

Farm

The man who worked on the farm with me wore an orange vest and walked around with a clipboard pretending to check the stalks for disease. The reality was that he spent a lot of time down by the riverbed masturbating where he thought nobody could see him. He'd come check on all the people digging in the soil and try to make himself as bothersome as he possibly could, telling us to "look on the bright side" and to "pedal to the medal". But that trick stopped working on me eventually, and it's all because of a girl named Jemma who worked next to me every day with two bright red gardening gloves on. At one point Jemma walked over and gestured to the man in the vest. "i was thinking that if we followed him around, we could probably find out what his whole life is like", she said. "maybe so" I told her. "let's leave in the early morning and look at him while he's asleep, and then follow him around. Then we'll know all about him, and we can add that to the list of things we know about". So the next morning we broke into his cabin and looked at him lying there in bed. We stood on tiptoes above his sleeping face. His neon vest hung on the open door of his closet. His chest rose and fell only very slightly, almost not at all. But his throat moved in interesting ways. A system of elegantly concealed tubes and ducts were splayed out alongside one another inside his neck. Jemma and I looked at each other, and she raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips, telling me, this is something we didn't know about him before. We looked over every inch of his body, making note of fine details, hair color and skin tone and general temperature. We wanted to be as meticulous as possible, and an effective team, like a pair of cooperating snail antennae poking around for a crack in a sidewalk. We moved our bodies through that bedroom, arriving at similar conclusions, sensing around carefully for cracks in the surface. After a few minutes we did finally detect a crack, running down the midsection of his body: a very narrow, almost invisible fissure. Jemma patiently traced it with her finger, then unlooped the chain she'd brought with her and began to feed it through my hand, passing it smoothly from her side of the bedroom to mine. I lowered the anchor at the end of the chain into the fissure and very patiently waited for it to hit the bottom. It was

so deep, and the anchor took so long to lower, that I do not know if it ever hit the bottom. But it must have, because Jemma and I left his room, and it felt strange for us to look at each other, or to want to look at each other, all the rest of that day. The person I wanted to look at was the orange vest man, who wore the orange vest because he was one of the people involved with the duty of cooking, and he sat at a table in the great house all that day, slicing peaches in half with a blade, removing the pits, and leaving the peach meat in a porcelain basin for the line cooks. The peach pits he palmed and set aside in their own container, a wooden crate. He didn't go outside, as I had expected, that whole afternoon, but I watched him through the window, fascinated. He didn't see me, as after all, he had my anchor in his chest, and was being accessed by me. He lived very much within his own thoughts, unwilling or unable to experience the world around him. I wanted to lick his expressionless boring pale face, as he plucked the peach pits from their golden, juicy half-circles, and occasionally sniffed them, or scratched at them with his fingernail if a color seemed wrong, if rotten or unripe. Once or twice a noise from the kitchen commanded his attention and he stood up and walked around the corner to have a look. But he did come back, and I looked at him. The sky was unnaturally soundless. All of the bird noises and noises of twigs snapping and people talking seemed far away, coiled up. A narrow sound, like sand pouring out of an hourglass, one mass of sound emptying into another, through the hole in the man wearing the orange vest. But his face in that dark kitchen showed no sign of emotion or interest. He was getting the job done. He went back to dealing with the peaches. He might have been humming to himself. He tilted his head this way and that to get a better look at his work, and never once glanced over in my direction, because, as I realized, there was no way he would have wanted to look through a window at the pleasant day. The thought was almost arousing. To refrain from feeling aroused I tried to think about what Jemma might be doing. A little air came swooping against me, but didn't seem to affect any of the plants around me. Jemma seemed to be very far away, and I learned later that she had gone wandering off into the woods—she'd walked down to the stream bed running through the grove— a series of low pools emptying into each other. She told me that most of the stream had evaporated, leaving the pools separated. She'd dipped her finger into one pool and then the next,

and lo and behold, they hadn't tasted the same, though they all had an identical deep black color. She stood up and breathed in deeply and then walked back toward the farm where all of the workers were holding shovels and slitting the shovels into the ground.

That night the man in the orange vest led all of us to the great house for dinner, and we all sat at our respective benches. We quietly counted the skins in our mashed potatoes, and after a certain point, we began to eat the mashed potatoes. We ate the food in the great house and continued eating until night fell. The man wearing his vest moved around along the periphery of the room, and then everybody stood and made their way to the furnace in the bedroom at the end of the hall to clean their plates. The furnace where we all dumped our food at the end of dinner never said anything to us, because we stood in a line in a very organized way and waited for each person to scrape the remainder of their food into the face of the furnace. The furnace was very hot and never spoke to us. It sat in its bedroom at the end of the hallway with its hands folded on its lap, wearing a white bonnet, on the edge of a comfortable-looking bed. The bed had white pillows and white satin sheets. The whole room looked very organized and well tended to, with no dirt or dust anywhere, and the furnace sat in that room, and had probably been sitting in that room for a very long time. Everybody scraped their plates off into its face. Whenever I went to the furnace and emptied the scraps of my food into its impossible face, I'd be overwhelmed by a feeling of utmost circularity: birds and butterflies and bluebirds, looking at the sky every day, were full of the fire I was feeding, and full of the fire being drained out of me in small amounts. Fire draining out of me and into the ground, every day as I worked on the farm, all of us working and breathing all the time on the farm, sweating from the effort of harvesting food. We were all having this experience. As I scraped off my food into the furnace, it suddenly struck me that the man in the vest had disappeared from the great house, had walked out to the stream-bed in his bare feet, and was now masturbating onto the flagstone. The image in my mind was perfectly clear. He was masturbating and masturbating, with nobody around to see, because everybody was too busy scraping their plates off into the furnace. The distance he had walked naturally pulled me and Jemma close together for

the second time that day. We were still working toward an identical goal and therefore did not have any reason to communicate or to look each other in the eye. But somehow we sat together in the hall of the wooden house, feeling our legs pressed against each other, our leg hairs interacting, as all the other workers cleaned their plates. And after the plates had been cleaned the workers left from the main door and only paced around inside their sore bodies in the night, very tired. Then they found their cabins in front of them and maybe after bling some sad personal statements they opened their doors and crawled into bed and crossed over into sleep. But Jemma and I sat next to each other in the dining hall, unable to stand, the chain pulled tightly between us: the both of us forced to endure the truth. The truth was that the man in the orange vest had removed his vest and left it somewhere in the building, and now he was masturbating in the deep cold. And as soon as he finished, the chain we'd tied ourselves to would be broken, and it would be a long time before Jemma and I could have anything to say to each other. Very soon he would be walking through the cabbages and would return to his bedroom and close the door however quietly he wished. He would wash his face and pull his clothes off and fall asleep. We sat together at our table in the dining hall.