

Virginia Watts

The Glen Acres Dump

As a little girl, I didn't know the difference between bullets and BBs. They both came out of the end of a gun. I learned.

"You should tip the end up just a smidge," I suggest to my oldest brother Curt.

"The end of a gun is called a muzzle, Ginny," he reminds me.

"But that doesn't make any sense. A muzzle closes things off, like the mouth of a dog that bites."

No change in his aim.

Curt has BBs, silver balls smaller than marbles, inside his jeans pocket and a rifle he calls his "shooter." This is confusing too. He is the shooter.

I tag along on excursions to the Glen Acres dump for the ping, the echoes, to clap and cheer for Curt. He can hit anything dead on, targets resting at the bottom of that cavernous hole, even tiny objects I choose: a matchbook, coppery baby spoon, red foil gift bow, and now, a playing card. I spot the jack of hearts trying to blend into a flock of monarch butterflies, a bed sheet, soaked from recent rains, clinging to its mattress. Curt shreds Jack to confetti: just one shot by my eagle-eyed brother and that boy is done.

In the failing light of these summer evenings, a reverse rational reality materializes here. The sun drops down and sets trashed belongings on fire. They glow down inside the ditch as embers do. Blinding flashes that flare up once and are gone, except for the spots dancing in my vision. The silver rim of a bent bicycle frame, aluminum pie plates, bed coils, hubcaps, all torched igneous red, then immediately doused back to black.

The setting sun catches sight of a picture frame. It isn't empty. There's still enough gold leaf to catch on fire: inside the rectangle, a man with a long, feathery beard under a serious expression. He has come to rest faceup on a carved wooden cabinet missing its television. He is staring straight at my brother and me. A Revolutionary soldier, that's what I see in him.

“Don’t shoot the man,” I say.

“Okay, what should I hit instead?”

I spot a tambourine. The silver jingles wink fuchsia Morse code signals, but that must be the falling sun playing tricks again. The instrument appears to be in perfect condition. I wish the sides of the dump weren’t too steep to climb down. I wouldn’t mind having my own tambourine. It’s always disappointing when you have to hand them back at the end of music class. Once, there was a baby doll with a lace bonnet and golden eyes. I wanted her too. That was years ago. She’s gone, buried by layers.

“That?” I suggest, pointing to the opposite bank.

“The tambourine or Brownie camera.”

“Tambourine. Do you know what the metal jingles are called?” I ask.

“Is this more of your middle school information I’ve forgotten, because I desperately want to?”

“Zills,” I inform him.

Curt bends one knee to dirt between us, squints, inhales. I know he’ll hit it. I inhale, hold. When he does, the metal zills play music—the few beats of a lone gypsy—and blow up forever.

The Glen Acres dump at nightfall feels far away from our everyday life. The contents are never the same, new ones arrive weekly, old ones slide, topple face forward, rust, cave in, catch water, hold snow and bird nests.

When dark finally wins over, lightning bugs pulse around the perimeter, a giant’s holiday wreath I can never enjoy, because I feel afraid without the sun. The cavity under my dangling feet is suddenly so much deeper and darker. I crawl backward, sea-crab style, and stand up slowly. As we step in the direction of home, the outlines of the biggest shapes—the discarded refrigerators, a riding lawn mower, bookcases, desks, swing-set slide, reclining chairs—form sunken cities until dawn.

Under the street sign for Brookside and Carlton Avenues, I stop and look back at the moon and stars over the rise of the dump.

“Why do you always look back at stuff?” Curt asks. “You always do that.”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m worried I might not be able to see something again. So I take another look just in case.”

“You’d miss seeing the dump?” he asks, but softly. A whisper, really, with kindness.

“Yes,” I say.