

*Haunted Earth*

My fingers slip under Tsuny's blouse and pick at the clasp on her bra. She sinks under me, down in tall cordgrass, and the stalks crackle beneath us as my hand maps her ribs, follows her smooth back to the dampness at the base of her spine. Outside this stand of chest-high grass is the open lawn where they say aliens landed two weeks ago. I'm trying to undress Tsuny in an autumn when our town, Big Lake, is buzzing with reports of demons and UFOs. One group in a Buick said they were chased by flying lights on the highway. A guy at my school has an aunt who moved to Houma because she saw a dark, hairy man-thing staring at her from the backyard, two nights in a row while she was washing dishes.

None of that matters, because it's all on the other side of the cordgrass, not down in here. Our breath is hot and my hands keep shifting, searching for an open pathway. She moves with me, blocking the waistline of her skirt. This is our conflict, and we repeat it with frustrated, fading spirit, like an argument we're tired of having.

Before she spread the black blanket today, Tsuny stood beside me and we saw past the tall grass, to the other end of the rice field. Over there a circle got scorched into the ground of Leon Arceneaux's farm, where he says a spaceship landed. Everybody's seen that. But today, before I tangled my hand in Tsuny's heavy black hair, we both saw that Mr. Arceneaux had gotten a couple boys to help him spread a banner across his roof that reads WELCOME in tall, red letters. Mr. Arceneaux doesn't work since City Services shut down the oil refinery in Big Lake. I know that because he used to work with my pop. I figure with the banner and the spaceship he's trying to get interested in something, which is good, because if you don't stay busy in the prairie slums, time and the sun will make you crazy.

I'm busy with Tsuny. I watch where our skins meet, my white arm against her rich brown. Her color mixes her mom's Vietnamese and her dad's black. She has plump lips from her father, a tiny nose and slivered eyes from her mom. Her skirt is from Our Lady of Lourdes, the Catholic school she goes to, and it bunches in my fist. The wool in my hand, its plaid pattern of navy and gray and

yellow are a charged sensation to me, like her skin, and I want to be changed by it.

She goes to school with uniformed boys in khaki slacks and blue oxfords and I'm wearing the same jeans I always wear, today with my jungle fatigue OG 107 Utility Shirt from Army Surplus, where I spend a lot of the money I make recycling. My shoes are unissued FG combat boots, and I gave up taking them off when I'm with Tsuny. I'm afraid that the effort of unlacing them ruins the momentum, and if that happens she'll never get carried away by passion. Then, together, with shrinking motions, we stop, with no real advancement made into the disputed territories. We breathe rough. A silver dolphin gleams on Tsuny's neck, and under it rests the paper tag of her scapular.

"What are we doing?" she asks me.

I don't know how to tell her what we're doing. She might be asking me why we do these things down here in the grass, but we don't go to movies or hold hands in the mall.

It's 1983, and I have a map of Vietnam on my wall. I took it from a *National Geographic* when I was eight, and the sickle-shape of its coast has become as familiar to me as sky. Pop got back from Vietnam when I was six, and I'd been seeing it on TV long before that. Vietnam is fire and prehistory to me, the reason Pop isn't good at numbers and why my mom first got her job at the Shetler Insurance Agency. My name is Neal Lemoine and Vietnam is part of me in a way I can't understand, an inherited way, like a middle name. There's been lots of talk here lately about this movie, *Close Encounters*, but I've never seen it. The new movies bore me, and everyone looks ugly. I don't play Pac-Man, Dungeons & Dragons, or any sports. I have a good handshake.

I trace a finger across the brown shore of Tsuny's stomach, and she stops it at the top of her skirt. I picture her on my bed, where she's never been, under the mosquito netting that overhangs my mattress. Scraps of camouflage are scattered on this canopy, and at night I've imagined choppers breaking the stillness of marshes, big machines floating down weightless, blowing grass flat. This electric god voice speaking staticky, arcane words—*Bravo, Echo, Alpha, Charlie*.

We're fifteen, and I'm thinking Tsuny is on the verge of surrender, that soon this fight will end and the terms of cease-fire will mark an ultimate transformation in me.

We rise and straighten our clothes. We watch buttons and zippers and when our eyes meet, we look away.

"I can stay longer tomorrow," she says. "My parents have a party."

"Good."

Over on the other side of the grass, Mr. Arceneaux unspools cord for some spotlights the boys have installed on the roof, where his WELCOME sign is fixed.

Tsuny just has to walk over a hill to be back at her school, where her parents think she's trying out for the track team, but I walk three miles in the other direction, east of Parish Road 90 until turning up Ryan Street, along the lakeshore toward downtown. Downtown is rows of empty streets, soaped-over windows, broken streetlamps. The sign on the old Sears store is written in red cursive and missing its last two letters, and when I look at the sign with my field binoculars I can see the gulf shore behind it and the word Sea becomes an advertisement. I have studied the town. Sometimes I skip school to do reconnaissance. I know when I pass the parking lot that covers the place where a skirmish was fought between bands of mercenaries in the Civil War. I know that the small, Masonic obelisk on the edge of the Civic Center is where a sailor strangled his girlfriend in 1956, and I know that Jean LaFitte used to have a hideout where a drive-through seafood store now stands beside an enormous rock riddled with caves and wells. Across the lake the closed refineries still rise, hunks of steel and metal piping that look like a city made for robot insects. In the sinking sun I imagine Cobra helicopters emerging, arclight bombers roaring above and dropping conflagration, exploding those dead refineries and clearing the lakeshore. Off the water comes an oily, fish-tinged breeze. Every ten years or so the lake and the gulf rise up and I know that twice in its history, everything on this side of town was washed over, uprooted and left stranded by the brown waves. The people built walls of sandbags and the water carried them away. In pictures of the flood the bags look like teeth floating in coffee. I've been meeting Tsuny for two weeks, but I met her before that when we were kids.

I don't know how things will go with us, and she hasn't said she minds our secrecy.

Our neighborhood on the other side of downtown is called the "Historic Charpentier District." Charpentiers were Acadian carpenters who built strange swooping homes that might remind you of Dr. Seuss drawings. Pop is trying to put macaroni and cheese into Lyla's mouth while he stares at the news. His mouth is always a little open and he's not really paying attention to where he shoves the spoon. Lyla tries to bat it away but she can't move far because of the high-chair. I'm sitting at the kitchen table eating cold C-rations from the can. I ask Pop when Mom's going to be home.

He answers slow. "She's working late. They're busy getting ready for the thing in Baton Rouge."

Mom is the only secretary they have at Shetler Insurance. She comes home after nine most nights, and she has to go to a lot of conferences on the weekends. She used to work there when I was a kid, but quit when Dad came home. Since the refineries closed, she got her job back and Pop stays home with Lyla. Lyla has a noodle stuck in her tuft of black hair.

Pop has narrow, hunched shoulders and short blonde hair. My hair is brown and I'm five inches taller than him, and about sixty pounds heavier. It's because he's small that he had to go into so many VC tunnels, and I've seen the twisted pink scar that runs from his shoulder blade to the small of his back. I see hesitation in his face, as if he's always trying to make up his mind about something. We have a 27-inch Zenith with a new video movie player, and he sits in front of it with Lyla all the time. The TV's on wheels so he can roll it into the kitchen for dinner.

Right now the news is talking about a red van that's arrived in town recently, and the people in it. This group has come to interview us about the weird things being witnessed lately. And the news says that these people have put the idea to the city council that the way to revive the economy is to market Big Lake as a center for paranormal events, like Roswell, New Mexico has done. The light from the news is flickery and white on my father's face. He's put down the spoon and is not watching Lyla shove her hands in her bowl of macaroni. The rest of the house is dark behind the TV.

"What do you think about all that?" I ask him, nodding to the television.

He shrugs. "Well, I don't know, but, you can't really tell." He trails off a little, and his eyes look glazed in the white light, and

I can tell he forgot he was saying something when the newscaster starts talking again.

He doesn't know that I've seen what he's been doing. The last few nights, my father has taken to standing in the backyard when it's really late and pointing an ART scope at the sky. It's an old sniper's scope; the ART stands for Adjustable Ranging Telescope. He stands out there alone, searching the skies, and that rankles me. I'm not used to seeing him interested in anything. His silences don't bother me, because I still think of my father as an aftermath, a result, a tree whose leaves were peeled by Agent Orange. But seeing him use a tactical scope to watch the stars makes me feel nervous and worried. It maybe reminds me of myself, kicking my skateboard down the deserted streets, searching the roofs and windows with my binoculars. I skip school more than I should, but the rooms there have no windows and the desks are tight, and whenever I'm there I feel myself becoming more and more afraid.

There are piles of empty cola and beer cans in plastic bags stacked against one corner of the kitchen. I bring them to the recycling plant on every second Saturday. The pizza boxes have been on the counter since Tuesday, and after I brush my teeth I see we're out of toilet paper again.

Wood creaks and settles as I walk to my bedroom. Light through the window is thrown into an aquatic pattern by the mosquito netting, like light on the wall beside a pool. The map floats in the dark, and the spring handle I use to develop my grip is on the dresser beneath it. I see the country's tan blur and think about Cam Ranh Bay, the Gulf of Tonkin above. At the bottom of my closet, in a padded green field case, I keep a Mac-Song combat knife, my binoculars, and a small, thin plastic box called a GI field pack that includes a box of water-proof matches, an ultra-thin poncho, twine, a flat compass, antibiotics, and a condom in a plain olive-green wrapper.

From my window I can see my father, in the backyard, pointing his scope skyward. His body is like five sticks and his face stays pointed to the stars. He walks real slow back and forth, and then stops in the moonlight and slowly revolves, never shifting his eyes. There is the feeling that I am watching a sort of weird ballet, where the movements are supposed to mean things, and it does something bleak to me.

Tsunny's father used to work at the plants with Pop, but he quit a long time ago and bought his own shrimp boat and now owns five or six. I was eight or nine when Pop and Tsunny's dad and our moms all met at Contraband Days. A Ferris wheel drawn in red light had been spinning and in the nearer distance were flags atop tents, the sounds of bottles breaking at the shooting booth, an accordion and washboard playing over the speakers while a singer sang in French. The lake was bursting with fireworks, men behind counters calling people to step up, laughter, all over the smells of frying meat and peppery spices. The red neon bars on the Ferris wheel made Tsunny's hair scarlet and it had blown around my face while we both sat on the bench, rigid, and she didn't look at me or say anything while we rode up and down. All the lights below us moved across her eyes.

Headlights from Mom's car pass over my blinds and sweep across Pop in the backyard. He keeps facing up for a few seconds, then lowers the scope and trudges inside and Mom's car door slams shut. I hear her keys jangle and her footsteps around the house but no voices for the rest of the night.

Before I leave in the morning I eat an apple, and the President, an old actor with real thick hair, reminds me not to be afraid. Dad is sleeping on the recliner with Lyla on his chest. She sucks her thumb and watches something with puppets. The sky shivers across its gray, wavy surface, and the damp air rumbles from a coming storm. Just then I realize I won't be going to school today.

Instead I get my Mac-Song knife and binoculars, and the poncho from my GI field pack and kick my skateboard past the bus stop, riding it downhill toward the lakeshore and the empty buildings that are being split by roots and smothered by kudzu. A warm drizzle starts and the poncho flaps behind me as I roll past some rusted stoves and refrigerators that sit gutted among weeds beside a nameless brick place. I extend my arms and the poncho is like wings. An old black guy standing under an umbrella gives me a thumbs-up when I zip by.

Pop didn't start looking up at the sky until Mr. Arceneaux told his story. Mr. Arceneaux said a tiny thing, all in silver, walked out the tiny spaceship that landed in his backyard, and this thing spoke to him with its mind and promised to return. On the news he said, "It was outer space."

His wife said it was true and there was the large circle burnt on his lawn, and then everybody started saying they saw things, objects in the sky, bigfoot crouched in a shadow, a prehistoric monster swimming beneath the lake. I ride down to the lakeshore's fallen houses and sinking docks. I remember a party Mom and I went to when I was little, out at one of the houses here, and Mom danced on the dock. The water sizzles with rain, and somewhere at the bottom of it all a plesiosaurus might be paddling. I could see the sea-monster rearing its head out the lake and smashing the 1-10 bridge. Then the rain ends and bright, steaming sun comes out. Eventually I stop at the edge of downtown and climb a hill. I use my binocs to look about a half mile away where Mr. Arceneaux's WELCOME sign shines white from his roof. There is a red van at his house that I recognize as the van on the news. His land sits in the basin between two hills and on the other side of the far one is Tsuny's school.

She asks me questions. She wanted to know why all the boys she knows are angry, and I guess that meant me. She sees guys freeze to stare at her legs when she crosses them or they lower their eyes to where her top button is unfastened, and they can't talk. She said we're all sad. She reads a lot. I like to stay moving too much to read the way she does.

I like the high cordgrass and the marshy rice field to its south. My fingers move over wet stalks and I use the knife's blade to part bigger shafts, imagine using the barrel of an M-16 to cut the brush. The rusted farm machinery that dots these places is heavy on the air, and it isn't hard to imagine the smell as coming from mortar shells or downed choppers.

Around three Tsuny waves to me across the field's tan bristles.

We say hi and I kiss her. We look out at Mr. Arceneaux's house. The two boys from yesterday are dragging picnic tables into the yard. "Have you seen the people in the red van?" I say and point to the van on the street in front Mr. Arceneaux's house.

"They just came to our school and spoke at an assembly. They want everybody to be excited by all this stuff." Her white blouse glows at a certain angle and her dark face and arms look held up by its light. I can smell her perfume and the way her skirt hangs makes me reach out. We set down our backpacks and she unrolls the black bedspread, its smells like moth-balls and sweat.

She tastes like she just ate a tootsie pop, and her skin beneath my fingers almost makes me shake. I can get a little sad when we do this, but I couldn't say why, just that touching her can make me feel like I do when I pass the empty docks where I saw Mom dance, or I see the lots beside the lake where Contraband Days used to happen. My mind confuses me, so I hurry, and soon she is prying my hands off her skirt.

I get myself to act angry. "Are we going to do this forever?"

She rolls her eyes and sighs like I'm a baby or something. Then she turns her head toward me and pieces of her hair blow across her eyes. "Tell me again why you dress like some crazy vet?"

"This stuff breathes better than what you wear. It's all made for this climate. It's comfortable."

"Whatever."

"Aren't you tired of fooling around? We never get anywhere."

"Shut up," she says, slapping my arm. We both lie on our backs with our hands touching, breathing hard. A cool breeze comes along the ground, rustling beads of rain off the stalks above us, and the shade is cool and quiet.

Later on my eyes are open and it's almost night. Tsuny wakes up next to me and asks what time it is. My field watch says seven. I start to tell her it's not too late, but I stop mid-way because we both realize that strong white lights are shining above the cordgrass, and for just a second I think that maybe something has come down to us from the sky, maybe the aliens or something else, and the fear runs hard over my back. But then I hear all the talking. Lots of people are talking on the other side of the grass. Somehow we are surrounded. Then, for just a second, with the voices and dark, the insects buzzing and chirping, with Tsuny at my side I can't help believing we're in country, dug deep into the jungle. We stay quiet as we gather up our stuff and move, close to the ground. I watch her legs and hips as we creep up to the open field beyond the grass.

Mr. Arceneaux's field is circled by people. Three spotlights on his roof shoot into clouds and light up his welcome sign. The people meander, sitting on lawn chairs or at picnic tables. A lot of the men stand and talk and smoke cigarettes. One woman is crocheting in the bed of a pickup truck. A couple people are standing in front the red van and talking to five or six others. I will learn later



that tonight is when Mr. Arceneaux's alien visitor is supposed to come back.

"Jackasses," Tsuny sneers at them all, and we start to move away from the lawn, back out the far side of the cordgrass. But then I see that one of the people standing around the red van is Pop. She must see something happen in me because Tsuny asks, "What?"

"That's my father," I say.

She looks past me and stares a second. "He's tiny," she says. "That's your sister?"

Pop holds Lyla against his chest and he is the smallest guy in the crowd. He isn't really standing next to anyone, but keeps his eyes fixed on the man speaking in front of the van. The way his eyes squint I can tell he's really paying attention.

The speaker is a soft man dressed in black. He waves a book around and says they should buy this book, which he wrote, because it's all about the kinds of things people have been seeing here. The book is called *This Haunted Earth*, and he says, "There is deep magic in the world, y'all."

My pop raises his hand, shifting Lyla in his arms. It's a little shocking. I hear him ask, "Do you think they've come to help?"

Pop's voice never sounded so clear and loud, and the words of his question are still in my head, and I know I'll be thinking about them a lot. But while I'm trying to listen to what the man's answer is, Tsuny puts her hand under the back of my shirt. I stiffen, but then relax when I feel her kiss the back of my neck. Then we're both on all fours and kissing, and we lose our balance and fall over.

The people around the red van all turn to see us fall out of the cordgrass, but we jump back in before anybody can see the white boy and black girl with their shirts all unbuttoned. I hear the people gasp and act shocked and Tsuny and I run into the grass, with the poncho over my head and the black blanket flapping behind me, sailing over the tops of the stalks.

All that crowd can see is the black blanket waving as it disappears into the dark above the cordgrass, and people are hollering, acting surprised and scared. Tomorrow in the paper it will say that the man from the red van insists what they all saw in the cordgrass was a "massive psychic projection."

We come out the other side of the field and climb the hill, about a hundred yards away. The acres under us are bright with light and

noise like a ballpark. I show Tsuny my binoculars and we take turns looking down at the people. They are spreading out into the tall cordgrass, looking for us I guess, and we both lean against a pine. Its bark is rough and sticky, and its needles quiver and straighten, like there was something on the wind.

"What?" she says.

"What?"

"You're crying."

"No I'm not." But she wipes my cheek and it's wet.

We move to each other again, in the forest scents, the dark, and the rustling of the pine needles is the sound of memories, the sound of bare feet dancing on a wooden dock, of years moving backward and forward from this point. Tsuny feels me on her hip and she uses her hand for the first time and I help her with the button and zipper. She looks at me and her eyes go wide and curious, open, and I can tell that this is it.

She seems hungry and strong on the ground, tugging at my pants. Her hands are warm, and I exhale a breath I didn't know I was holding. I kiss behind her ears, and her hands leave me to unfasten her skirt. We huff and struggle together.

Past her head I can see the lights. The people moving. She puts me in, and we both gasp. I think I can hear voices below in the field, wind rustling in my ear, Tsuny's breath. I'm thinking too much, then I'm gone, not thinking, not watching anything, only feeling her, her places I've gone.

When I have to stop, I shudder. I roll away and pull up my pants. I sit down by her but I don't want to be touched.

"What's wrong?" she says. "Aren't we having fun?"

"I don't know. I can't figure it."

We sit together and I don't understand why I'm sad. I want to leave, but Tsuny makes me sit down and she puts her hand in mine. Below us people have stopped combing the field and have gone back to drinking and talking. I notice Pop standing out there with Lyla, his face looking up. Something gets tight in my chest, but I can't figure if this is even the way I really feel.

I wonder if the lights and the tall brush at night remind Pop of being back in country, or if maybe it seems like that surgical hospital in Tan Son Nhat. The place with the big plants and the cold circles of light. He'll tell me about all that down the road, when I

get him to tell stories about the heat and insects, about the biggest fears making him paralyzed in the night.

Right now I stand and let Tsuny's hand fall from mine. I see all the people and hear the voices and imagine the basin flooding, washing them all away, and I know that they would return. I understand that's what everything looks like, and it feels like something new might be in me. Less fear, and I don't know how it got there.

"Aren't we having fun?" she asks.

"I'm going down there for a second," I tell her. "Will you wait for me?"

"Why?"

"I just want to go down there for a second." I pack my poncho with my skateboard in my backpack. "Stay a second. Please. I have to do something." I leave the backpack with Tsuny and start working my way down the hill, toward the people on the lawn.

Spotlights are yawning up, and I hear people talking and laughing, and as I walk around the high grass I see Pop standing alone, the baby curled up in his arm. I know that one day everything will end. I know my life and Pop's life will be washed away, and all the things I see and love will be wiped out, and the world will be all that is left. As if he knew I was near, just then Pop's face lowers from the clouds and he stares at me, a little cockeyed, like I'm someone he isn't sure he is seeing. We look at each other.