The Meat Tree

by Stephen Graham Jones

We never knew what happened to him, the missing kid, the third-grader, nobody did, but it didn't matter, either: our pregnant mothers saw his face at every stoplight, his name stapled to telephone poles, and drove the careful ways home then sat in the car with both hands on the wheel. Our fathers never knew, not until we came home from kindergarten with a teacher's note that we needed our *initials* on our lunchboxes too. Because all of us born in 1978 were named after Jeremy Michaels. It was a trade—letting Jeremy live on through us, just so long as we *lived*. Our mothers never talked about it, and our fathers never asked, so we kept the names until junior high, when the coaches started calling us all by our last names anyway, and our fathers still never asked, and we gave them both roses as we walked to the stage for graduation, and all of us lived through that night to stumble up the driveway, see our fathers sitting in the cars now, holding the steering wheel with both hands, about to come find us wherever we were. Maybe it was one of them who had taken Jeremy in a moment of weakness, even.

I became interested in him at sixteen. In Jeremy.

By college it was more than interest.

He would have been in his thirties by then. I missed a test to meet a girl who was supposed to have a vintage flyer of him from some telephone pole her uncle had stolen because it was evidence of his drunk driving, but she never showed up, and after missing the test I had to drop the class, and then the rest just fell away, like I had been wearing glass clothes all my life and was just moving wrong now, breaking a sleeve off, a lapel. My mother called and I told her I was taking a semester off. I could hear her holding her hand over the receiver on her end. My father lied that he understood, and I appreciated that, from him.

The girl with the flyer called me just before Christmas break, talking about how she still had that flyer, and needed money for gifts. We agreed to meet at a sports bar just off campus, Tanner's, but she stood me up again, and I watched the students walk by with their backpacks slung over their shoulders. They were all imitating each other, it seemed.

I moved across town to not have to watch them anymore—or pay college rent—and then one morning I opened my door and there she was, Lorinda. I should have known right then, too: it was a fairy-tale name, the kind a little girl would pick. But I thought it was beautiful. She was the first girl to see my place.

"So?" I asked her, after all this time.

She looked away from the question, across the bulletin boards I had balanced on the piece of molding that met the paneling halfway up the wall. It was a delicate job; I couldn't find nails that would go into the cinderblock of the upper wall.

"They're all empty," she said, the bulletin boards.

I shrugged. I'd tried putting tacks on them, but it made them overbalance. And sometimes they fell over anyway, clapping onto the linoleum in the middle of the night so that when I woke the papers on my nightstand would still be fluttering, like someone had just stepped away.

"I'm waiting to put flyers there," I told her.

She smiled.

We went to Tanner's and it lasted all afternoon. I was cynical by then, of course, nodding hello to each fratboy who passed our table, daring him to acknowledge me.

Lorinda wasn't in school anymore either, so we had that. She did lower her head some when a group of guys fresh out of poli-sci or mass-comm bunched in, but she made it look natural by adjusting and re-adjusting the hasp of her necklace. It made her hair hide her face some. I scanned the guys, trying to pick which one—see if I looked enough like any of them—but they were all clones, stamped out years ago, their childhoods mapped out already, positions waiting for them at their fathers' firms.

"No," Lorinda said, about the flyer. "My uncle, I don't know. He says he thinks he burned it at Thanksgiving. The pole."

"Thinks?"

Now she shrugged. "The ash was all clumpy, anyway," she said, "from the resin or—"

"Creosote," I filled in.

In addition to being cynical, I was also self-conscious about my education. Later Lorinda would teach me I didn't have to be smart all the time. But right then it was all about the flyer: did she ever see it? what did Ur-Jeremy look like?

"*Ur*-Jeremy?" she asked, as if she'd missed the joke.

The group of guys across the bar exploded around a video-poker machine, falling all over each other. The machine flashed and flashed, and not one of them really needed it for rent.

"As in the *first*," I said. "It's . . . I don't know. The prefix means old or something."

"From the bible," she said, "zigg*ur*at . . . "

I shrugged maybe, yeah.

She said she had seen it a long time ago, the flyer, and then apologized again for not having it with her like she'd said.

I told her I didn't have any money anyway.

She was looking at me in a different way now, though.

"He your brother or something?" she asked.

I shook my head no.

"Because you look the same"—reaching across, for the hair over my ear—"here, and something about the space between the eyes. No, it's the temples."

He'd been in third grade when he disappeared. The photo was his class photo.

I was twenty-two.

I ordered a chicken sandwich and Lorinda ordered a chef salad with the turkey on the side. When it came she slid the little container of meat across to me, and just on principle I didn't take it.

"At least let me show you," she said, finished with her salad before it was even half gone.

I looked at her and past her to the campus and said sure, anything, then that afternoon at her place—eighth floor, smallish balcony, the whole year's lease prepaid by her father, blood money she called it—Lorinda sat me in a chair in her kitchen and shaped my hair like Jeremy Michael's. I could feel myself disappearing; at one point she had to straddle my leg to get the right angle on my head, and the denim sound of her inner thighs filled the small apartment.

"So why all the corkboard?" she asked, the comb in her teeth. "Waiting for the big flood or something?"

"You shouldn't let strange guys up here like this," I told her.

"I've known you for months," she said.

I didn't tell her she was the reason I was taking the semester off. Mostly because I still didn't know how long this semester was going to be for me.

But the bulletin board, the cork.

I made up a theory for her, that the kitchen was the center of American family life not because of food, but information, cycling past under the nostalgic magnets of the refrigerator, that that was why we stood around in kitchens all the time. And it was only natural that we would eat, right? Surrounded by food like that? It was America's weight problem; I was rolling, smart, didn't need anything from any classroom. I told her that if we just had that kind of regularly-updated information—snapshots, lists, appointments, *flyers*—thumb-tacked on all the walls of the living room, the hall, the porch, then maybe as a country we could—

"—burn calories walking all over the house looking for the grocery list that should've just been in one place?" she said.

"Got to have money for groceries," I said.

"Or flyers," she said back, quieter, then before I could look up for the kind of smile she had she was leading me by the hand to the balcony, making me lean over the rail while she lifted the sheet off. My hair drifted down into traffic.

"You do look a lot like him," she said.

We were standing right across from each other. The balcony was that tight, that close.

I stepped back inside, away from her, from being that close to her and not knowing what to do with my hands, and walked through the only other door. It was her bedroom, the bath right off it. I framed my face in her medicine-chest mirror.

I wanted to write *have you seen this boy?* in soap on the mirror, but it wasn't my soap, and it wasn't 1978.

She let me stand there alone until I was done.

I found her in the living room washing vegetables in a sieve. It was more of a sinkjob, really, but I didn't ask; I

was the one trying to look like the missing kid, after all.

"Jeremy," she said.

I nodded.

"My phone used to ring in junior high," I told her. "But nobody was there."

She looked up at me for more, and maybe that was when I fell into whatever I fell into with her.

"I knew it was him, though," I said, "*them*, I mean. The Michaels. Maybe they called all of us like that."

"You think they . . . they never stopped looking—?"

"No," I said. "Would you?"

She was washing carrots and broccoli, and looking out her eighth-floor apartment window, surrounded by the clutter I could tell was just there to show her father that this apartment would never be good enough to make up for whatever he owed her, whatever he'd done. I didn't ask. I knew he'd never been over to see it, though. Before I left, to walk the streets like Jeremy Michaels—before I *had* to leave, or risk embarrassing myself with her in some awkward way—she took a picture of me without asking.

"Now I've got you," she said, holding the camera with both hands.

I shrugged, blinked long from the flash, and walked out.

———

Two weeks later I saw her at Tanner's. She was moving from station to station along the salad bar. Aside from one busser, we were the only people in the room, all the students gone for Christmas.

I sat down across from her.

"Vegetarian?" I said.

"Kind of a personal question," she said back, biting a cherry tomato in half, narrowing her eyes at me in play. I ordered a chicken sandwich again and the busser mumbled it to himself all the way back to the kitchen, so he wouldn't forget.

"Personal?" I said back when I could, then went into how I could tell she was, say, white, American, female. "Maybe we should all walk around in big cardboard tubes," I added. "Write on the outside just the stuff we want people to know."

She shook her head, speared some lettuce.

"What about when it rained?" she said.

I told her we'd all lie on our sides and roll down the street. She laughed, not because it was funny or even a good answer, but because she was thinking of tubes with eye holes and umbrellas. She paid for both our meals.

"Blood money?" I asked.

"Any other kind?" she asked back.

We were walking down the street by campus. It was all tattoo shops and paddle-stores and pizza; I was morally against pizza—coffee too—but it was still too early in the relationship to tell her that.

"Why don't you go home for the holidays?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"You should go to the Michaels'," she said. "Jeremy's parents. Just show up in a coat and earmuffs and say you got lost coming off the bus or something, back then."

I could see myself doing it, too.

"People are easy at Christmas," I said.

She didn't say yes and she didn't say no.

That night I would wake in her bedroom, in her bed, and the junk mail on the cardboard box she used as a nightstand would be fluttering and I would think someone had just been standing there, but when I rose to pull the balcony doors to, her hand would be on my wrist, and she would pull me back into her, saying it for me again: people are easy at Christmas.

It wasn't that I didn't want to go home, it was just that I wanted home to be different, somehow. Like here, maybe, like her: she didn't know we were all named Jeremy, that we were all missing, living out different versions of his cut-short life.

"Where do you get your protein?" I asked her the next morning, standing before the garden the refrigerator was.

"You don't need as much as you're conditioned to think you need," she said.

Maybe. I took the switchback stairs down eight flights anyway though, for the plastic beef-jerky the convenience store had by the register.

The clerk watched me eat. "Good?" he asked.

"Necessary," I said back, peeling another—an urban chimp—and then sat on the stoop in front of her building, imagining she was standing on the balcony eight stories up right then, looking for me when I was right here. It was a fairy tale; I was already in it with her.

———

Just like I'd done with school, I let my apartment slip too, even the bulletin boards. I told myself I was just making my life more simple, sloughing off the trappings, all that, but then over a lunch of macaroni one day Lorinda pared it down for me: what I had amounted to survivor's guilt. And all survivor's guilt was was a kind of death-envy.

She would only eat the macaroni that came from a box, because there the dairy was imitation, the powder-version of stadium cheese.

I still hadn't figured out why she was interested in me. It was more than interest though, too. Her father had done some kind of number on her, it seemed: sex for her was something to conquer, to win at. I had to eat the beef jerky down at the convenience store just to keep my strength up. And to rest. She started giving me money for it, even, the beef jerky, until I had to ask her where it was coming from. Neither of us were working.

"A trust," she said. "Insurance."

I watched her hard.

"But I thought your father—"

"He just has to sign," she said, already dismissing the subject.

I told myself it didn't matter as long as it kept coming, and in that way I was like the frat boys I used to stare down at the fringes of campus, and I knew it even then. But it was nice.

We went to her uncle's so I could see the ash pile that had been one of the telephone poles. He gave us each a bottle of beer at the front door then led us around the obstacle course the side of the house was to the backyard. It was the middle of January by now. He was leaning-back drunk, like the heels of his boots were gone, or the ground soft, or the world just spinning too fast.

We stared at the ashes and he remembered aloud his girlfriend in '78, how she thought she was psychic, could see little Jeremy floating in a septic tank just outside town. It was like we weren't even there, like *he* was channeling his old girlfriend's channels. We left our second beers halfway full, balanced on the bed rail of an old pick-up he was using for trash storage.

"I'm sorry," Lorinda said. "Have you never seen one?"

"An uncle?" I asked.

She smiled, took my arm at the top and at the bottom, where it was important.

"A *flyer*," she said.

I couldn't remember anymore. It seemed like I had, though.

That night when I woke she was gone. The apartment was dark. I walked through it touching the walls, running my hand along the counter tops, the windowsills. The balcony door was open and I stepped outside in my underwear, trying to get sick. Death-envy; I almost said it out loud.

The only thing I'd brought with me from my place was my box of books. Just trucking them around made me feel educated, noble in a surly, down-trodden way I needed. I'd offered to sell them for grocery-money, but it was just an offer. Right then the only thing I was dreading was the phone-bill, because my mother was going to show up on it as ten digits. We hadn't said anything real, but still, sometimes it took hours to get even that far.

"I was worried," Lorinda said, suddenly behind me, around my sides.

"Me too," I said.

We stood together not knowing anything and watching the third shift crowd wend home, their eyes hooded against the sun.

The next morning when I woke Jeremy Michael's flyer was taped to the medicine chest mirror. Like a delayed reflection from the first time I'd been here.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked her over her morning fruit ritual.

I did look like him.

"My uncle," she said, but it was too unfolded, too well-preserved to have come from his house.

She had an envelope of money, too.

I stared at her and stared at her then followed the handrail downstairs to the convenience store, only didn't have any change for the beef jerky. A different clerk was working—meaning no credit—so I walked along the edge of Lorinda's building until dollar bills started raining down from the sky. I caught them and caught them and forgave her for whatever I knew I should be holding against her, and then, when I pushed open the door of her apartment, she took another picture of me then ran for the bed.

I followed.

———

The next time she went missing I went to her uncle's house. It was the only place I thought she could be. She wasn't, though, and, standing on the porch with one of his beers in my hand I realized I didn't know her last name. Maybe in fairy tales you don't have to have last names, though, because each first name is so individual. And because you never know who your father was, what your patronym should be, what you've inherited. She was the only Lorinda I'd ever known. Her uncle called her Lindy. We sat on the couch while his wife worked in the kitchen—some kind of telemarketing she didn't have to take notes for, as she was painting her nails the whole time—and on the third beer I asked him if maybe she just got lost on the way to the bathroom, Lorinda.

"She hasn't told you?" he said.

I took another beer, shook my head no, and treated him to Tanner's. It was the only place I knew anymore. Class was back in session, and I was proud to be there with her uncle—to be there drunk with Lorinda's uncle, occupying a full corner of the bar. We were unapproachable.

He told me yes, maybe she had got lost. It wouldn't be the first time.

I didn't interrupt him with any questions, and he thumbnailed it for me: that when she was ten—1988—she'd gone missing for three weeks. The big disappearing act. Little Girl Lost. It was in all the papers; her picture was up there too, stapled to the telephone poles already bristling with staples. As he talked I was falling more and more in love with her: of course she would be drawn to me—I was still looking for the girl she'd been ten years ago. And she was helping me.

I leaned back into the dull comfort of a six-pack and Lorinda walked right into it. Or, to the edge, anyway. She was standing in the door looking at me and her uncle, her hair for an instant touching both sides of the doorjamb at once. Her uncle waved to her and some of the students noticed, and I winced inside. To show how displeased she was with the whole situation—her uncle was *her* family, not mine—she sat down with us and took a big, tearing bite of my chicken sandwich. Maybe I was the only one holding my breath, I don't know.

She paid our tab and led us out. We piled into her uncle's truck and she asked to borrow it after we dropped him off. He told us not to worry about being careful; I pictured us driving home with a telephone pole angled out over the tailgate, its butt hooked under the toolbox.

"I'm sorry," I told her.

She shrugged, no eye contact at all, and drove north until I fell asleep against the door panel. She shook me awake maybe an hour later. We were at one of those halfway diners that feed the cross-country bus crowds, that just have rows and rows of toilets. We didn't go inside, though, but to the far island of pumps, the handles all garbage-bagged over.

"This where you get make-believe unleaded?" I asked, chocking my door open with my foot.

"Something like that," she said.

I started to get out but she was holding my wrist again. Not looking at me, but in the rearview.

I pulled my door to and watched real casual in my mirror, but there were just truckers walking in and out, always stopping just before the door to spit, all the cold air in the place rushing past them.

"Ed told me about you getting lost that time," I told her. "It's all right."

She looked at me, didn't answer, and I rewound, played it back, what she'd heard: *all right*. As if it had been her fault.

"Where were you?" I asked, quieter.

"Here," she said.

"I mean then."

"Lost," she said, in a different voice, then stood out of the car before I could follow up, apologize.

I stood too, leaned over the hood to steady myself.

She came around to my side, reached into the windshield bucket-thing hose-clamped onto the pole, and pulled out a freezer bag with Jeremy Michaels' face in it. Only it was me, not the picture she'd taken earlier but one while I was sleeping. I thought of the papers on her fake nightstand rustling, closed my eyes, opened them again.

I pulled it from her, turned my back, peeled the top apart. In a neat, non-Lorinda hand on the back of the picture were the words *yes I've seen this boy*.

It was for the Michaels. Twenty-two years after they'd asked.

I could seem them in their tasteful, trying-to-be nondescript clothes out here at the last island, pulling their son's picture up from the developing tray the bucket had to be to them; the fairy tale.

"We needed the money," Lorinda said, and then said it again.

I laughed without quite smiling, and held the picture to my face, leaving my prints all over the back of it.

When she tried to touch me I pushed her away harder than I meant to and she fell over an old gravity hose and rolled away from me, like she was expecting more. I stepped forward once and she stopped, staring up at me, and I didn't lower my hand to her, just turned for the diner instead, settled into a booth by the plate glass. All the truckers were watching me over their coffee. I stared at my hands on the table, pressed them into it to keep my fingers from shaking.

We needed the money.

The waitress wouldn't take my order because she'd seen Lorinda fall. I laughed again, didn't stop until one of the truckers settled into the booth across from me. He just stared. I looked up at him and knew what was coming, knew there was no help, so just did what I could: pushed the table hard into his chest, pinning him for a moment while I scrambled up. The front door was locked, though. I pressed my forehead to the glass then turned to see the heel of the trucker's hand coming at me, palm up, and then there was the sound of keys, and then I was

outside on the asphalt.

He told me he was showing me what it felt like.

I laughed again and he sat on my stomach, holding my hair with one hand, hitting me with the other, the waitress—his girlfriend?—watching from the register, holding her finger to a key as if she could just push it and pretend this moment wasn't happening, that she'd just been standing there ringing up a customer the whole time. I tried to wave to her for some reason and the snapshot of me fluttered away, like your soul does in a book, and, to complete the scene, make it right, everything suddenly bleached itself out, got washed into paler versions of itself.

It was Lorinda, in her uncle's truck.

She rolled up until her bumper was an arm's length from my head, and I looked up at the rusted undercarriage.

"He's not worth it," one of the bus-people said to Lorinda.

She tried to pick me up and I shrugged her away again, climbed the grill myself, felt around to the passenger side.

"We needed the money," she said ten miles later, then again at twenty, and in the movie I was writing in my head now, of this, a demure Ford had pulled out of the parking lot behind us, was following us even now, Mr Michaels holding his wife's hand across the bench seat.

How he hadn't stepped out of the car to keep the trucker off me, I had no idea. It was for the best, though; I would have screamed with him walking up out of the asphalt like that, one hand extended.

———

I wasn't worried about the phone bill anymore. Lorinda sat across the living room from me, in the windowsill. She looked like an anguished young woman on the cover of a video in the dollar section of some sprawling store. All she needed to do was scrunch her hair at the front, hold it in her hand. Instead she just looked right at me.

"We don't have to keep doing it," she said. "It was just supposed to be that one time."

I shrugged. The side of my face hurt. This was a vegan house, though: there was nothing to put on it to pull the pain out. If that even worked.

"How'd you get hold of them?" I asked.

"They never changed their number," she said, looking away, eight stories down.

Meaning she'd had the flyer all along.

I scrunched my hair at the front of my head.

"They want to meet you," she said.

"You know I can't trust you anymore," I told her.

She closed her eyes.

"I always screw things up," she said.

She was sitting on the coffee table across from me now. It was maybe lunch, but we weren't eating. I wondered for a moment if maybe I *was* Jeremy Michaels, kidnapped, eased into another neighborhood, another household.

"Where were you?" I asked her.

"I told—" she started, looking north, to the diner, but then got it: where was she when she was ten, and got lost.

"Will you trust me, then?" she asked.

I told her I didn't know, and wasn't lying. We had needed the money, though. And people are so easy around Christmas.

"You know where Deermont is, right?" she asked.

I nodded: two hours south, maybe. The opposite direction from my vigilante diner. I touched my face, looked for her to go on. She covered her eyes and said they used to camp there, her family. This time her mother hadn't been able to make it, though. It was just her and her father, and it had taken me however long I had known her then to realize that she never called him 'Dad.' It was always the formal term, *Father*. Like he was that far away, or, like God, that close, that inside.

"You don't have to," I told her.

She told me anyway, though.

They went to their usual place, with the rock overhang. He wrote her name in the soot by his head and said people had been using this place for centuries, because it was high, and because the scooped-out part of the cliff curled the heat back at you, and because, if you stoked your fire, you could see it for miles and miles. Lorinda fell asleep looking first at her name, then, when the flames were gone and all that was left was ember light, at the after-image of her name, until she wasn't sure if it was even there anymore.

When she woke, her father was gone.

She was twenty-two when she told me this, but I could hear the ten-year-old in her voice, looking around for which tree to pee behind, if 'behind' even meant anything without anybody else there.

Of course she got lost. It was like her uncle said, like I'd not meant, really: she went to the bathroom and never came back. For three weeks, anyway.

———

Little Girl Lost. It was what they called her on the radio, in the paper, on the news. She even showed me a flyer with her face on it and there she was at ten, in frayed pigtails.

He was fishing, she said. Her father. Fishing. Like he always did, leaving the women in camp for the morning, only this time it was just her, Lorinda.

That first day she walked to what she thought was camp over and over, and never heard her name being called, just waited for night and how she'd see the scooped-out part of the cliff that was theirs. How her father had probably worked all day dragging wood to it for the bonfire.

She sat on the highest clear spot she could find and hugged her knees and woke that way in the velvety, unbroken black.

On the second day she found a stream and drank from her cupped hands, then followed the stream to another,

smaller one, and another, until it was just a trickle, a damp spot under the woven yellow grass. There hadn't been trash in any of them. Once she heard a truck on a blacktop road, its tires whirring, engine laboring, but then it was gone before she could zero in on it, and four more days slipped by. Her pigtails were frizzy now, straggling down onto her shoulders. She was eating the soft insides of bark she peeled off certain trees, and digging for some bulb-plant that had maybe been a turnip.

On the seventh day, she found the camp again. It was deserted. The raccoons had been at the stuffing of the sleeping bags, so everything was coated with angel hair. Her father had left the camp, forgotten it. She looked down into the basin, where he had to be looking for her. By now he wasn't supposed to just start a bonfire, but burn the whole forest down, do away with the trees and just leave her there standing from the ash.

She broke open the one can of beans that was left and fingered them into her mouth along with the leaves and dirt they'd fallen into.

This left two more weeks.

Lorinda shrugged, hugging her knees again now in the window well of her apartment, and said they didn't matter, those fourteen other days. The helicopters made their patterns, her shoes fell apart, she heard another truck—an RV—even saw a flash of a mirror or lens from across the valley. It was too far away, though, and probably lost too.

Partway through the second week, she found another can of beans. It was from the six-pack her father'd had at camp. It was sitting on a rock, rightside up. She watched it all morning, then stood, walked straight to it, and smashed it on a sharp rock in the creek. The water swirled brown for an instant with juice, but she only lost a spoonful of beans, if spoons still mattered.

Sometime after that she started seeing her father.

Telling me this, her voice became uneven, then too controlled.

I told her again that she didn't have to, but she just went on.

The first time she saw him, he was walking funny, and she thought it might be because he'd been hurt trying to find her, or had worn his good boots out, was breaking in another, better pair.

She sat in the shade of her tree and waited for him to see her, to save her, rescue her, but as he drew closer she saw why he was lifting his feet so high: hip-boots. For wading. There was even a creel strapped over his shoulder, and when he turned sideways to navigate a rock, the long, limber rod which had been invisible straight on revealed itself.

He called her name, his voice strong and clear.

She didn't answer.

He walked within twenty feet of her.

Lorinda closed her eyes after this part, refusing to let him still get to her. It wasn't an act. Even now I know it wasn't an act.

After that, she followed him, watched him work the small, virgin streams, pull silver fish out of the water that glinted in the sun as they died, the green line leading out of their mouths like a slender tongue extended in pain. When he met with the rangers at lunch and the middle of the afternoon, for news, reports of her, the rangers would point along the skyline, trace grids in the dirt showing where they'd searched, where he had. They didn't

brush them away when they were done with them either, so at night she could emerge from the trees, stand in the squares, a ghost of herself.

I didn't even ask where she slept, or if she did.

I did understand about when they found her, though, in the ditch of a farm-to-market road. She was just sitting, watching the cars pass by. Drawn by the hum of the tires. Which wasn't the thing that made the news that afternoon. What made the news was that the driver of the car that finally pulled over had to scramble over the fence and through the brush and deep into the woods to finally catch her, and even then she fought. Even at ten years old, after nearly three weeks in the bush.

In her living room, being smart, I told her that it's like with language: a kid can pick it up. Or lose it.

She smiled.

"Along with everything else," she said.

That her dad brought tackle with him to look for her was one thing. But that she just watched him. That she could.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Now you know," she said, shrugging, and I did: the thing she'd been doing with Jeremy Michael's parents hadn't been about the money. It had been a test; she'd watched them coast up to the fuel island with the same eyes she'd watched her father with when she was lost. The same eyes she watched me with sometimes, in the street.

I nodded: now I knew.

"It's not Christmas anymore, y'know," I told her, my voice almost shaking.

She breathed out hard, through her nose.

"Run," she said, just that, looking out the window, her back to the money divided on the coffee table, and I did, taking the close way around the building because I could feel her in the sway of my back, watching.

That night I followed a homeless man through the streets from doorway to doorway, and once when he raised his fist over his head to rail at some half-remembered injury I saw the thinnest hint of a phosphorescent line tracing delicate S-shapes in the night sky above him, and I looked away, stole across town into the graffiti-steam tunnels under the college, and up out of them into the basement of one of the resident halls, the couches and the television and the academic life. Soon enough one of the fraternity boys stumbled down in his boxers to shove change into the vending machine, then stood by my couch looking at the same program I was, tossing salted peanuts into his mouth.

"This one again?" he said—the show—and I laughed, shrugged, and betrayed everything I thought I stood for.

It was three days before I had to leave, before the rent-a-cop asked for my student ID then actually ran it through, asked me what floor I lived on. By then I'd put Lorinda together in my head some, though. Enough, anyway. It all came down to her salads, how of course she liked them. It wasn't the turnips she'd dug up, but her father. How he had to have cooked the fish he caught, their smoke wisping through the trees; their taste.

With some of the money from the coffee table I bought a beer at Tanner's, waiting for Lorinda to fill the door again, or not to, and with the rest I bought a cork board from the bookstore next door, carried it under my arm through the streets, collecting abandoned tacks from telephone poles. The parts of their shafts which were

buried in the oily wood were shiny and bright. The flyer I was trying to ignore was the homeless man I'd seen fishing the other night. He was gone.

———

By the time I found another apartment, I was Jeremy, slipping away in the third grade, watching my parents through parted bushes, Huck Finning past my own memorial service. It didn't last, though, the apartment. Or, my rent. I called my father and he breathed in deep for a lecture, and I left him talking, the payphone receiver balanced to catch the rain, drown him out.

Summer Session One started and Tanner's dropped its prices, started serving more margaritas on the patio. It's where I saw Ed again. He had his own beer in cans up the sleeve of his shirt, so that at first, his arms were stiff like a robot. But as the day wore on they were wet yarn waving before him as he wheeled from our table to the bathroom, the bathroom to our table. We drank, and drank, each revolutionaries in our own way maybe, in our minds at least, and I told him I knew about her now, Lorinda, *Lindy*, the whole Little Girl Lost thing, and he eyed me over his mug, asked if I thought it really happened, then?

"What?" I said, and turned to the door, half-expecting her to appear in ratted pigtails—summoned, her hair matted with leaf litter like she'd never been found at all.

Ed shrugged it off, but then I got a little more out of him later: Lorinda weighed more when they found her than she did when they'd gone on the trip.

In the incomplete silence he left—the *suggestion*—I closed my eyes to try to think about this, cracked the beer open on the dash of his his truck we were suddenly in. The beer sloshed over my hand.

"Careful," I told him, Ed, and he wheeled through molasses over to the other curb, and we urged the earth under us until his house rotated into view at the end of the street.

"The meat tree," Ed said, spraying beer before him in a fine mist.

I focused on him. We were leaning on his dumpster-truck in the backyard.

He laughed, looked up at the trees all around, like fingers reaching into the sky, and I thought of her again, at ten, alone in the woods, then told Ed about the scam she was pulling on the Michaels. How she was using the Michaels to get back at her father. I was crying drunk by then. The trucker's fist had left an impression under my eye somehow—a ring?—and I'd taken to holding my finger there. It was like all our mothers had done with Jeremy's name: used us to fill it up.

"The meat tree," I said back to Ed, finally, and he nodded, held his can up in appreciation.

"May we all find it," he said, and without him even telling me, I could see it, dripping red.

It was what he said Lorinda said she'd fed on those three weeks.

"After the beans?" I said.

"The second can," he said back, passing whatever test I was giving him. That I'd hoped he was going to fail.

I stayed with him for four more days, ran his bill up talking to my mother, the earpiece of the phone worn down from telemarketing and flecked with nail polish, then on the fifth day I found myself again at Tanner's, waiting for her. Lorinda. I told myself it was because I needed the money, but that wasn't it. I needed her.

———

On her machine I said I was collecting the flyers again. Like that was healthy, would make her pick up: a sheaf of missing homeless men staring up from their faded pieces of paper, or tacked at shoulder level around the living room. The thing was, nobody knew where they were going, or being taken. Supposedly it happened every few years like this. My old Sociology professor would have flowcharted the demographics, turned it into a migratory pattern. Used it to explain what was left of the twentieth century. The homeless men that were left were calling me the Custodian. I'd hear them behind me, speaking through their tangled beards.

No, I told them in my head. *It's Jeremy*.

My hair was longer now, though, not like cropped like his parents thought—like it had been in the photograph they'd had, of me sleeping.

I wired my mom for two hundred dollars and used sixty of it for a week's worth of hotel room, paid in advance. Local calls were fifty cents each, so I loitered in the lobby, waiting for the courtesy phone. The desk jockey watched me talk to Lorinda's machine and smiled, the corners of his mouth impossibly sharp. It didn't feel like a fairy tale anymore; all the girls on the corner had names like her: Savanna, Leiloni, Katressa.

I told my mom I was registered for Second Summer Session.

I stood under Lorinda's balcony for long minutes.

The clerk at the convenience store still let me have jerky on credit. Eight dollars in, I asked him why.

"She pays it," he said, nodding his head up to the eighth floor.

She knew I was watching.

The two days after that I spent at the library, leafing through the microfiche for accounts of her ordeal; for details. There weren't any, though, just what she told me—less, really—then one useless article about how going feral like she'd done—running from the man who'd stopped for her—was just another variant of the Stockholm Syndrome. I read it line by line, though. The homeless men there for the public restrooms and free air-conditioning watched me, too, knew me. On the long walk back to my room—one day left on my tab—I stepped into a pawn shop, held a high-dollar fly fishing rig in my hand.

"Go ahead," the guy stocking sockets said, and I whipped it like the ceiling was higher than it was, my off-hand open, pointing with the palm, for balance.

I talked him down to forty dollars. He folded it up into a poolstick case and then I was walking again, following a man I thought looked like me in thirty years. He was wearing a demure grey overcoat, his hands deep in his pockets. I knew it wasn't, that it couldn't be, but I told myself it *was* Mr Michaels, that he'd traced Lorinda back to here; that he was looking for me.

Finally, at an intersection, I let him go then stood under the stoplight, the faces of the missing massing on the pole behind me. I looked out from them into the stopped traffic, and there, both hands visible over the wheel, was a woman who could have been my mother twenty years ago.

She was staring at me.

I started running.

I don't know what happened to the fishing rod, but, too, now, I do: a homeless man found it, opened it, fitted it together the only way it would go together, then walked through the streets casting it over the vinyl tops of cars, the flat-faced bullbats gliding down to inspect the flashing hook. He was the man I followed that first night I left

Lorinda, only he was moving the opposite direction in time.

That night the clerk at Lorinda's convenience store reached under the counter, handed me some of my books. He called it special delivery.

In the pages of Heidegger were pictures of me sleeping.

"Thanks," I told the clerk.

I looked at the pictures in my room then tacked them to my bulletin board and looked at them some more, then took them down, and the next night, the one night the front desk was extending me on credit, a spoonful of rice unchewed in my mouth, I understood: it was an invitation; a warning; a plea.

I walked across town and sat at Ed's kitchen table and let his wife cut my hair. So I'd look like Jeremy. And then I borrowed Ed's truck.

———

Lorinda was waiting for me in the square bushes of the Michaels' house. I'd found them in the phonebook. We were four hours away from where we were supposed to be, two hours past the vigilante diner.

"Hey," I said, sitting down beside her.

She didn't say anything.

The hollow dent under my eye was so empty. If I laid on my back, dew would collect in it maybe. I had a can of beans in my pocket. A light went on in the house, the window glowing yellow, then it went off again. It was like a signal. I sat the beans down next to Lorinda's leg, upside down, and she righted it then pulled her hand away, the memory snaking up her arm.

I looked out at the street.

I didn't have to say that raccoons couldn't read the label on a can of beans, to have set it upright for her, and I didn't have to say that Ed had told me about the meat tree.

Her chin was trembling. She wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve.

"Who was it?" I said. "Who left them for you like that?"

"Ur-Lorinda," she said.

"No," I said.

She looked up at me.

"It's happening again," she said. "I can't stop it. They should have left me in that ditch. Not chased me."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

She tilted her head back to keep from crying. Headlights washed over us and we didn't move, and then it was dark all over again. I stood into it, away from the window, and then saw it like an afterimage, written into the sill, under the eave, all the nights she'd been spending here: the seven letters of her name. Like her father had written in the soot of their overhang.

I turned back to her.

She was looking at me.

"No," I said, "don't—" but she already had the match, to start the fire.

She stood too.

"Would you want to live?" she said, "if your kid was . . . " but couldn't finish.

I cupped my hand over hers, killing the flame, but she pushed me away, backed into the yard, lighting another, and another, and dropping them.

No lights were going on in the house.

No cars were coming.

It was just us.

Tendrils of smoke were feeling up out of the grass. I walked through them to her, held her, and in broken breaths she told me about the meat tree, how, after the upright can of beans was another, and another, leading her deeper into the woods. When she got there it was night and the bugs were chattering above her, but when the sun came she saw it: the meat tree. It was like Ed had said: flanks of steaming red meat speared on the reaching branches, dripping. For her.

She ate.

And each night there was more, and on the third night she saw it moving through the trees above her, like leather in the shape of a man, or a man who had just forgot to die.

She told herself it was her father, her real father.

The meat made her sick, but she ate it, except the skin. That she draped back over the dead branches of the tree. It was hairless.

I pulled her tighter as the lawn sprinklers came on, then did what I'd always wanted to do, I think: traded myself for the Michaels, went home with her. It was something only a son would do.

She had taken the bus there, so she rode back with me, sitting in the middle of Ed's bench seat, her face paler with each car that whipped past.

We stopped at the vigilante diner and nobody remembered us. We sat against the plate glass and she ate her salad and I ate mine, and when the waitress who'd held her finger on the register key like she could have stopped the trucker at anytime asked if we wanted anything more, a burger or something real, I looked up at her and shook my head no.

Out at the last island of pumps I was floating in the oily water, a baptism, and then my eyes slammed open and I gripped Lorinda's hand hard under the table.

———

I moved back in with her the next day, handing my collection of flyers out the bathroom window of my motel so the front desk wouldn't know I was skipping out. We were avoiding Tanner's for some reason, too. Like it would remind us of when we didn't know so much, make us sad of who we were now, and where. That first week

passed uneventful, no sex even. Lorinda was sleeping a lot. I flipped through the stations of her television and stood on her balcony at night. The Fourth of July was six weeks behind us already, more, but kids were still lighting bottle rockets and roman candles from the tops of roofs. It was enough.

I kept the flyers of the homeless men on the nightstand.

I called my mom and told her I was okay. She asked about Lorinda. Not by name, just generally.

"She's okay too," I said, but it was a lie.

Lorinda's hair was matted, *matting*, not anymore like she'd never been found, but like she was reverting, going back, the years falling away from her. For one bad day I thought maybe she was a ghost, that she was the girl you always hear about hitch-hiking between certain mile markers, trying to get home but not able to, but then I remembered Ed, how he'd seen her too, how the microfiche at the library had had pictures of her on the side of the road, how the napkin I'd found in the kitchen trash the other day had had real blood on it, hers, from cutting fruit probably.

So she was real, physical.

I breathed out.

The day after I thought she was a ghost, I thought she was just confused, that she was repressing: that all her talk of her time lost was a displacement or transference or something, an allegory of molestation. General Psychology was the test she'd made me miss that first time. It made sense, though, that she was just projecting someone else in the woods with her—some *thing*—because her father would never do what he had maybe been doing the whole time her mother wasn't there. The meat tree even fit, the blood; the fishing rod. Isn't that what fairy tales are, anyway? What we tell ourselves *about* ourselves, just in an indirect way, with elves and magic and monsters to make it all safe? I told Lorinda about it in the afternoon when we were just sitting there and she looked across the room at me and smiled one side of her face.

"You don't gain weight from getting molested," she said.

"You were ten," I said.

"Call it what you want," she said back.

I looked away. It had been a nice two hours at least, when the world had made sense.

"You don't have to be smart like that all the time," she told me.

I kept looking away.

The rest of the afternoon she shaped my hair more like Jeremy's, and then, later, at the convenience store, looking through bangs that weren't really there anymore, two things happened: the first was the new clerk nodded at me like he knew me, then followed me into the street, led me to a wooden pole. On it was a grainy reproduction of me, sleeping. And the phone number. And the reward. I closed my eyes, the clerk faded away, and then, before I could make the stoop, the stairs, the payphone on the side of the building started ringing.

I looked from it to the street.

It was just me.

It was *for* me.

I closed my eyes and walked back inside. I was eating candy then, because the chocolate was made from cocoa, which was some kind of bean, and beans had protein, I was sure. And I needed protein.

When I opened Lorinda's door, turning the knob first all the way to the right then back to the left, making the room a safe place to enter (I'd always imagined a huge windshield wiper on the other side of the door, wiping back and forth), she was waiting for me with her new camera. It blinded me, and all I could think was *silver, silver, silver*. It was good, though; as the living room faded back, its corners sharpening into furniture, I let myself believe that I was just meeting her—this girl who was supposed to have a picture of Jeremy—for the first time, that I was just coming up to her apartment. That the last ten months had been some flash-forward or something, what could have happened but didn't. Lorinda played along, snapping picture after picture, her camera pushing them out onto the coffee table and the carpet and the spaces between the cushions of the couch.

We fell into bed laughing or trying to, twined together with sheets like the dead, night feeling down around us, into us, and for a few minutes what we didn't talk about didn't exist. That next morning Ed was there, though. Standing in the bedroom door, the can in his hand catching the morning sun and turning it silver. Like the flash of the camera all over, my eyes just clearing.

He looked at Lorinda sprawled naked under the sheets.

"Your dad's in town," he said.

"I know," she said.

She never looked at him.

On the coffee table by the couch where he'd sat, waiting for us to stir, were five empty cans and then the polaroids of me, stacked neatly in the order Lorinda'd snapped them. You could tell by the continued motion, like how you know which frame comes next in a comic book. There were all these missing moments, though.

Over tasteless slices of breakfast melon I asked Lorinda if she wanted to see him?

"Who?" she said.

I didn't know what to say. The classifieds were still spread on the table from the day before.

"We need money," I said.

"We need a lot of things,' she said back.

It was Labor Day; nothing was easy.

She walked out onto the balcony with her melon.

I called out that I was going to get a job, a dishwasher or something, anything, the guy with the spray bottle and rag at the skin arcades downtown, but it was a lie: two hours later I was standing over her uncle. He was sleeping on his back on the couch, his wife doing her telemarketer imitation in the kitchen.

"What do you sell?" I'd asked her on the way in.

"What do you need?" she'd asked back, the receiver pinned between her shoulder and jaw.

She hadn't known where Ed's brother was, just nodded to him on the couch. I was turning to go to him when I

saw it: one of the flyers of me on the table under her fingernail equipment. There was money involved.

"Who are you talking to there?" I said.

"You come here for me or for him?" she asked, then *yessed* her way back into whatever pitch she'd been in before I'd let myself in the back door. She looked at me over her fingernails like Was I done?

I was.

Ed woke when I moved his beer.

I lied that Lorinda wanted to see him, her father.

He leaned on his knees and thinned his eyes out against the harsh forty-watt above and behind me.

It was lunch, a little after.

Ed closed his eyes and gave me directions—just another motel on another street, room 134—then patted himself down for the keys he didn't have.

"You sure she wants to see him?" he asked.

I nodded yes and never stopped walking out the door.

Not only were his keys gone, but his truck wasn't there either.

By five, I was sitting outside room 134. I hadn't eaten all day, except the part of the melon for breakfast. It had been bitter, though; I pictured the rind shriveling up at the table, the flies buzzing eight stories up and in through the open balcony door, the melon snapping shut over them.

For two hours, he never came out. Or back. It was another room in a row of rooms.

The new homeless man taped to the metal sides of the streetlight poles was a man I thought I knew; I already had his flyer tucked into my pocket. I think I was collecting them because of their beards, because if you shaved them they might pair up with artist's sketches of missing third-graders twenty years after they'd gone missing. I wanted one of them to be Jeremy instead of me. Or, Jeremy *too*.

At dark, when no lights came on in 134, I leaned against the door and it gave—no chain—and I closed it behind me, stood in the stale air, turned the light on myself finally.

It was just me.

I sat at the two-person little table for long minutes, looking at my hands, then went into his bathroom. His electric razor was there. I shaved my head an eighth of an inch at a time with it, all the thing would take. It took maybe forty-five minutes. I left the hair on the counter, stared at myself in the mirror, ran my palm over my scalp.

On the walk back to Lorinda's I left the polaroids of me face-in in likely windowsills, under the wipers of parked cars. It was funny; I was laughing. The streets were full, school almost back in session again.

I shouldered through the crowds knotted around the entrances to the bars and once someone called my name and I closed my eyes. It was somebody from the Psych class I'd dropped; he pushed through to me.

"Thought you were dead," he said.

My scalp was halogen-white.

"I am," I said, and touched him with my finger on the forehead like I was giving Lent, then turned and walked away.

Maybe these were the missing moments between the snapshots, I thought. Literally they were, anyway; I still had two in my pocket for somewhere up the street. I started running, and didn't stop until the foot of Lorinda's building.

In the gutter and on the sidewalk were both her cameras, the film exposed to the sodium light.

I knelt, collected them, looked up at the rounded base of her balcony. It was just concrete.

I made myself walk up the stairs.

Her door was open.

I stepped in with the lower portion of my shirt pulled out to hold the broken cameras.

There were two policemen in the living room.

"I told you she threw something," the first cop said, looking at my shirt.

"Paraphernalia . . . " the other one said, approaching.

Lorinda was behind them, on the other side of the couch. She'd been crying. She looked hard at me, trying to tell me something, but I couldn't get it, not until the police men leaned over the camera parts I had.

The flyers, my flyers, the homeless men.

They thought it was me. Because I kept them. Because I fit the profile.

The second policeman—the one leaning over for the parts—saw it in my eyes the moment I realized it myself: that I was going to run. He took one step back, cocking his arm over his stick, and I flung the parts over the room, and the only reason they didn't catch me right off was that I wasn't scrambling for the hall, like they expected, but the bedroom.

I grabbed the flyers off the nightstand, turned hard, and bounced off the wall back into the living room, knocking one of them over, then crashed out onto the balcony, letting all the flyers go, back to the city.

After about thirty seconds I turned around.

"You done?" the first policeman asked.

The other was shaking his head, his hand at his waist.

"Jeremy Barker?" he said.

I swallowed.

"We should take both of you in," the first officer said, flashing his eyes over at Lorinda. I saw on his pad where it said *Linda*, her real name.

"For what?" she said, her voice as small as it could get.

"The Blue Inn?" the second policeman said. "Nine days ago?"

I sagged against the rail.

"Wasn't me," I said, the usual line.

They looked at my scalp, Lorinda too, and I tried to push into their minds the Blue Inn desk jockey, describing me with *hair*, with all this *hair*, but it wasn't working, I could see it in the crook of their elbows, their arms cocked above their pads, their nightsticks, but then down on the street someone screamed, straightening all our backs.

The two policemen looked at each other, deciding, then the first held his hand out to me, index finger up. "Stay," he said, and backed out.

The second one turned to follow, his partner's footsteps already retreating hard, then asked didn't he know me from somewhere?

"Nineteen seventy-eight," I said, and he looked at me a moment longer, then left.

We were arsonists, thieves, impersonators, drop-outs. Vegetarians. We fell into bed, the weight of the day pressing on our eyes, and when I woke again it was deep night and Lorinda was shuddering beside me and I held her as close as I could and our mouths found each other and hers was slick with tears and salty and I took them away, into me, and smoothed her hair back, told her everything was going to be all right. But she was shaking her head no.

"What?" I said.

Instead of answering, she closed her eyes against my chest—I could feel the lashes, even—and I drifted in and out, and when I came to once, the flyers on the nightstand were fluttering again, and I suddenly couldn't breathe anymore.

They were back was the thing.

Someone had just left them.

I stood, groping for the bedpost, the wall, then out into the living room.

The balcony door was open, the curtains wisping through it.

I parted them, stepped out, and there on the brick was a slab of raw meat. It was almost a relief, to be in one world instead of another. But still. I backed away, to the brick of the building. There was skin on the backside of the slab of meat, I could see it, but more, too: delicate footprints in red, the barest hints of toes. Lorinda's. And then, with the tip of my tongue, I felt my mouth, my lips. They were crusted, but I corrected myself: con*gealed*.

This is where she got her protein.

It was still feeding her.

It's happening again, she had said.

The bloody napkin in the kitchen trash.

It hadn't been tears in her mouth.

I felt back through the balcony door into the darkness of the living room, and the phone was ringing, had been. Once, twice, four times. I looked to the bedroom door, expecting Lorinda to fill it at any moment, standing-still asleep, her mouth red, like all she needed was a kiss to wake up, but the thing about fairy tales is that for every princess there's a troll, leathery and slight, moving from building top to building top on fingertips and toes.

No, I shook my head no, *please*, for her not to rise, then raised the phone to my ear.

There was a long pause—nothing, nothing—then a voice, a man's voice, a father: ". . . Jeremy?"

My lower lip trembled, the room blurred, and I nodded, said it into the phone even, *yes, yes*, then set the receiver down on the counter and followed the wall around to the moulding of the front door, and the line of the jamb down to the handle, and the handle into the hall, and, stumbling out into the street at four in the morning I understood for a moment what it's like to be lost, to be in the third grade and be lost, gone, disappearing, the only part of you still left a picture on a pole at an intersection as you hunch past with a crowd of students, your backpack slung over your shoulder like the rest, a girl standing on a balcony eight stories above you, waiting to be saved.

By day, Stephen Graham Jones is an associate professor of English at Texas Technical University, he writes at night. He is the author of All the Beautiful Sinners, The Bird Is Gone: A Manifesto, The Fast Red Road – A Plainsong, Bleed into Me: A Book of Stories and Demon Theory [forthcoming].