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Snakehips

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SNAKEHIPS

PAIGE COHN

You are told two things when you live among the tall grass in the summer—treat every snake as if it were venomous and only wear tall, leather boots in the field. Most people would call a rattlesnake poisonous, but us kids know better. Poison is the little pellets you sprinkle into prairie dog holes that litter the fields and pastures, inevitably poised to break a young horse’s leg. Venom is the slow drip that seeps from the fangs of a snakebite and killed a young boy next to the Big Dry last summer. It was the two small holes above his ankle slightly raised from the rest of skin that told his parents he wouldn’t wake up when they found him sleeping on the bank of the crick.

We call my grandpa “Snakehips”. Underneath his blue jeans, he wears heavy cotton long johns, held up by a thick, leather belt even in the dead of summer. I inherited his cool skin and the struggle our blood has to keep us warm without the sun. Like reptiles, my family laughs. Compared to the round, swaying hips of the women in my family, his slender build is easily lost. More than once, we’ve turned around only to find he has slipped away, between bookshelves, out to the corrals, to the next room.

There is evidence that prairie rattlers’ venom is becoming neurotoxic. The venom of the rattler has been hemotoxic, meaning it attacks the red blood cells, preventing the blood from moving through the victim’s veins at a pace necessary to sustain life. If it becomes neurotoxic, it will attack the nervous system. It will stop the neurotransmitters from finding their synapse, from being able to fire across the void, much the same way dementia dismantles a brain. Worse than snakebite, I

worry my grandpa will ask me where my brother is when we're out in the fields, and I'll have to watch him experience the death of his first grandson all over again. That's why we wear our boots, my grandpa and me.

My favorite thing to eat with my grandpa are oranges peeled and arranged on a plate in half moons, powdered sugar sprinkled across the tops, red raspberry syrup drizzled slow and easy. He braided a halter for my first horse out of a piece of dead rope lying in the grass that I didn't approach because I wasn't sure if I heard a rattle or just the summer cicadas.

During the winter months, snakes gather in underground dens. Come springtime, the men head out into the coulees with shovels, looking for those snake pits, hoping to find rattlers sleepy in their dens so the sharp edge of the shovel can separate the heads from their bodies before the warmth of the summer sun entices them to lay out in the field. They'll cut the rattle from the corpse and shake it the whole way home before offering it to the kids to play with.

The year is 1941 and my grandpa is six years old. The drought in Montana hasn't heard the rumor of rain in the Dust Bowl yet, so the sun continues to bleach and blister the countryside. A snakeskin, shed from a rattler, hides among the tall grass. His father picks it up, rubs brittle scales between fingers. Stay close, Charles, his father says, shovel slung over his shoulder. But as he turns around to catch his son's eye, he sees only horizon. He runs over to the bank of the crick, calling for his son. My grandpa crouches near the ground, his blue jeans the only thing distinguishing him from the countryside, his white crop of hair blending in with the dried stalks of wheat. As his father walks closer to him, he notices Charles shoving his pockets full of squirming things from a hole in the ground. The father calls out to him. Charles turns, baby rattlesnakes falling from his hips.