

Stealth

by David Ackley

Closer. Their hides the color of dried leaves in the dust, the fawns' white-spotted, on long spindly legs, knobs of bone showing under tight skin. They graze behind, slanting their ears back. But the mother's ears turn separately on her skull, pointing here and there as she feeds. She has the face of a large goat, a neck long enough to reach the grass without bending her forelegs, high shoulders, a knobby ridge that curves down then up to the muscled rear haunches, around which her tail flicks at stinging flies. Carrying the two babies has swayed her back. The hair has pale thinned patches. Her knees are worn to the cracked skin. He urges himself closer, hungry to see more, into her life, her deep self.

Duke barks on the next farm over. The deer listen to that side. If a hunter with one bullet and you saw a dog running a deer, which would you shoot? The barking stops and their heads drop. He tries to go quicker and freeze just before she looks up. He seems to be on a track through her mind she doesn't know is there. Her hide shivers and flies whirl out from her side. She rolls her upper lip to crop. This close she is heavy and tired and earthbound as a cow. Not as he'd expected with the lightness of their movement. Her hard days chased and running. She raises her head with both ears cupped toward him. I am not here. No one is here. She drops her head again. She has a long, pointed slab of tongue like a cow's that twists into the clover and pulls it between her square yellow teeth. He moves three steps then two quicker now. The ending seems near but he still can't see it. If he gets close enough to touch, then what?

The doe's head snaps up. She stretches her face closer and takes his scent into her. In her plum-dark eyes swim two shirtless boys, white-haired and tanned. He is twice-born from the transparent air. For a fleet moment he feels what together courses through them invisibly, like the wind that bends the grass. But behind his floating reflections the dark bulbs swim deep back into a darkness. She is big and close and when she stretches to smell him she is too big and

too close with a flooding life of her own that scares him. His helpless hand moves. Scuts raised white, they loop and touch, loop and touch and are over the fence and gone. He is there with her in the light springing through the trees feeling how she runs.

