

SCOTT WITHIAM

Audit

The pages of numbered rows of numbers evoked fields of wheat. No wind, but the grain moved. Something in the grain swimming. Above the grain, long tail feathers. Pheasants astride or astrut? To resist the pressure to discover something, the accountant lingered there, until the feathers reminded him of the overblown scare of dorsal fins. And then came the prehistoric similarities of fish to birds, not how their single genetic path divided, but evolution overall like the bloody aftermath of an audit—everyone just taking off. But it wasn't necessary to go after these birds. One of them trotted right up to the hedge where he stood. No, there were two birds. He determined the male by its bright color—although they were both bright—and drew a knife, a buck knife, though he didn't know what a buck knife was. Yet he was sure he knew how to throw it. Given the imbalance between blade and handle, even with the slimmest chances of accuracy, he threw the knife and it stuck, though he wasn't entirely sure where, till the female, quite calmly or quite removed, got away. *Brighter*, he thought. The male collapsed without a squawk or stagger. He wouldn't do such a thing in real life. He didn't even like meat. This was more automatic. A tool was placed in his hand and he used it. He had a modern brain and older parts exercised it. He didn't want to clean that bird, to go any further, but he didn't believe in waste or any effort unfinished. He sprinted from the field to the nearest house. Signs of life inside, but no people. He plucked and gutted the bird in the porcelain sink, but was more interested in cleaning up, of showing no signs of a mess, what he was trained to sniff out as something very wrong. He went to the garage, the first place he'd expect anything to be hidden. The garage was highly organized. You could eat off the floor. There was a man dying there. This really upset him. This even more: his guts kept spilling. How many times did people need reminding of what they did? He'd had a motorcycle accident that landed him halfway up a waterfall. You really couldn't land on a waterfall, he advised. Fluidity—you would instantly be moved. And then a woman, separated from the man for some time, arrived to comfort him, threw open the garage door. "Did you say, *brighter*?" she said. To him or the dying man? He couldn't tell. He was never good with words.