

*Snakes*

It must have been a Saturday when someone sent up the cry, "A snake on the road!" The hunt was on. The men, at home midday in dirty T-shirts and work boots, came running and rolled an oil drum to the edge of our yard. Next door was an acre or so of wildness bursting with lilacs, roses, and shoulder-high grass and ripe with strawberries just half an arm's reach in any direction. One of my uncles found the lone snake on the road and, in the midst of that unruly acre near the spot where I had spent half the morning feasting on strawberries, a nest of snakes.

The men set a fire blazing in the oil drum (it was the rusted-out one where we burned all of our garbage), shovels and more gasoline at the ready, and began hurling the snakes into the fire. As snake after snake sprang from the fire, the men scooped up their writhing bodies and tossed them back in. Only the baby snakes, deprived of the powerful muscle of their elders, their black bodies pencil-thin, slid down into the fire without a fight, their ink-dot eyes and mouths agape. And so they burned—a whole family of snakes—even the grandest of them all. He coiled on the bodies of the others, then leaped from the fire, twitching in the dirt until someone doused him with gasoline and gathered him onto a shovel. He twisted through the air, wide-mouthed and soundless, and landed in the drum, where, with a whoosh, he became instantly fleshless, a splay of white-hot bone as detailed and delicate as a fern. When I stepped forward, just as his open jaws crumpled into ash, someone put out an arm to stop me.