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Storying Ecocenes



Knee Deep

Lydia Gwyn

squidlyd@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-5469-6125

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Knee Deep

by Lydia Gwyn



About the Author

Lydia Gwyn is the author of the flash fiction collections: *You'll Never Find Another* (2021, Matter Press) and *Tiny Doors* (2018, Another New Calligraphy). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in F(r)iction, Midway Journal, Anti-Heroine Chic, The Florida Review, New World Writing Quarterly, and others. A selection of pieces from her new collection "Emptiness, Standing Still" is available in Issue 22 of Ravenna Press's Triples Series. She lives with her family in East Tennessee and works as an instruction librarian at East Tennessee State University.

Knee Deep

Lydia Gwyn

My son shoots mosquitos with a Bug-a-Salt rifle loaded with table salt. It eviscerates the insects in a puff of minerals. We purchased it to deal with the invasive spotted-lanternflies headed our way from states up North by way of China. Lanternflies are a striking insect, a plant hopper, with black spots on their gray wings and a surprise ruby-red underwing that flashes when fully opened. When its wings are extended it looks like a butterfly.

The lanternfly has an appetite for over 170 species of plants and trees including its host, the tree of heaven, another invasive. Our property and the forest surrounding it is full of trees of heaven, a beautiful tree that quickly takes over and chokes out other plants, secreting a toxic substance into the soil. I often wonder how something so beautiful—both the tree and the lanternfly—can be so devastating.

I'm outside too, transplanting the lemon balm I found at the crystal shop in the neighboring town and wedding one of the big gardens, the one I put in strictly for the butterflies but is used by everyone—the wild bees, the soldier beetles, any number of wasps and moths. On the porch, I walk past the basket of petunia flowers I bought from the garden shop. Its blooms open into candy-striper swirls of pink of white, its nectar guides inviting all the bees and hummingbirds, anything with a proboscis. I regard one of the flowers and imagine myself small enough to stay inside its trumpet shape. To slide down its throat in a pair of tiny blue jeans and a tiny t-shirt. I imagine it would feel like those days in grade school when the phys ed teacher would spread the parachute across the gymnasium floor and all the kids would grab an edge, lifting fast to catch the air, and rushing inside.

As children, my brother and I lived in the woods. Spending our days in creeks and moss. Knee deep in weeds. Our legs and arms were covered in scrapes and mosquito bites. Nightly, our parents checked our scalps for ticks. Back then we worried about pollution

and acid rain. Saving the whales. Forest-destroying insects weren't on our radar. But my brother would have loved a Bug-a-Salt. I can picture him threading a rope through its plastic trigger and slinging it across his back, looking for invasive targets around the woods. I'm 45 now and have lived more of my life without my brother than with. He died in a time before everyone in the world had cellular phones and home internet was just getting started, back when it wasn't so easy to check on people.

The website for our state forestry service is full of information about the lanternfly's spread from China to the U.S., how it's devastating forests in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but under the heading "What you can do" there's no information. Just a blank space. We've already lost eleven ash trees to the emerald ash borer, another beautiful, destructive thing. Already there are eleven holes in our forest view. Skeletons, dropping sheets of bark, broken limbs. All we can do is remove the dead trees.

On my next pass by the porch, I stop at the basket of petunias. I drop my finger into one of its flowers and touch its pollened antlers. Maybe it would feel like floating to be inside this flower. Maybe it would feel like being swallowed.