

I live in a run-down cabin by the river. Sometimes, at night, when the windows are open, I lie awake and listen to the water running over the rocks. It carries remnants of fallen trees along, past the other cabins and shacks that sit rooted to its banks, and loses them far away in the Mississippi. Those are the times I think of Billy. I think about how he used to be before he became the monster he was the last time I saw him.

I was standing at the back door when I saw him walking through the tall grass of the field between our houses. Halfway through, he bent down to pick something up. When he stood, he was carrying a long, thin stick. He beat the grass with it while he moved forward, sending bits of dry broom sage flying around his head. He hit it hard and quick, like he was trying to kill it before it killed him. The early afternoon sun shone bright, right over his head, so his blonde hair glowed like a halo. He looked like some avenging angel, bodies made of grass flying up around his face and catching the light just so, making them burn bright in the moment of their death, their souls falling left and right, as he trampled the sinners beneath his feet.

It was too bright to see his face clearly, until he was almost in our yard. But every few minutes, he'd weave to one side or the other, when a particularly short group of broom sage stalks was out of the stick's reach, and I'd see the dark, dirty tan of his skin. At the edge of our lawn, he beat the stick against his leg and threw it back into the field. He lifted the rusted strands of barbed wire on the sagging fence over his head and ducked under them, stepping carefully over the bottom one. There was a quiet twang and a squeak when he let them go. The rotted wood posts bent backward, shedding dry green lichens. He took a step forward and ran his hand over his sweaty buzzcut a few times, flinging droplets of sweat and pieces of grass everywhere, then wiped his hand across his white t-shirt and left a dusty print. He stopped and looked up at our house, as if he could see right through the brick.