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Almanac, and: Coker Creek

Summar West

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ALMANAC

I was the child in the dusk who heard her mother's voice as it arched across the house, became a background like the sizzling of power lines or sprinklers in the heat. I kept riding my bike, jumping sidewalks and banks. Flat-out lied when I came home and said, *I forgot the time*. That wasn't the only lie. I wasn't a child when my grandmother said on her porch, my halting place: *I was never in love with him*. Matter-of-fact, words as steady as her ritual of watering the flowers in the evening. I had been the one confessing, rattling on at twenty like my childhood bike chain. To sit and talk of *my friend*, never uttering the word *boy* when all I'd ever wanted to say was the scent-skin-tense of women. An erasure of boy had not been my first failure of language, the first time I laughed and talked to hide my tears. Call it a coming out foretold by the begonias and petunias, witnessed by my grandmother. So when I asked about her marriage to a man, how else could she respond? Who knows how she loved him. I only know how she loved me enough to slant the truth.

SUMMAR WEST

COKER CREEK

Calls to me along highway sixty-eight's
 signs for the Lost Sea
and the stretch of rambling on
 about relatives dead and gone,
the long inquiry about the kingdom of heaven.
 Look, up ahead on the *mountain*—
the place my grandmothers are from—
 always at a distance
always a visit.

Come over Unaka,
 come over Cataska,
go back to the timber
 clear-cut for decades
on Cherokee land.
 Let the record show:
Chera courses through
 all the roots
and veins and names.

This is one more place granted
 to white men after the Revolution
a lineage of soldiers and squatters
 preachers and moonshiners
Saturday nights and Sunday mornings.
 But it was a woman
who rode over five hundred miles
 by mule to fetch the deed.
I go after you, Pollyanna.

Legend says white men found gold
when a woman let the secret
slip during a dance.

Why is the most dangerous
place on a map
a woman's mouth?
So begins another obsession
with extraction.

Whipporwill
Yellow Dog
Hotwater
Calf Yoke
Paris
Underwood
Annette
for all the longing.

Witness once told me
great-great-aunt Cyn
went to the mines by night
panned for gold by day
to feed her family.
I think about their hunger
as endless as coal-black night or the shaking
of silt back and forth in a pan.

I think about more removal than gold.
Cherokee marched from their home,
how their bodies
made the Trail of Tears.

I can point where on a map
 of erasures or we can take
John Muir trail to the falls where Legend
 says a Cherokee princess comes and goes.

I'm nearing an end
 though I've only begun
to dredge like Cotton does
 when he's in the creek beside
my parents' house.
 Now tell me your Coker Creek,
the water where you cannot stay
 and the alluvium you cannot leave.

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