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DOE

Alayna Becker



It's hunting season in the woods where my girlfriend and I live, outside our tiny green cabin in Mississippi. We're tucked between a pine thicket and marshy hardwoods, beside a lake where fat catfish pace the rusty bottom. Thick vines

hang from bare trees, moss carpets the lowland beside the creek until out on the ridge, a half mile back following the winding creek past where it dries, the land opens out to an expanse of toasted grass turned gold in the winter sun.

Around a big full moon bonfire my girl's dad asks my biggest fear. This is him trying to get to know me, I think, or he's testing me. I'm not sure whether to answer honestly. Beneath his camo Stihl hat, I meet his eye, flickering amber. His face is my girl's face, but bearded and sun-weathered. Same high cheekbones, same honey eyes, even the same shaggy slicked back haircut and denim shearling jacket.

Men in the woods, I answer him like a joke, the only way to say true things.

Another true answer would be: you.

He tells me up north is where the bad guys really are, all the serial killers, the militias in Portland, he points out. Here in Mississippi, I'm safe with him. He offers to pay for gun classes. Despite missing the point, I'll take him up on it.

I walk in the woods by myself every day and try to convince myself I am alone. Beneath a canopy of mockingbirds and mourning doves, I drink in the winter sun, I want to believe I am safe. The copper leaves shake like coins in the wind, then somewhere, a branch breaks.

Here, the men hide in blinds built up in the trees or in camo tents, invisible until you meet the eye of the barrel pointed in your direction.

When the election results are certified, the good news we'd been forced to wait for, her dad takes me out into the field to shoot a 12-gauge shotgun. He stands behind me, a Bud Light in one hand, his other, over mine, showing me the safety.

I aim at the open sky and fire. I love it more than I expect. The kickback shocks me into my body, I feel my blurred edges, where I meet the world. A place I am not used to occupying all the time yet, even now. I shuck it and fire again.

In Mississippi, if you're hunting with a shotgun, you're looking for a buck. It's the law as I'm learning it. To decide if a buck is old enough, you look it right in the face, to the tip of his alert ears and measure his antler against them. If the antler ends at the ear, he's legal.

Doe used to be illegal to hunt except for one day a year. It was the busiest hunting

day of the season. Men in trucks, bent necks trail blood from their beds.

In Mississippi, baiting a deer is a crime but giving a girl too much to drink is almost love. You won't be able to prove either in court.

If you're shot in the woods, they'll ask what you were wearing.

In front of our cabin, he pounds a spike in the ground with a mallet, and I follow with a daffodil bulb. I learn he is afraid too. He covers the holes with earth, and I pat them down with my feet.

He has learned to wear camo and keep quiet. He says he can't be himself around them the way he can around us, his girls. In the spring, he says, 5,000 bulbs will bloom, and the lake will glow gold.

To be a deer, you must know fear and live anyway.

Every night, dark falls and then a small herd of doe appears to gnaw at the fresh wintergrass outside our front door. When I see them, I sit at the window to watch their little quiet mouths. Last night, a fawn got closer to the glass than she meant to, met my eye, froze, and fled into the dark.

ALAYNA BECKER is an essayist and comedian living between Oregon and Mississippi. Her work has been featured in the Shout Your Abortion anthology, *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Manifest Station*, and others. She is the managing editor of *Moss* and is at work on her first collection, *Bad Trick List*. Find more work at alaynabecker.com.