I returned to work Monday afternoon. Since I had talked to Haley on Saturday I had forgotten about the clunking and had stopped hearing it everywhere around me. The parking brake snapped as it locked. The second hand tick tacked as it moved across the clock. Clothing flapped on the wash line. At night, the horse hooves clumped on the prairie grass. But, as soon as I saw the de-seeder, I heard the noise. And now that selfsame clunking was accompanied by a scratching sound, like another part had come loose and was stuck in the base of the drum, and it screeched and grinded against the metal with every revolution. Scrape, slide, like a penny in the washer. Clack, rasp, like chalk on a blackboard. Click, grate, click, like grinding teeth. Clunk, clunk.

The day continued forward, clunk, clunk, clunk. I filled the hopper three times, scrape, scrunch, clunk. I chased two pine cones to the kilns. I restarted and stopped the drum seventeen times, kachunk, kachunk, clunk, clunk. I saw Fredericks flash behind the machine. "It keeps (clunk clunk) getting louder!" I yell. He pointed at position number five, next to the kilns, as he slid an empty tray under the squirrel cage. I looked at the clock. Time to go, clunk clunk, home.

Car door, clunk. Front door, scrape, clunk. Bedroom door, clunk, screech. Bedroom door, clunk, screech. Front door, scrape, clunk. Car door, clunk. Tuesday, clunk, rasp, clack, clunk clunk. Wednesday, click clunk, kachunk, scratch. Thursday, screech, clunk, screech, clunk, "Not now, Haley," scrape, clunk, clunk, screech. At home, before work, the front door clunked by itself, the porch clunked by itself, the windows, pattered and rapped and kachunked by themselves. "Are you avoiding me?" "No Haley." "I want to show you something." "I have to work, Haley." "You don't answer your door." Clunk.

At work I meditated, I used the noises to filter themselves. There was a royal wedding, empty tin cans of Folger's Crystals would drag and clatter against the cobblestones, tied to the back of the carriage with ribbons. The horses would clunk clunk, clunk clunk down the street. The groundskeeper was trimming roses in the palace gardens for the bouquet. The blades of the clippers clacked and slid against each other and clunk, the rose stem was severed. The Queen was trying on her crown and scrape it fell from her head, down her curls, down the back of her skirt. Clunk, it landed in the box of jewels.

At night in my bedroom, Fredericks would bring the box of jewels on the arms of the fork lift, and raise them high to the ceiling. They would glitter in the light. The lift locked into place, clunk. The jewels rained down onto the floor, scattering under the other machines, patter click. I ran to gather the jewels, and they slipped through my fingers. Fredericks dumped the box into the hopper. Scrape, clunk. The door would open, the jewels fell into the squirrel cage, scrape, clunk. The squirrel cage would revolve, scrape clunk. The crowns and brooches and rings, gold, and silver, diamonds and rubies and sapphires and opals would spin against the metal drum, clacking against each other. Little jewels would separate from the larger jewels and fall into the seed trap. Little seed jewels, put in little seed jewel boxes. Sent to New Mexico to be roasted. Sent to Nevada to be planted. Sprouting like magic into jewel trees. Tomorrow I had to wake early, I had to work first shift.

Clunk screech, scrape clunk, clunk. I drove through the fields of fir trees, watching the saw crews scraping their saws against the tree trunks. At work, the squirrel cage was as loud as ever. I thought for a second the cones would shed gems. I looked in the hatch, but there were only seeds. I complained to Fredericks. "They're ten years old," he said. "They all rattle."

"Not like this," I said. I mumbled. Clunk clunk clunk. I walked to each position. One, Two, Three, on my side. Clunk, scrape. Safely spaced ten feet apart. Spinning drums and full hoppers. Kachunk. Four, across from me. Five.

I escaped to the restroom, I could still hear the drum, clunking, reverberating through the vents. The faucet scraped on. It scraped off. I walked back to my position. I unloaded the empty cones into the bin. I switched on my yellow flashing light. I looked at the clock. It was after lunch. While in the restroom, I had missed lunch. While I was running the faucet, listening to the quiet whish of the water, rubbing my temples to ease my headache, I had missed lunch. I saw Haley. She was wearing her old blue sneakers, a hardhat tipped over her eyes.

She carried a shoe box sideways, under her arm. The green shoe box. She handed it to me, it felt light, as though it was empty. I held it up and looked through the hole in the front. The clunking was so loud, that I could hardly think to focus my eyes. They adjusted to the darkness and I searched against the inside walls, but I could see nothing. I looked at the light pouring through the top. It hurt my eyes, and I felt a piercing in the front of my head.

"What's inside?" I asked her.

"Nothin'" she said. She smiled, pulling the box down to her eye level.

"No what's in it? I'm going to open it if you don't tell me..." I joked with her.

I sat on the floor, as she held the box steady. I looked inside again. I felt her leaning over me, over the box. Her face appeared in the hole. And then she blew into it. I felt her breath graze across my eye.

She said something, I couldn't hear her over the machinery. She pointed to me.

"What?" I asked. Clunk screech. I couldn't hear her. I reached behind me. Scratch clack, Kachunk. I pressed the button. The drum stopped. Clunk. The pine cones slid around the cage one last time, scrape. They tumbled against each other. Scrunch.

"It's just my box," she said. "But you can keep it." I stepped into the passageway between the machines where I could feel the kiln vents blowing. It smelled like hot pine. The gusts tickled my eyes. It was warm and chilling on my face. Fredericks drove by.

"Get back to work," he said. I held onto the box. Haley was doing her two-step on a flat-empty bin. I listened to the kiln air. It drowned out the whir and clunk of the other machines.

"I can't take this noise. I'm quitting," I said.

"You'll kill to get this job back in two weeks." he said.

"I want to work in the fields again," I said.

"No you don't, get back to work," he answered. And I knew he was right. I learned to hate the fields like I learned to hate spinning seeds. If there was any magic left in the trees, it fled before we got our hands on it. I saw Haley dancing, twirling a strip of packing tape in the air like a banner. I felt it whip past my ear. I knew that she would be working here in ten years, and I wondered if she would be happy. I wondered if she would still be able to remember when the trees towered over her and when she had the magic.

Fredericks drove forward on the forklift. Then he stopped it, screech. "Try five."

I heard the kiln fans turn on. I listened for the clunking. No clunking. I looked at Position Five. I heard the air push forth. "O.k."

I took Haley by the hand. We walked toward the kilns. She held the box. The hopper was named 'Finch.' The window on the hopper was spotless. As I pressed the call button and the yellow light flashed above me, onto the floor, onto the tip of Haley's nose, I realized something. She didn't have it either. But it ran through her like electricity through a wire, and she knew this. The kiln ignited making a soft noise, a swishing, like branches rustling, snow falling. I watched Fredericks loading the hopper, I listened to the cones ring against its metal walls. I leaned against the orange face of the kiln, smelling the air as it poured from the vents. I watched as Haley chased the raining pine cones scattering and spreading over the concrete floor. I looked inside the box, and it was just a box. I knew this all along, because it couldn't possibly hold what was inside.