

## Skin

At the beginning of the school year, Kasie was late to Phys Ed. Cheeks flushed from running, she appeared at the edge of the playing field as an animated blur tearing through wild grass, leaving behind a lingering trail of citrus perfume. Summer in the Houston countryside clung around in a warm, billowing mass, and the winds brought her scent close to the strip of forest where I resided.

I fell hard. Everything about her seemed poignant and profound: her hair was the colour of onyx; the hazel pigment of her eyes matched the emerald cover of the leather-bound notebook she carried around her classes. Her voice had the soft, unobtrusive texture of melted clouds. She was sunshine and smoked cedar, perpetually chapped lips and windblown hair. *People don't understand why I let my hair grow wild*, she had written in the leather-bound notebook, *but I like the way sunlight weaves itself into my plaits when I'm outside, or when the ends of my hair split off, as if each strand has a separate idea of its own.*

She didn't come to my side of the campus often, though on occasion she and her friends would skip class after lunch to spend hours idling near forest. Laying upon a worn picnic blanket, the tangled conglomeration of teenage limbs laughed, shared tongues in hushed tones, danced to whatever pastiche blared through the speakers. Once, taken by a whim, Kasie spent an afternoon etching hasty black marker scribbles on her arm. They patterned her skin like birds, eager to take flight.

Early into the month of September, Alister went missing. No one saw him after the fourth period, though his footprints were sighted near the playing field. Kasie and her friends stopped going to school altogether – the police sealed off the school grounds with white paint and called for all students to remain at home until further notice. I had never settled into the changing of seasons with much ease, but I found the final days of Autumn that year as being one of the worst. Uncollected apples lay at my feet, stifling my senses with the putrid odour of decaying matter.

Deep in the centre of my foliage, I nestled a compartment of thoughts dedicated to Kasie, willing for her presence to linger in the time of her absence. But as time passed, the secrets scattered across the playing field that Summer were washed away by spells of rain. Like tarnished silverware incapable of reflection, memories of Kasie faltered and faded in my mind, even as I gripped them tenaciously.

Two years had passed when I finally saw Kasie again. As she emerged from the opposite end of the field, I first caught sight of her violet scarf, thrust carelessly around a pale neck, striking amidst a barren landscape of yellow grass and sleet. Recognising the familiar features of the scarf's owner, my branches tingled with nervous apprehension. *What does she make of me now? Bald, hideous, bent over from the howling winds.* Bursting to the brim with diffidence and self-loathing, I failed to acknowledge the boy trudging behind her, until he suddenly lunged forwards, tugging at Kasie's scarf so she turned to face him. Wrapped in a bear hug, a shrill

shriek of joy escaped from Kasie's lungs, dissolving into the cool January air. As the two figures toppled over my outstretched roots, I caught a whiff of Kasie's hair – she no longer smelled of citrus.

Above me, the sky collapsed in heavy rain.

The squall struck the forest with the force of a bitter imprecation. Awoken from their turbulent slumbers, bulging, veinlike ferns slithered across the forest floor, trapping Kasie in a tightly woven net. Indulgently, they nibbled at the tips of her fingers and tousled her matted hair. Through the heavy curtain of rain, I watched her chapped lips part in a silent, harrowing cry. Her eyes, two extinguished lanterns, fluttered shut and did not open again.

I stopped watching then, fixing my line of vision on the boy instead. Beneath the trembling canopy of a Japanese oak, he remained petrified and unblinking. A cruel smile played on my lips – I knew, fully well, that the agents of the forest were incapable of stopping in their most feverish hours. There will be nothing left for him to collect, not even a set of porcelain bones. A moment passed, and he broke from his cataleptic trance, falling to his knees and clawing frantically at the growing nest of wilted leaves that Kasie's inanimate body was embroiled within. The ferns pushed him to me.

I stabbed at his eyes with splintered bark until inky residue oozed from the sockets. His spine snapped back, his life draining fast, but I wasn't finished yet and gave an anguished cry – *how dare you smoulder away so easily?* His body began to writhe, bending at odd angles. *Like a boneless cephalopod.* My branches prodded him like taunts.

At last, I tore his heart from its roots, marvelling at the diaphanous sheet of skin that separated so easily from flesh, shredding into wrinkled, paper-like pieces. The resemblance between tissue and tree bark left me wistful and forlorn. *You're no different from me*, I thought out loud. The ghastly opening of his mouth failed to respond, but his soul understood me and shook. The remnants of Winter spilt at my feet, mingled with his blood.