

Text by Aidan Tojino after Tim Hawkinson's "Bear"

the bear grass

in response to Tim Hawkinson's *Bear*

Not too long ago I spent a summer digging holes for deer grass on the San Joaquin river. It was this wrinkled, liver spotted retiree who ran the program. He came by one day and asked the supervisor of our home to line us up auction block style. I fidgeted with my shirt as the supervisor told him about my hobbies. Boxing. Walking. General trouble making. My grades. Good. But not so good, because he's taking a lot of meds now so he falls asleep a lot. He sandwiched the supervisor's hand with both of his and gave it a genuine and hearty shake.

The supervisor woke me up at dawn exactly one week after this experience and told me to put on my best working clothes. Starchy grey Levi's and a black hoodie. I had thrown out almost all of my colored clothing in an effort to comply with the home's zero-tolerance gang policy. Officially, the program was a hands-on supplement to our biology curriculum. A lab section, if you stretched your mind a little.

When I stepped into the ear-biting dawn, the old man and a blue pickup were waiting in the street. Boys from other homes were already sitting in the flatbed. When we got close to the river bank, the old man started pointing. Deer grass. The way they grew reminded me of the little patch on a baby's head where their hair began. He said deer grass got its name because fawns would often be found sleeping in their centers, their bald spots. If you didn't know any better it would seem as if they bore the fawns like fruit out of the rocky earth.

He gave us shovels and pointed near the river. At noon, we would place new plants in the holes, going down the river section by section. The old man's goal was to reach a place downstream. He said it once had salmon.

The summer went on for some time like this. My forearms grew firm and my back began to hunch and I started to see the veins in my calves. I don't know if the old man was right about the deer grass because it seemed as if the only things that made their homes in these leaves were plastic bags and Zig Zag wrappers. Sometimes after a hard rain, the river would run brown, and we would have to watch out for hypodermic needles that floated down from a tent city a mile or so up river.

One muddy morning, I thought I had found a fawn tucked in beneath the tall blades. I approached quietly. I was very empathetic to children who were forced to wake. This morning the earth bore a strange, mangy fruit.

It was a cub. Evidently, unwell. Its fur lay strewn about around the grass. His gums were showing red and pink, like the kid with the hare lip they put on those donation posters at pho restaurants. His white belly protruded like the plump body of a drowned sailor. I figured he probably drank from the river after the rain.

I got the attention of the old man. He was sitting in his blue pickup reading about the Kansas City Chiefs. I said hey I don't know about deer, but I think I found a black bear cub over there in that rocky section. Should we call somebody?

He looked right through me with worms behind his eyes.

Call who? Ain't nobody to call, boy.

I fumbled over my own fingers. There was nothing I could do for a dead bear cub. Nothing I could do to stop the rain. I knew I couldn't just stand there though. But in that moment of hesitation, when I considered going right back to digging holes, the cub had vanished.

The only hint to show that he was something more than an illusion was a few straggling tufts of fur. Even they seemed to be tugging away from the grass, looking for a foothold in the wind to sail downriver.

I had no choice but to keep digging holes.

Things were different after the cub left. Sometimes, my spade would pierce the earth and I swear I heard him cry. When I moved the dirt around in anticipation of a body, there was no white and pink flesh, just rocks.

It went on like this and the summer dragged on. Right up until one morning when we could smell the air getting drier. Our lips chapped up and bled as autumn blew over our faces.

Eventually, we dug and planted our way down to the place where the salmon used to live. Which it turns out was just like the rest of the San Joaquin: dead and still.

I was released from the home the following spring. I swam down the San Joaquin. Way down past Visalia and Delano and McFarland. I swam up through the Grapevine and all the way to the border, but I could not find the old pond I had come from.

I saw that mangy cub again in the dark. He is larger now, and though he still cannot breathe he seems alive. The grass he sits on is trampled and muddy. There are footprints all around the shadow of his still protruding belly. He's since lost all his fur in the deer grass next to the river, and replaced his pink skin with granite. It's a wonder he was able to float so far downstream. I think I am supposed to hug him. I am supposed to feel the coolness of the rock against my calloused palms. I am supposed to do something for him, but I know it's too late to dig his hole.