

**from “Maps We Leave Behind,” by Carson Faust**

I hear chains as they approach. There are other rez boys around, so I know I will pay for staring, but I stare. Boys like us are bloodied here. Boys like Micah and me.

Micah walks up with the others. He acts like the others. But boys like him and me, we stand too close. We glance at dirty ankles and want to fold our hands around each one. We watch sweat drip down the backs of bodies like our own and want to catch it with our tongues. We watch for a glimpse of the fine hairs that lead beneath basketball shorts as players' arms stretch up, as the arms pull at the shirts they wear, as their wrists flick precisely so the ball goes through the hoop, so the ball makes the chains sing. Wind through chime.

Micah plus two. Aster Beckons and Vince Praley. The three of them are towers compared to me. That is the advantage they have in this game, but I'm fast. Much faster than they are. They know this.

“You playing today, Trystan? Or you just going to sit there with your dick twitching 'til the sun goes down?” Aster says. Gets a cackle out of Vince. Smile and a scoff out of Micah. I smile, too, knowing that Micah remembers what my dick tastes like.

“Winning today,” I say. “That's what really gets me off.”

Summers in Kusabo Lake, humidity sticks to us like skin. Heat ripples off of the blacktop. Our bodies tangle as we play. They're rough, but I don't mind. Aster's elbow clips my bottom lip, and I taste copper. Spit it out. Vince trips me. The ground teethes my arm open. My breath catches as Micah stands behind me, his arms stretched wide as wings. I look at our shadows, and mine is the one with wings. These bright orange balls, like setting suns in our palms, pound against the cracked court. We push them to the ground and they spring right back into our hands.

Alone, after nightfall, Micah and I wear nothing but moonlight until we slip into the river water. The Edisto River crawls through our rez like a slow vein. Water as black as the sky that stretches above

us. We get farther from the riverside, and the water covers the lower parts of us. We know all of the shapes that the blackwater hides. All of the shapes the water curves around.

It starts like it always does, just as it has since the first time. We fight each other off. I jump onto Micah's back and lock my arms around his neck. We laugh. He pulls me off and tosses me away, but the water catches me. He claws through the water toward me, lifts me, spins me, and plunges into the water with me in his arms. We drown and come back to life. We drown, but only for an instant.

After we are out of breath, after our breath comes back to us, Micah falls toward me, whole-bodied. I catch him. With the help of the water, I can hold him. He is tall, but narrow. I hold him up by the small of his back, cradle his head in my hand, hold him above the water. The threads of his hair weave between my fingers. It's so dark, I can't see where his hair ends and the river begins. I lean down. I kiss him. Not hungrily—not like the first time. This kiss is like resting.

“Your lip okay?” Micah asks.

“Tender,” I say. “Tastes like a rare steak, don't it?”

“Sick,” he laughs. “No.”

“You ever kiss anybody in high school?”

“Not sober. And definitely no boys. Got my ass beat enough as it was.”

“Least nobody fucked your face up. I like your face.”

“Kind of pretty, huh?”

“Not even that pretty.” I smile down. “I just like the way you look at me.” “How's that?”

“Like you don’t want to beat my ass.”

He pulls my head down to his. Kisses me so hard my lip breaks open. He gets to his feet and holds my head between his hands. We stand too close. I’m not even sure there’s water between us. I reach beneath the water, between his legs. I can feel his pulse there. The beat. Must be something like holding a heart.

In a place where everyone knows everyone, it’s nice to know someone better than anyone else does. I’m glad to know Micah that way. Everybody who lives in Kusabo Lake, South Carolina, knows just about everybody else who lives here. We all know what crazy Indians and shitty white folks the roads are named after. Lots of us have last names to remind us of the crazy Indians and shitty white folks we come from.

Crowe Road—my family’s name, mostly Indian, a little black—leads to highway 14. Weber Street—Micah’s family name, mostly Indian with some German—winds into highway 27, which winds up in Charleston. We know who’s Indian, who’s mixed-blood, who’s a little inbred, and all the in-betweens. Which families stay put, and which families break away. Crowes and Webers stay put. We move about as fast as the water we’re named for: Kusabo Lake, where the river moves through so slow, it might as well be still. Hence the name.

Webers stay put, but Micah’s pa couldn’t. He left when Micah was six. Everybody knows this. But Micah tells me the man left after roughing up him and his mama. Darla Weber only let that happen once before she got the shotgun. She missed on purpose, just one time, and told Micah’s pa to go anywhere else. Darla, Micah, myself, and the critters that heard the warning shot twelve years back are the only ones who know that.

I know that, under all that hair, there’s a dip in Micah’s skull from when he pulled a radio onto himself when he was a toddler. I know that his left eye is open more than his right one when he

smiles a real smile. Most folks know that Micah's ma means the world to him, but I'm one of the few that know there's a healthy, potent dose of fear under all that love. And I know Darla planted that on purpose.

She always told me: *Nothing wrong with being afraid. A man without fear ain't nothing but a boy. Haven't met her, but I know Micah sounds just like her as he says it. Nothing wrong with love, either. A man without love is just a half-step away from being an animal.*