

# The Hunter

*by* Curtis Smith

Beneath the covers, the boy held a flashlight to his hand. The bones of his fingers a leafless tree, his flesh sunset red. He turned the flashlight to the book by his side. *Gray's Anatomy*, a volume rescued from the library's annual sale. *Withdrawn* stamped on its title page. The boy flipped past images of skulls and spinal columns before stopping at a picture of a hand. In the drawing, the skin had been removed, revealing a textured landscape of muscles and tendons. The boy opened his drawing pad and began to sketch.

In the woods, he shot groundhogs and rabbits and squirrels. He used his father's .22. His father had drowned last spring. When the boy held the rifle's sights on a living creature, his breath stilled and his heartbeat swimming in his ears, his father seemed close. The boy had grown into a patient hunter, and he believed his father would have been proud.

On a frigid January morning, the boy killed a hare, a clean shot through the head. The echo lingered amid the bare branches, and the boy's boots crunched over the brush. Time was of the essence. He rolled the hare onto its back and used his mother's five-inch hatpins to anchor the paws to the earth. His knife's honed blade hissed as it cut from crotch to jaw. The dusting of snow beneath the hare turned red. He made two more cuts, groin to hip, jaw to shoulder, and then peeled back the fur. Steam rose from the carcass, and the boy leaned close, knowing this mist was like no other. He took the sketchpad from his backpack. His pencil scratched the paper, his pace quickening as the steam faded.

