Heather

Heather sat at the base of a tree in a park three blocks from her house, one sharp breath away from hyperventilating. Her body was so tense that she thought her muscles might snap if she moved too suddenly, and her inhalations felt ragged. The air dug its nails into the inside of her windpipe as she tried to force it down, reluctant to leave the atmosphere of the park and enter her lungs. She clutched her knees harder to her chest, her clasped hands shaking from how tightly they were interlocked. Her brain felt like a child’s chaotic scribble, her latest panic attack coming in waves that crashed into her body and confused her senses. She blinked against one of the waves and dug her teeth into her bottom lip to keep from screaming. She felt blood slide down her chin. She bit harder.

Sometimes, when Heather’s brain felt like mush sloshing out her ears, she personified her panic into numberless beings with infinite forms. Though she couldn’t see them, she knew they were watching. They watched her from behind the twisty slide, shooting up inside whenever Heather turned her head in that direction. She could feel them watching from around the thin poles of the swing set, their minute movements causing the seats to sway tauntingly in the breezeless air. They watched her from the pavilion, the tennis courts, and the shiny BBQ grill chained to the ground. They surrounded her—teased her with their barely-there presence. If Heather turned around, she’d catch a glimpse of one sitting on the other side of her tree. She was sure of it.

They followed her wherever she went and laughed in her ears when they thought she’d forgotten about them. Their tongues dipped into her pores as they panted over her body, always gone when she looked, always there when she didn’t. Sometimes, after a hot shower, Heather could see their claw marks on her back, thin white lines that stood out from the quickly fading
redness of her skin. She shuddered thinking about it, goosebumps appearing on her arms despite the warmness of the August mid-afternoon. She slapped at them like they were mosquitos.

Heather squinted at the children playing off in the distance, looking inside their shadows for the bumps of bodiless hands resting on their shoulders. She clenched her eyelids shut when she couldn’t find any. She pressed her face into her knees, her head pounding so violently it felt like someone was slamming a hammer into her temples. Heather held her breath in her mouth a moment before inhaling—trying to see how close she could get to suffocating—and repeated that several times before her fingers finally loosened. The knots in her shoulders grew a little smaller, and the jitteriness of her joints spiraled down to a faint buzzing.

*See?* Heather thought. *Doesn’t that feel better? Everything’s fine.* The air was cooperating with her when she took a deep breath, but all of it was sucked out of her body when she lifted her head up. They were there—*all of them*—crawling, slithering, and lying dead-like on the grass. Their movements were twitchy as they crept underneath the abandoned picnic tables and wrapped their lithe bodies up and around the mighty pines on the edge of the park, bark peeling off due to the sharpness of their scales and the stench of their flesh. She heard them breathing and felt their exhalations moments later, wet and cold on the back of her neck.

Heather wanted to close her eyes and bury her face back into her knees, but one of them had a fist in her hair to hold up her head and another had her eyelids peeled open with chipped, browning fingernails. Her vision was blackening in the corners of her eyes, and she felt something—several somethings—crawl from the arm nearest her cheek and into the holes of her face. Her pores stretched, her nostrils ripped, and her lips were pried back by the winding, slow-moving somethings. Her lungs were full of them yet somehow they felt so hollow that she
thought they might be turned inside out. She passed out when she felt them wriggling within the whites of her eyes, disappearing within the black of her pupil like water swirling down the drain.

Her neck ached when she woke up, bark from the base of the tree poking into and ripping her flesh. The cool night air dried the sweat from her body, leaving her feeling like she had uncovered a new layer of skin. An owl cooed in the distance, and Heather’s breathing came naturally to her. Her entire body shook when she breathed, and she could feel the oxygen filling her veins with a buzz-like energy. The roof of her mouth tingled. Slowly, she opened her jaw and shifted it to the side until she heard it pop, then she stood up and did the same to her spine. Somehow, she knew that the somethings weren’t going to be able to find her. Her movements were fluid, and her limbs were light. Her face was lax as she walked the long way home—through the side streets with flickering lamplights—and kicked her feet out in wide, sweeping arcs with her arms held out a little less than parallel from the ground. Her laughter bubbled out of her unapologetically, violently, in sudden bursts of giggles that sounded like gunshots.