

Testimonies from the Townspeople, in the Dead of June

Bone-tired and spirit-tattered, we march back to the base camp with empty hands. The families have already left, which is a sweet relief to us. We have started to despise their empty ghost-faces, because we know no other way to comfort them.

The dogs are frustrated and yippy; they cannot take the thing seriously. It's not their fault: they are young hunting dogs that spend spring aimlessly hunting wild fowl, and the rest of the year they snore the day away in Ned's convenience store. These pups probably already know the kids' scent from after-school trips to the candy shelves by the cash register. We bring them old shirts and shoes anyway: artifacts that look wrong without a child's body inside them. Pink tulle that is a bit scratchy to the touch, a sun-worn baseball cap — all these small things that we can hardly bear to look at as the month starts to pass through us.

We open our thermoses, but we barely eat. We discuss plans for tomorrow's search half-heartedly. The birds have stopped singing, and we are engulfed by the creaks and groans of towering maples and pine. Somewhere in the mud and in between these trees, under decomposing brown foliage and engulfed by maggots, the children hide from us. We wonder how long before we can burn it all down.

We have become used to the sight of police cars patrolling the campus. They hover around like wasps near dripped syrup and some of the senior boys dare to swat at them. We suspect that they start to hassle us to feel like the work is being done. We can only assemble in large groups if we are shelved on metal bleachers and a basketball hoop hangs above our heads. House parties are postponed indefinitely.

If we do venture into the woods, it is with a partner, and usually for a good cause. In the silence and tree-shadows we can talk, kiss, and touch in peace. We tell ourselves: we are not

children anymore, there are no children here, not in our part of the woods. The frogs and the insects watch us sleepily.

We continue to have our first kisses and our violent rivalries, but classwork has lost its significance. What is the use of fearing our final exams? We dread the sluggishness of summer break and try to find excuses to leave town. Our existences have become footnotes in another story, and we feel untethered.

We organize the last ceremonies of our childhood years ourselves, without much supervision. While the adults bide their time in prayer, we plan for our Prom night, we buy the necessary supplies and, on the set date, we drink the punch. We don't stay out late.

We don't even know those missing children, when would we even cross paths with any of those goddamn children? We don't work at the school, we don't live near the playground. You should be talking to their teachers, their distant family members. Someone's father, even. Yes, he could do it. Good adults hurt children, we know this well. We would not even be thinking of children so much, if it weren't for the cold we feel in town. We know it – we are old, or poor, or we were violent towards our spouses, or we drink too much. We are condemned before we even drink our morning coffee.

We buy groceries after dusk, and we buy liquor to drink by ourselves at home. We watch the news at night to see if it's over yet. We would go to church, but we are exhausted by judgment. We don't hear God's voice much, and we have always figured he could never hear ours. Here's a question for you, Officer: if we sit in a pew on Sunday and pray for those missing children, will it count for anything?

When praying is not enough, we slave over baked goods and casseroles to feed families minus one. We deliver them without fanfare, and in lowered voices, as if it is a funeral reception. Tragedy is always so embarrassing.

We analyze our acquaintances and discuss our suspicions over picket fences. We have come to a consensus: we think this is the best time for hysterical crying in the mothers, but for the man we think their tears to be strange. Missing children is a female hurt. If our own children went missing, we know our husbands would face the thing with strength, stoicism and the appropriate dose of rage.

We spend our time ironing and cooking: household spellwork to make our own children come home from school every afternoon. We kiss our children more, and somehow love them harder, even though we didn't think that was possible.

At first the desks are empty, but after a long weekend we come back to the classroom and see five less seats than usual. Where do they put the extra desks? And when can we play again? We tear up grass and build mud forts at recess, but we have to stay in the yard and in sight. We can't run around after school, and we can't play in the woods, unless your parents don't care enough to tell you not to. We can't play big games for very long anymore because we're missing the numbers. We are always reminded of rules we already know and the safest path home. We can hear our parents cry through the walls of our bedroom at night, but we are not sure why.

Our friends aren't coming back home. This makes us cry. We don't know why they don't come out of the woods. We know they can't be lost, we used to play in between the trees and under the logs and beside the streams in every season. We remember it like this: they would tumble around in flower beds and sprint through tall meadow grass to get home in time. The

sound of the woods was always a mix of bird-song and screams of excitement. They were perpetually grass-stained and blooming. We don't know why they don't come out of the woods.