

The Language of Decay

Bees the size of thumbnails have lost their yellow tones, lying at the bottom of the polyethylene bottle. Ground setae and snapped legs lay powdered around their copper corpses, wings like wrinkled vinyl catch the light. I lean my face in, watch my reflection in the hollow plastic, pull out my camera. The box made of thick ashen wood hangs in front of a window, bullet holes bored into the sides, the bottle screwed in on the underside.

“It’s a bee trap. Haven’t you seen one before?” Jared leans over my shoulder. “No. *But I have, something like it*

as a child in an indoor swamp at the bottom of a spiral staircase – three feet of murky water fenced in glass walls, fake trees reach upwards, young alligators and turtles bask on artificial rocks in the electric light. NatureWorks, Orlando. I walk down the illusion of a dirt path, metal rails leading through the plastic marsh. In the trail, a vertical column of PVC rock stands, the tumorous hive jutting out from the side. A transparent window peaks in, reveals the interior – a hexagonal pattern like so many gaping mouths – filled with amber jewels with wings. Model-sized bees painted in yellow and black stripes. Through a hidden speaker, I hear the choral buzz, an incessant hum, and the click of the camera shutter.

“Let’s move on.”

A warped line of ruined barns and crumbling silos slumps behind the cobblestone cottages of Thornwell Orphanage. The abandoned Lushacres dairy farm has long-since been reduced to an eyesore, a pile of rotting lumber and chipped brick. A sign stands on thin metal legs, the embossed lettering illegible, punctured by shotgun spray – a turbine spins lazily in the breeze, creaking slightly and showering rust

Jared and I meander within the confines of the old farm – my camera bag slung across my shoulder, his notebook tucked beneath his arm. A milking parlor hardly stands, glass windows shattered along the tops of shutter doors. I haul a crate to the door and step up to peek my head through the empty frames. The crossbeams of metal cages are cast into shadow, wires draped across the bars like string lights. The last traces of milk lay in spoilt pools at the bottom of plastic buckets strewn across a bare floor. I push my shoulders further into the space, extending on the weight of my toes. My feet crash through the plastic lattice of the crate, but my arms hook over the lip of the door and I hang, suspended for a moment – glass shards embed themselves in the sleeves of my jacket.

“What’s going on?” Jared calls from around a corner.

“Nothing.” I drop down to the ground and kick away the crate. “It’s alright, I’m good.”

“Just don’t mess with anything.”

A tall stone silo stretches into the sky next to milking parlor, the pointed top absent, holes bored into the cylindrical walls. One crack opens beneath a rotting wooden ladder – the rungs create a handle as I swing in, feet first, with my camera in the bag on my back. Looking up, light pours in through the open ceiling, all but a circle of sky is visible, as if we had fallen to the bottom of a deep well. A wispy sapling grows from the damp earthen ground, casting needle thin shadows on the walls. A woven nest, now empty, is cradled in its kindling branches. Jared and I press our fingers, our cheeks, to the cool moist bricks, listen to the wind whistling through the cylinder. Through a lightning strike fissure in the wall, I watch dirt and debris tumble across the courtyard, into the vacant stalls of a

collapsing stable. I align my lens with the stables, capture the silhouette framed by bricks. We crawl through the entrance headfirst like bugs out of a festering wound.

I want to climb to the top of the silo. I scale the ladder and clamber up a bit before Jared grabs onto my ankle, just barely in reach. “No, come on, that’s not a good idea.”

I smile down at him, “It’s perfectly safe.” Even so, my fingers cling desperately to the moldy wood and my legs begin to tremble beneath me. I continue to climb until I can peer over the roof of the parlor. In the distance, I see the abandoned gymnasium, the wilting football field, the small stone monument with mounted bronze bell. A remote field, fenced with crude spirals of barbed wire, is home to a single creature – a horse or mule, legs short and crossed, hair a pale and mottled cream like curdled milk. It grazes lazily amid dead grass.

“Okay, now that’s really far enough.” Jared’s arms are crossed, his foot taps.

I hop down the final rungs of the ladder, land with a thud against firm ground. Jared claps a hand on my shoulder. “You worry me, you know.”

An unkempt baseball field lies behind us, a solitary barn before us. Jared walks, pen tucked behind his ear, to inspect the dusty chalk diamond. I walk forward, towards the barn and, beyond, the vacant field.

The language of decay is etched into the crude pattern of white oak, in a series of blown open doors, splintered wood lying in bonfire heaps. Red paint chips away under my fingernails. Afternoon sun sieves through the timber floors above my head, shades the ground in bands of light and shadow. The space within is empty, the floor littered with fetid cow droppings, moist from a recent rain. A stale scent wafts up, almost visible. The second floor is suspended on a series of naked trunks, bark grated away to reveal smooth skin. In

the corner leans a wooden staircase, a steel ladder resting atop that. I mount the stairs, my jeans and leather boots collecting splinters and a fine layer of dust. My right-hand digs into the rotted wall, I clutch my camera with the other.

I perch atop the stairs, unwilling to continue. I have never seen a dead body – apart from roadkill, small creatures on the side of the road, reduced to paste on asphalt. This is a carcass – a segmented spinal column, a cage of ribs split open, a dislocated femur, a leg kinked with chipped hoof – laid out directly in front of me on a folded vinyl tarp, as if pieces of a puzzle waiting to be assembled. A cow perhaps, or a horse, hard to tell – the skull is absent.

I haul myself over the threshold, navigate around the tarp, back up into the space behind it. Food pellets cascade across the floor from a broken canvas bag, the label long since washed away. I crush them under my heel as I move about the deck. Sun floats in on a wind from a window cut into the far wall. Standing in the frame, I lean out into empty air, breathing deeply. The solitary mule bays just outside in the field.

I come back to squat next to the carcass. I place the viewfinder of my camera against my eye, sweep it around the barn. In my vision, a transparent white crosshair centers composition. I train it on the corpse and release the shutter, once – rack of broken ribs – twice – marble pillar of spine – a third time – bones like hollow pylons. I draw the camera strap up around my shoulder, lean down to inspect the grained surface of cartilage. Scraps of rotting flesh and limp hair cling to the bones. Strings of sinew thread between notches of the ribs. I blow gently, and powdered skin rises like smoke. I reach for a section of backbone, a series of vertebrae notched together in a Jacob's Ladder.

Jared surprises me, pokes his head above the staircase. "What are doing? Don't touch that. Put it down." The bones clack dully as I lay them on the tarp, lining them up with the trajectory of the spine. "Have you never seen anything like this before?" *But I have in a high school classroom, along the top shelf of a cabinet, a row of skulls with devil horns like daggers mounted to cranium. I was just tall enough to reach up – my fingers grasping the jagged jaw, or slipping into eye cavities, hooking into unseen craters – and bring down a skull to rest on the desk. With graphite, I transcribed the crude curves and severe ridges of the skull, the serrated slate of bone above twin nooks of upper jaw, the fissure running like a river between eyes, the teeth set in a grim smile, loose, clinking within the jaw. The language of decay is written too on these porous and pock-marked pipes of bones, the cranial cap, the spiral staircase of spine, a gnashing maw of rib cage teeth.*

Jared bends down, inspects the carcass, turns. "We should go, girl." He starts off down the stairs.

"Wait," I turn, "there's something else here."

I stalk away from the corpse, wipe my hands on the back of my pants. A wooden shaft bridges two sections of the floor. I cross on tiptoes, my hands groping at the ceiling above, drop down onto the slanted floor. The ceiling leans low, the space crowded with fallen beams, dried wasp nests, and a child's wagon – the handle propped against the rim, green paint shavings filling the rusted bed.

I crouch to move around the space, aiming my camera at the sunny spot by the window. The wagon rests just beyond the ray of sun, too dark for camera to capture. I tap the toe of my boot against the rim of the wagon, pushing it towards the light. The wheels

give a bit in the grooves of the timber flooring, settle again as I draw my foot away. I place the camera back in my bag, wipe my hands on the sleeves of my jacket.

I fumble down the metal stairs again, land with a thud on the damp floor. The windswept doors open to the field, the fence, the mule. Jared stands in the sun, looking out towards the mule, scrawling in his notebook. I lean against the bare railing where a section of wire has been cut and twisted down the spokes of the fence. Extending my arm outwards, I snap my fingers, click my tongue against the roof of my mouth, calling out. The creature does not turn but rather bows its head into the tall grass, eye twitching in its socket.

“We should go now,” Jared looks up. “I’m starting to get hungry.”

I am repulsed by my own skin. I wring my hands together in the car, try to abandon the thoughts – spine, hinged, ribs, fragmented, femur, discarded – as we drive away. Later, I will eat a burger with these hands. Later, I will lick ice cream off these fingers. Later, in the restaurant bathroom, I will burn these arms under the tap, letting the hot water run until skin is scorched pink. But skin, too, like wood and bone, is the medium on which decay is engraved.

Word Count: 1848