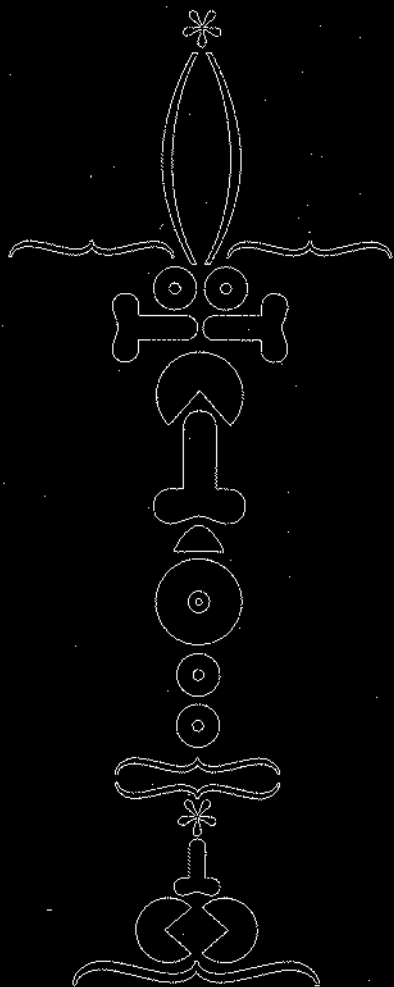


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Chicken

by Elizabeth England

NEITHER HAD GIVEN MUCH THOUGHT ABOUT WHERE they were going so when his older brother Marshall began to jimmy the lock to the old boat house, the boy just watched and held the bag like he was told. It was March and the sky was black, and though he could always find the Big Dipper, he saw no stars bright enough to follow. He was cold first in his feet and that feeling moved through him, numbing him slowly and making his lips feel large and furry when he spoke. "Sure we should be doing this?" Marshall stopped picking at the door and turned around. On his pocket knife there was paint that he slid off with a long fingernail.

"I'm sure," he said. "Are you?" Marshall was the oldest son and had gone out often in the night without anyone noticing anything different in the morning. This was the boy's first time.

"Not so much anymore," the boy said. He heard a rustle, loud then quiet, in the thistle bed. He dropped the bag and then bent and searched the hard ground, touching some gravel and loose grass that came away easily in his hands like dead hair, before he found the cans and the paper bag that hid them. Marshall laughed and said it was nothing, just a raccoon.

"You a scaredy cat?" He was still looking at the boy. His blond hair was long like a girl's and when he tried to push clumps behind his ears, they just fell in front of his eyes so he had to squint to see things right.

"I'm not saying that," the boy said.

"What are you saying then?" His brother began picking

again. The wood was dry and splintered in pieces and each time the blade cut into it, the sound was dull and whiny as if the older boy was sawing cardboard.

"Nothing," the boy said.

"That's what I figured. Just help me out, here."

When they pulled at it, the screen door came off the hinges easily without much noise, and since it was rusted and no good anymore, Marshall set it against the side of the house before trying the second one. The main door was thick and swollen and stuck in its frame and opened only when both boys used their shoulders and leaned hard into it. Mice ran forward when it finally gave away and their bodies shone silver in the dim moonlight. A few stopped and sat on their hind legs, sniffing the ocean and the wind coming off of it. Their thin fur ruffled some and then fell flat as they moved off into the sea grass. The boy hid near his brother.

"You are a chicken, aren't you?"

"Who says?" The boy moved away. He was still holding the bag with the beer cans and he could feel the wetness of them on his chest.

Marshall just laughed and held his head up to the moon, his teeth shiny like diamonds. "Give me one of those." His brother reached into the bag and snapped the metal cap and wore it like a ring. With his head back again, he held the can far from his lips and poured the yellow stuff down into him. The boy watched his throat open and close until he stopped and wiped his mouth with his hand. "Try some." The can was green and white and black and had a dent on the side. The boy held onto it for awhile, holding it up to his mouth a few times before taking a sip. "It's not going to bite you, for chrissakes."

"I know that," the boy said. He took a sip and then one more before giving the can back to his brother. The beer was warm

and bitter and didn't go down as nice as he had hoped, waiting as long as he had to try it.

"It's good, right?"

The boy shrugged and his brother just laughed again. "You wouldn't know something good if he came up and grabbed you."

"Who says?"

"I says." Marshall curled his fingers around the can, lining them up on the seam and then squashing the metal in his palm. He tossed it back in the bag the boy was holding and walked into the boat house.

The air inside was warm and solid like pudding as though no one had used any since last August, and the smell of things damp and molding, made them both wince. Marshall quickly opened three of the four windows and struggled with the last one, reaching for his knife again to pick at more paint. Blue chips fell in a pile on the dirt floor while the older boy scraped at the latch, stopping every so often to try and lift the window. He nicked himself with the knife tip once and the boy watched as his brother looked at the cut and then stuck the finger in his mouth. His eyes closed and his lips held tightly onto it and he sucked until the finger seemed all right again and then he bent the knuckle once and then again and watched it curl and straighten like it was supposed to do. Then he went back to picking.

There was no light from the Fredricksons' porch this time of year so the boy had trouble seeing the lantern that usually hung near the bathroom curtain. He tripped over an old tricycle and a croquet mallet which turned his foot back so it hurt just a little. Marshall looked up both times and said, "Easy, now," and loosened the window, sliding it up and down in its runners. Finally, the boy felt the wire handle of the oil lamp, its glass cracked, but still in place. He carefully lifted it down and set it on the card

table and then, in the darkness, ran his hand over the picnic bench, looking for a dry matchbook. His fingers touched a few cards, damp and curling around the edges, and a golf tee for picking corn from back molars, and when he did find matches, they were hidden in the canoe next to empty cigarette packs. He straightened the wick and lit it after a few tries and the yellow shone soft first and then caught fire. In the new light, he saw that the boat house, though older and smaller than he remembered, never changed much from year to year: big towels left to dry on canvas chairs, a *Wheat Thins* box tipped over and full of ants, his own life vest wedged under the floorboard to keep water from coming in during the winter months and all the things his father would fix one day: a diving board with no spring, a cracked snorkle and the Sears washer still missing a lid. There were at least thirteen hats of his mother's, in faded bright colors with big brims, carefully pinned to the wall like butterflies. It was quiet with only the sound of water going over rocks and the dogs running loose.

"Check it out," Marshall whispered and the sudden thwacking noise made the boy turn. He carried the lantern forward with him and saw his brother jabbing an oar tip at a large wasps' nest. Wedged against the window molding, it was an old nest, gray and unraveling, and though the boy couldn't be certain, he thought there was no chance of anything living left in it. His brother needed more light and reached his arm towards the lantern, saying, "Give it here," his hand grabbing for the handle. The boy listened for any stirring and when he was sure there was none, he offered up the lamp, standing back as he helped Marshall, the older boy's fingers now shaking, hook the wire on a nail. Though his brother was taller than him, it was not by very much and every time the older boy swung the oar, he missed the nest completely. Black marks sprang out on the wall

like bruises and the lamp, heavy on the small nail, bent the metal downwards. "Look out," his brother said. The boy saw sweat rings under Marshall's arms and knew then that the nest was still active. The wasps buzzed softly at first and even in the poor light, the boy could see at least ten of them on the rafter.

"I thought you weren't supposed to go at them like that," the boy said. "Dad always uses the spray." The boy was allergic to wasps and normally carried a small vial of penicillin in his jacket. He knew how to load the syringe, test for air bubbles and stick the needle anywhere in his skin as long as it was bare. His thigh was the best place, the muscle there was the most easy to slide through, but he knew how to prick himself anywhere, close to the elbow bone, even. If stung, he would immediately turn red and his throat would close and the saliva would evaporate in the boy's mouth. There would be time to get to the hospital, but not much, and the boy knew that in the wintertime, the path back to town was muddy and slow.

"It's fine, just stay back," Marshall said. "You got your stuff anyway, right?" He reached for a fishing pole of their father's. It was wooden with a cat gut line and no matter how much force he used, the pole didn't bend easily enough to flip the nest out of the window sill. The boy watched as the older boy climbed onto the card table and got his balance, the aluminum legs pressing deep into the soft dirt. Marshall's arms were quick-moving with muscles that flexed big and round whenever he jabbed at the nest's middle. He paused to examine the pole's end, arching the wood backwards and then forward with his fingertip, and then he looked up at the nest once more before poking into the darkness. The buzzing grew louder and a couple of wasps flew into Marshall's face before landing on the window, their slim legs unsteady on the cold glass. "You got your shot, Pete." Marshall was crouched down low and he looked up only this once to see

his brother's face. The boy looked away from him towards the nest and said, "Don't worry about it."

Marshall smiled then and stood up, swinging the pole towards the nest once again. "You had me worried there, Petey."

"You're missing it," the boy said, squinting into the corner. There were a cluster of red and green and blue buoys pinned to a beam and they made a muffled sound each time the older boy missed the nest and hit them. Soon, they crashed to the floor, one of them cracking in half like a hollow egg. "Just leave it alone, Marsh."

Only a few wasps were circling the small boat house, their flight slow and undirected. They landed on the *Wheat Thins* and two fell in the box, their wings stiff and unused to movement. The boy waited for them to climb up the wax paper liner, and when they did, there were crumbs of food on their backs and legs and when they tried to fly, they stumbled onto the table. More flew out when Marshall ripped a small hole in the nest's bottom.

"It's black up in there," his brother said. "I thought there'd be honeycomb or something." Marshall was close to the nest now. He reached his finger up and touched the flimsy outer layers and then looked at his skin covered with silver powder. When he withdrew his finger, more wasps crept out and some dangled from the fraying wood pulp by their skinny legs.

"Only honey bees have honey," the boy said. He knew that any kind of bee or wasp or hornet or yellow jacket could sting whether they made honey or not. He knew that he was supposed to knock them down and disorient them if they flew at him. He knew how to stamp until he was sure they were dead. He knew that if one landed on him, it would probably sting him and he would swell immediately. His thighs would become too bloated to walk and his hands would no longer fit in his pockets. "That's not such a great idea," he said, watching his brother stick his finger in the nest.

"I think there's some honey in there," Marshall said.

"There isn't, I swear it," the boy said. "Don't mess around, o.k.?"

Marshall withdrew his hand quickly and looked at his finger. "I think one got me." He squeezed the tip of his thumb. "One of them definitely got me."

"We should just get out of here."

All wasps had stingers, the boy knew this. They held them to their chests like daggers and if unalarmed, they just left them in the resting position. Only bumblebees died after they stung something. The boy had seen movies about all this and knew that only wasps could sting twice, three times even. If sluggish, the wasp was most likely waiting to let go of his stinger.

"Just quit worrying," Marshall said, steadying himself on the card table. Its metal top was sagging some and its legs were almost buckling beneath him. He stretched his arm as far as it would go and gently nudged the nest's bottom. It rocked a little with each push, but wouldn't fall. The boy picked up the bag and put the cans back in it, the brown paper now shredding and coming away in his hands. He cradled the beer cans and moved slowly towards the door, stopping when he felt the knob press into him. He watched the nest teeter, and listened as Marshall talked softly to the wasps, saying, "now, now," whenever one flew out and made him drop the pole between the wall cracks. It was warm in the boat house and though the boy was sweating, he kept all his buttons and zippers done up so he would have as little skin as possible exposed. He pushed the door with his backside, grinding his feet in the dirt for leverage, but it wouldn't move.

"The door's stuck," the boy said.

"It's probably from all the rain, just push." The older boy didn't turn around, but kept focused on the nest still clinging to

the window. It was tattered now, with thin gray ribbons occasionally falling to the floor.

"I think you pretty much got it," the boy said. "It's wrecked as anything."

"They're not dead yet." Marshall was on his toes, his sneakers bending and leaving the skin of his heels uncovered. The boy watched a wasp land on the table and walk clumsily towards his brother's foot, its stinger dragging behind like a stick. It suddenly fell to the side with its wings covered tightly over its heart. The buzzing went on for a while longer, even after the wasp stopped moving. Its wings flapped and rubbed over its legs and the buzzing went on and on until there was quiet and the wasp was dead. "Get me something longer and then we'll go," Marshall said, dropping the pole for good and standing still. He grabbed an old broom, but the wood handle split and gave way as soon as he swung it towards the nest.

The boy stopped pushing the door and looked for a golf club or a chair leg, but there was nothing long enough or thin enough or blunt enough to topple the nest without piercing the outer layers where the eggs were stored. Marshall kept shaking his head and saying no, that's no good, whenever the boy held up things that he was certain would down the nest. Finally, the boy found another oar, larger than the first, with a narrow, slightly bowed, paddle, and he handed it to his brother. "This'll work," he said to the older boy. "I'm sure of it."

The wasps had quieted. There were only queens alive during the cold months and they knew how to guard a nest against anything. The boy knew they would not bother anyone unless hassled and so he begged Marshall to stop, please stop.

"One of them got me," Marshall said. "Now I've got to get them. Besides you have your stuff so just relax." Marshall looked over at the boy. "I'll do the needle if that's what's bothering you."

Some queens died from the raw air blowing in and others had gone back into the nest while the boys readied themselves for another try. It was getting light outside and the fog horn's bleating was all the boy could hear this far away from town. He looked out and saw the eddy half-covered with sea foam. The smell of salt and dead clam meat was strong and though the windows were narrow, the boy hoped he could make it through one if he had to get out of there quickly.

"Hold my ankles," Marshall told him.

The boy was back by the door, leaning into it with all his weight, and the walk over to the table seemed like a long one. He watched Marshall roll over a wasp he'd just batted down. "Come here," the older boy said. "This thing's not going to hurt you." He pulled a wing from the dead body and held it up to the light.

"I want to go, Marsh." The boy looked again at the window.

"Just come here for a second and then I'll get you out." Marshall stared at the boy and fingered the wasp, plucking another wing and holding it up again to the light before blowing it like a feather into the room. Still holding the cans, the boy walked over and looked. It was a paper wasp which was the most common kind, and though it could still hurt him, the boy felt better seeing it on its back with the stinger tucked high to its chest.

"Let's go, now," the boy said, returning to the door. He still heard the buzzing and knew that at least fifty wasps were in the boat house. Marshall grabbed the boy's hood and pulled him back towards the table.

"Right after you hold my ankles. I got to get this thing down."

"Who says?" The boy was close to his brother and could smell the older boy's skin going off like milk. His hood was still being held and when the boy yanked at the fabric, Marshall's hold tightened.

"I says." Marshall grabbed the oar and stood up again. "And

because one got me. Now, hold my ankles." He smiled at the boy. "Please," he said, and once the boy gripped him, he turned back toward the nest. There were wasps everywhere and the boy couldn't keep track of their flight anymore. He saw one land on his father's golf tee and then another fly out the window. "Tighter, Pete." The boy hugged his brother to him. The jeans rubbed against his cheek and he felt the scratching and the sore that was beginning to flower there. He held tighter and tighter while Marshall leaned farther forward. The wasps prattled louder. The boy knew there was little chance of their both landing on him and then stinging this early in the season. He also knew that if stung, he had only eight minutes before he stopped breathing.

"I almost got it," Marshall said, and when the boy saw the nest move, he believed him. He waited, gripping his brother's ankles so that he felt the bones and the tendons thin as chicken wings. He watched the nest cling to the molding no matter how hard his brother hit it. The nest was there when he closed his eyes and it was there still when he opened them. It stayed up high and wouldn't come down. A swarm of wasps, groggy and light-headed, flew forward, black like exhaust smoke. The boy watched a few land, trip over one another, and fall to the floor. He let go of his brother and backed up slowly to get closer to the door that wouldn't open no matter how hard he kicked at it. "Hold me," his brother called out and the boy came back and stuck his hands in Marshall's deep cuffs.

There were a number of things he knew about wasps. If one landed near him, he knew not to move. He also knew that running drew the wasp closer so he stood quiet and still while he watched one land on his brother's back. Its stinger was dragging and then caught on the cotton of the older boy's shirt. When the wasp freed itself, it moved up Marshall's spine, stopping every few jumps to rest. It was headed for the older boy's collar and the ring of skin that circled the top of the shirt.

"Don't move," the boy whispered. He had a fly swatter next to his bed at home and if he heard buzzing, he awoke quickly and began hitting the air. He was a good shot, better than his brothers, and knew that if he could find something flat and thin, he could kill the wasp without it having time to draw the stinger. "There's a big one on your back."

"Knock it off," Marshall said, down low and holding steady. He was scared, the boy could see it in his eyes which were round and pale blue and no longer squinty. His face was red. "Just swat it off."

"I can't find anything," the boy said, letting go of his brother's legs and looking for something.

"Use your hand," Marshall said, still squatting. A queen was near his neck and though his hair covered much of his skin, there was some left naked where a wasp could easily crawl if it wanted.

The boy picked up logs and old baseball bats and an iron fire poker, too sharp to be of use to them. "I got it," the boy said, rolling up an old magazine and swiping the wasp to the floor. "There, you're okay, now." He smiled when his brother gave the boy his special handshake, over the thumb and across the middle finger three times with the pinkie.

Marshall then stood up and began going after the nest again. "Just one more try and I'll have it. It'll look cool in my room." He was struggling to get it down without doing more damage to the nest's lining. Gray flakes dumped on the ground like ashes and each time the oar nicked the bottom, a few more wasps flew out and landed on something near, the back of a chair or a bathing suit buckle. "You've got the bag, right?"

"I have it," the boy said, feeling the warm beer taken earlier from the garage freezer. There were no nests anywhere near the house because they sprayed on a regular basis and the boy would

check the dark corners just to be sure they had gotten every last one. "That's not how to do it. Let's go back please," the boy said to Marshall. He looked at his watch. The walk home took at least twenty minutes, even if they cut through the Wilburs' backyard which they could only do if the dog wasn't loose.

"We've got plenty of time," the older boy said. "Besides, I've almost got this thing."

The sound of the waves was gone and all the boy heard was the slow, drugged buzzing of wasps bothered off-season. The boy explained wasps' hibernation to his brother and though it was not like bears, the deep sleep was similar. If awakened before spring, they were not as strong as in the summertime, but they were more angry and determined to sting.

"No one's angry," Marshall said. "Just stay behind me and if one lands on you, flick it off, back first, remember."

It was something the boy couldn't do though he had practiced a few times. Once, while trying to flip one up in the air, he was stung. He knew that wasps have adhesive on their feet and when they land, they stick like gum and are difficult to remove without breaking the suction. He had trouble telling their backs from their fronts and though the eyes were a clue, he never got close enough to see anything besides the brown of their bodies.

"Like this," Marshall said, flicking two wasps to the ground with ease. His fingers were long and moved in an arc as he sent one up and then onto the table where he killed it with the magazine. The boy watched and moved toward the door. He wanted to practice a few times with a lima bean and make sure that there'd be no mistakes if a wasp were to find his hands, bare and hidden now behind him.

"Like this." The older boy showed him again, turning a wasp into a somersault. "Don't wait because as soon as they rub their front legs together, they're getting ready to let the stinger go."

The boy listened to his brother and nodded his head. He watched another one fall on the table.

"Let's just go, Marsh, please," he said, tugging at the door again.

"Like this," his brother said, flicking another wasp from his shirt and stamping it dead.

"Now, please." The boy looked out. It was low tide with seaweed hanging in clumps on blunt driftwood. The wind smelled rotten, and buried in long dune grass were gulls screaming over fresh crab guts, the shells loose and cracked. The only light was from across the bay. It swiveled red then white then red again and the fog horn still comforted the boy with its low steady bleat. A wasp then landed on the sill near the boy's fingers and was silent as it walked over the smooth wood. It jumped up in the air, buzzing erratically and loudly in the boy's ear, and came down higher up on the glass, above his face. He watched its dark brown wings twitch and splay before flying again. The boy then moved back a few yards and hurled himself at the door, the hinges only squeaking.

"I think I got it now," his brother said. There were bits of nest stuck to the front of his shirt and his skin was moist from the heat of the lamp so close to his face.

"My medicine," the boy said. "I forgot it."

The older boy looked at his brother, the oar still in his right hand. "You what?"

"I forgot it." The boy stood with his back against the door.

"You said you had it." Marshall was standing at the edge of the card table and holding the lamp and the oar and staring at the boy.

"Well, I don't," the boy said. "We got to get out."

"But you said you had it," Marshall said, dropping the oar and jumping down from the table. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"You never forget it though."

"We just have to get out of here." The boy was crying and though he didn't know it at first, he felt the drops on his wrists, uncovered just then from his shirt sleeves. His wrists were one of the places he couldn't stick the needle, the veins being too big and complicated. The hum of the buzzing meant the bees were everywhere and the boy tried to follow each one's path as it left the nest and flew out into the boat house. He traced one as it landed near him and then another would join it briefly before flying to some place new, into some crevice the boy had never stared into or explored. The wasps were too many to keep track of and though they were not as active as usual, they were still curious and lively enough to sting.

"I'll get us out." Marshall was pulling at the door with both arms now. There were wasps everywhere and he had to bat a few away before grabbing hold of the knob. "They like it quiet, right? Well, let's stay quiet then. Check your pockets, maybe you put it in there."

"It's not, I know it." The boy had only gone to the hospital twice though both times he needed oxygen and an IV dripping white stuff in his arm. Marshall had been with him and watched as they put the mask over the boy's face and told him to breathe deeply. His eyes closed and his skin was stretched and shiny from the swollen red and white patches. He sucked ice cubes to keep his throat open and later, when he could leave, he was brought to the car in a wheelchair. His legs didn't move right for a week.

"Open it, Marsh, please." The wasps were hovering around him, sniffing and flapping their wings in place to pick up the boy's scent. He held onto his brother's waist and buried his head

in the older boy's shirt, but left his eyes free to dart around the room and follow the wasps' movement.

His brother used a screwdriver and then his knife and then the screwdriver again to scrape at the hinges, the heat and dampness already swelling the wood tighter in the door frame. A wasp landed on Marshall's arm and he swatted it, flipping the insect up in somersault and then down on the ground where he killed it without thinking much. "You see that?"

The boy nodded and watched another one land on his brother. "You try it," Marshall said. "Come on now, quick, before it gets me." The boy moved his finger slowly towards the wasp, watching its front legs rub together and its stinger flat against its body.

"Now," Marshall said. "Do it." The boy flicked at it, but the wasp's feet were already planted on his brother's skin and within a second, the stinger shot into his arm.

The older boy winced and moaned and grabbed at himself, holding his hand over the welt which had come up instantly and looked already like a small mountain. "Quicker," Marshall said. "You got to move quicker." There were tears in his eyes, but they stayed in the sockets, welling up there where he could wipe at them before they fell down his face.

"I'm sorry," the boy said, rubbing his own arms. "Marsh, I'm really sorry."

"Never mind," his brother said. "Let's try the windows." They were old windows with small panes and a frame not big enough for Marshall to get through without hacking away at the sides of the house to make more room. Again, they went back to the door and pulled at the knob, loosening it only slightly. "It's coming." He pulled again.

The boy watched a wasp fly from the nest towards him. He was holding the lamp for his brother still picking at the door frame.

"One's near me," the boy said. He saw the wasp land on the sill and creep down towards him.

"Stay still and flick if it lands on you," Marshall said, using his knife to hack away at the wood. "Hold the light up higher."

The boy lifted it up and saw the wasp land. He quickly leaned over to put the lamp down and jam his hands in his pockets, but the movement wasn't fast enough. The wasp sat on the boy's forearm, just below the jacket cuff and waited.

"Marsh," the boy said. "He's on me, I swear it." He stared at the wasp and watched its front legs rubbing together. They were thin and brown and looked easy to break.

"Want me to get it?" Marshall was holding his knife with one hand. "I'll use the blade to flip him."

"No," the boy said, staring at the wasp. It was bigger than the boy remembered, with small eyes that moved all around his head. The wings were shiny and clean and poised to leave as if, at any moment, the wasp could easily release his stinger and then fly somewhere else without feeling the loss.

"Move quickly, Pete," his brother said. "Get him now. Look at his legs go." Marshall, too, was staring at the wasp and had convinced the boy that the rubbing meant something.

The boy moved his finger up from behind, watching all four of the wasp's feet settle onto his skin. The buzzing within the boat house had almost stopped completely and the rest of the queens were returning to the damaged nest. A breeze came through the window and the wings fluttered slightly before the wasp lost its balance and fell to the side of the boy's arm. It steadied itself quickly, rubbing together its front legs again.

"That's it," his brother said. "Just lift him up and over."

The boy stuck his finger under the wasp's behind and flicked it into a somersault, pulling his arm away and back to his side. When the wasp landed on the ground, he stamped and stamped

and stamped, grinding the toe of his sneaker into the meat of it. He kept digging further into the dirt until his brother squeezed his arm and said, "You got him, I'm sure of it."

The boy squatted just to know for himself and when he held the light down, he saw pieces of the wasp, black and wet on the floor. He saw the stinger and the eyes and the wings and when he touched a leg, it stuck to his finger like an eyelash.

Marshall unscrewed a hinge so when he pulled at the handle this time, the door opened easily and the boy went outside. The sun was coming through some dark clouds and shone gray on the water. The light across the bay was not as bright and the horn had stopped completely and a boat headed for the mainland was moving fast through the strong current. Marshall wiped the knife on his pants and took the boy's hand, leading him along the path that skirted the shoreline. He grabbed the bag and tossed the cans in an old dump they passed not far from home. The boy felt his brother's fingers tighten around his own when they went through the Wilburs' backyard and heard the barking of the dog that was tied up to the clothesline and was of no trouble to them. He felt the fingers tighten again when they crossed over the stone bridge and saw a few rocks give away, falling into the water with only a little splash. They walked together until they reached their driveway and there Marshall let go of the boy and walked ahead. The boy still heard the buzzing in his head though it was duller now, and as he opened the front door and walked through the kitchen and living room and up the back stairs to his room where he heard Marshall through the wall, playing music real low, the sound of the wasps had left him almost completely.