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Dustin Hoffman Dreams of Cages

Eugene Wood

Photo: Jack Davidson

Casey lived in a castle atop a mountain of composting filth and garbage—her birthright—and while she had never known anything else, that didn't stop her from wanting anything else. At night, she would claim what green life she could find sprouting from the dirt and rot, clench it in her gnarled fists, and then burn the green into glowing orange. In the morning, there would only be brown and grey.

Morton hated the sound of his own name, would clench his teeth and cover his ears as his mother called for him to clean his room or come to dinner. At age six, he asked his parents to call him something else, anything else, but they insisted that the name was so simply him that it would be impossible to change, that strangers would use his given name regardless—just from the look of him. At age sixteen, he ran away to where nobody knew him. No one called him Morton, but he saw the name on all of their lips, heard it in creaking floorboards, so he secluded himself, dug a hole and buried his mind down away in Wonderland as his body lay slumped against water-stained plaster. Eventually, no one called him anything.

Ava only wanted to fly, only wanted the impossible. She would climb up to the top of the very highest tree for miles, but height alone wasn't what she wanted—she wanted the moment after she was falling: the one where she was soaring, but it could never be hers, and to be among those who had what she could not only depressed her, only brought her lower, so she climbed down, returned to the ground. She stayed there for a long time, and in the end, when she returned to that highest tree, as she stood with only the sky in front of her and only the ground below, she gave no thought to flying anymore. Ava only wanted to die, wanted the moment after she was falling: the one where she hit the ground, but it never came. So she bought a gun.

Jacob was born with three legs: two extending down from his pelvis and the third sprouting from his elbow, just barely able to brush the ground when he stood. His parents were so afraid that he would be bullied at school that they kept him out of it, instead locking him beyond the reach of any youthful cruelty, plying him with books and assuming that their poor, deformed, quiet child was studious enough to teach himself better than any school, that he would be motivated by the instinct to overcome his mutation. They neglected to teach him how to read.

It comforts me that all this will be forgotten. It's the only way I sleep.

