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The Cut Is Burning · *Sesshu Foster*

The cut is burning, pain distanced by shock. Keep it that way, keep it away from me, I sing to myself wordlessly. I hold my hand still, very still, as if that will knit the flesh together and preserve the fingers in working order. Then the blood is pouring out of the glove, the burning racing up my arm. “Get me down! Get me out of here!” Swinging out lazily where I sit, one leg wrapped around the tree trunk. Twenty feet down, the chainsaw sputters in the dirt. It chokes and dies. Manny and his cousin Jesus hear it in my voice and run up from the truck they’ve been loading with debris. The agony hits and it’s all I can do to hold on, press my head into the bark and hiss, “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” The contractor was paying us a thousand to clear the lot by Monday. Manny yells, “Hold on, just hold on!” He tells Jesus something; it takes effort to open my eyes and glance at them. I close my eyes, not wanting to fall. Jesus runs back down to the truck to get the ladder. I’m 20 feet up, no ladder, no safety belt, a broken limb dangling below me in the breeze. . . . “What happened?” Manny asks at the bottom of the tree. I open my eyes again and look at him. “Chain broke. It whipped back around and tore the saw out of my hand. My hand is all tore up. I can’t move.” “Don’t fall—we’ll get you down!” It’s only an eight foot ladder, I’m thinking. My hand throbs, the light leather glove full of blood. Manny picks up the chainsaw, the chain dangling, and tosses it down into the excavation. One of us (it doesn’t matter who) will say it later: work too long, you don’t take a break, and you get too tired. (That means: maybe if we were working slower, I could’ve seen the chain was worn out.) I don’t know, I can’t think about it now. This trip to the emergency room is gonna eat up the whole thousand dollars; Manny and Jesus are gonna have to finish the job without me. No union, no contract, no disability insurance. They’re gonna have to work longer, harder, to get it done in time; and they will—for me. I can count on them. I won’t even think about it just now, because my hand feels like it’s still being ripped open. Like a sack of beans splitting a seam, all the beans flying out. Jesus slams the aluminum ladder against the tree. “You holding on?” Manny asks. “You’re gonna have to help me down,” I tell him. “Fuck!” I growl, trying to push away the pain. . . . “I got you,” I hear Manny say, coming up the ladder. Like Manny tells him to, Jesus grabs the broken branch and rips it down. The

end butts my leg, I kick it off, twigs scratch Manny's face as he lifts an arm to ward it off. Another wave of sickening pain hits me. "Fuck!" I growl, rubbing my head into tree bark. The idea comes to me, through a red sea of pain, that this injury's gonna cost me even more than the thousand—I'll be paying for this job in blood and time off. "Almost there, what do you want me to do?" Manny grunts, climbing up under me. "Get above me, so you can grab my shirt and help me down. I'm gonna have to use one hand," I wince. I open my eyes and Manny's coming up alongside me; he's looking at the long black wash of blood down my pants leg. I lift up my hand and turn up the edge of the palm so we both can see it. Through the torn glove, we see flaps of skin hanging loose, glistening with yellow fat in the blood. "Oh shit," Manny says. He wraps himself tight as he can around the tree and grabs me under the arms with both hands. "Let's go," he says. I open my eyes again and look down. Jesus, 16-year-old eyes wide and black, is looking up at me, waiting at the top of the ladder.