

In A Lightning Storm, Sheep Run Through Barbed Wire

by Cheryl Anne Gardner

I used to fear things. The lonesome wind come through the clapboards. Dry hillsides rustling. My own skin in the summer heat.

Rattlers.

Lurking.

Abandoned coal pits.

Pa said I was afraid of desolation. I didn't know what he meant by that. How can you be afraid of something all around you been there since the day you were born? I used to. Fear. Hard. But hard is what we had ... and the stink of sheep, goats, some cattle and horses. I've seen my sister kicked, bucked, and bloodied more often than I care to remember. Mud in her hair. Booze on her breath. Blue-blackened skin. Used. Useless. Pa used to do the castrations himself. He learned the old-time way and used to use these fucking rubber bands, but he eventually said that the old-time way wasn't the right way anymore, that it took too long, would oftentimes get infected. He feared infections, like the one he said my sister had, so he set about teaching me the right way. I didn't understand why we had to do it at all. It was bloody, and sometimes, the gonads were small, slippery like marbles, and you had to dig around in the sack with your fingers until you found the sinewy cord. Pa would say, "Keep digging," and I'd cry and cry and cry because there was so much blood and I was afraid I'd never get it out from under my fingernails, but Pa would shush me and tell me that it's good for them, and I'd ask why through a dirty fistful of tears while waiting for him to spit into the chicory and rub his chin for a spell before explaining, the

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way he does, that boys need it, makes them more polite. Something about hormones, he said. Maybe I was afraid of them, so I asked Ma about it while she was fixing the fried gonads for my supper plate, but she just shushed me too, wiped the grease on her apron, and said I was too young for talk about such things. I'm not too young. My breasts are coming in and I feel all funny. My sister said it's normal.

I'd.

Get.

Used to it.

I go to high school next year. My sister talks about it all the time. Says high school boys have the hormones too. I asked my sister if boys were like the horses and the cattle. She said no. That they were like the mules. I wondered if they stunk like them. She smiled at me and scratched at her crotch, so I told her I was afraid of getting kicked, like she always did, but she shushed me too and said not to worry ...

Pa was teaching me the right way.

