

ISHI WILDERNESS

Chief said there was this fire down in the Ishi Wilderness, and DeQuan was always on my ass about dropping some Molly as we fought fires across the north state, and not just weed again, but electric stuff that would morph me into the savior I was, and there was no smoke in the sky, no fires anywhere in the universe, so Fine, I said as we rolled in the back of the Cal-State Fire rig on Highway 36, and I stuck my tongue out like I used to do in church and DeQuan placed the pill there and I kept it safe and warm for a bit just thinking about Kendra and if I'd ever lick her again, and Mister said, We fight fires by lighting fires, isn't that weird to anyone, but he was new and had his yellow contacts in so we told him to sit on his thick thumb and spin, A thousand times, DeQuan said, I don't care if you were in the Marines, Mister, spin a million times, and then the rig swung a left turn and we rammed into one another and Swallow it, he said, You're a savior, You need to feel the world, so I did, but Mister had his trencher in his hand saying, I'll kill you Quan, I've killed kids, don't think I won't kill you, and Mister let out a screech laugh, the same belly sound that Kendra laughed when I licked the back of her knees, low and full of hate, and I was there for a pulse with Kendra and her Mickey Mouse and tomahawk tattoos, but the road turned to dirt, to rocky dirt, and Mister had had enough and showed us his brown teeth, and someone said Lightning, Matches, Campers, It doesn't matter, and my legs were thinning out in my stiff pants, and my skin was alive and swaying when DeQuan asked, Iraq or Afghanistan, but Mister said, Africa, so I said, Where's that, and we parked by Mill Creek under Black Rock, and finally, smoke and rattlers everywhere, and Chief told us to watch the flames and watch our feet, and I was digging and digging the lines and sweating my lungs out while the flame throwers started new fires, and I wondered if Kendra's girl was eight yet and then I wondered what would happen if these flames crested the hill and splashed all the way to Sacramento, and DeQuan took his gloves off and touched a lava rock and said, It's warm, man, still warm, and I said, You know Mister was right, that dude will kill you, but DeQuan didn't care about that because we were in the Ishi Wilderness fighting fire that lit the pines above

us, yes, we dug like saviors, yes, like kings saving the promise land where Ishi watched his mother die, where he wandered out of the hills, the last of his people, and I wanted to touch the water and flames and the lava rock too, so I asked, Is it still hot, but DeQuan was dumping orange Gatorade over his face and shouting Regeneration, Regeneration, and Mister yelled, A fucking arrowhead, and held a pointed rock above his head, and I knew right then that Mister would die that day because of his sins, I could feel it on the tip of my hot nose, and later we found him in Mill Creek, face up, dead, but happy, because every dead person is happy in their own way, and later someone told me Mister was never in the Marines, had never killed any kids, although I understood why he'd lie about it because it's a lie that works, a special lie I used later at The Ranch House when a young drunk said my brother was a fag and I couldn't take another jail stint but wanted to see genuine fear, and another time the night before Kendra came in and said I was right to belt her kid, but I knew she was lying because she still wore the white hospital band, but I didn't care, no one wants to be alone, and she had dyed her hair red and drenched that jasmine perfume that curled my toes, so I bought her four Miller Lights and led her back to my place on Birch Street, and I tucked her girl in on the green sofa with my Oakland As blanket and smelled her girl's dirty sweet smell when Kendra made her girl hug me goodnight, and then we went out on the back deck and watched the lit smoke of the lumber mill rise up into the night, and I took off Kendra's pants and turned my mini-Maglite on and spread her legs and touched her tattoos with my thumb, so soft and careful, first Mickey Mouse with a frown on her left thigh then a red and green tomahawk on the right, and I leaned in to lick them when she said, Not tonight, Not tonight, Look, and she held her left arm out to me and I saw the jagged scar on her inner forearm like she'd meant it, and when I went inside I heard her girl snoring and I knew Kendra wasn't worth it and her girl wasn't worth it, and I knew then that her girl would eventually crack her femur on the back of a Harley or catch a bad pill, so I let her sleep and snore because I had that incredible power, and I tried to sleep, but I heard Kendra rocking

on the back deck probably fingering her scar and cursing the fact that it's so hard to die, so I gulped some NyQuil and listened to the deck creak under Kendra's chair, lulling me to sleep, her jasmine smell still in my nose, and I wondered if anyone else in the world was happier than me.