

Broken Arrow / Ben Rose (H. Mention)

This is the most arresting testimonial by an anthropomorphic weapon of mass destruction that I've ever read.

— John F. Buckley, Contest Judge

I fall from the sky at a rate of 700 miles per hour, slam into a tobacco field, burrow 180 feet into the loamy earth, and fail to detonate. Rather, I break. And in breaking, I remember the earth the way a child remembers gestation when chewed into shrapnel by her mother's teeth and swallowed into her body. In breaking, I exhale myself and become location, become gamma, a ripple expanding across a pond's surface.

I expand across fields until I reach woodlands, until I pass through long dull radio waves to find their source: the transmission tone from the AN/ARC-34 radio dangling from the pilot's shoulder. He hangs upside-down by his parachute, snagged on a bald cypress. I infiltrate his sweat-sheened skin, his epidermis and skull, and find in his unconscious mind a childhood memory.

In fifth grade, his mother bought him a pair of walkie-talkies. He liked that the world hummed with invisible waves, like one massive ghost with innumerable mouths, and one mouth was his father at the Air Force base, and another the president, and another an astronaut. You could never truly be alone. He waited until dinnertime, right before his father would come home, set one of the walkie-talkies on his father's dinner plate, and ran out the back door into the humid evening air. He waded through knee-high switch grass dying gray and into the surrounding woods where, behind a bramble patch, he watched the headlights of his father's El Camino crest the hill.

His father kneaded his thick neck with a meaty hand as he stepped out the car and disappeared behind the front of the house. The boy rubbed his thumb over the radio's rubber stem, its yellow plastic body, and pushed down on the call button. He imagined the chirp from inside the house and watched the yellow square of the kitchen window. He waited for the simmer of static to snap into life. He waited. He hit the call button again. He waited. If he listened closely, under the blanket of static, he could hear a man's voice not unlike his father's calling for his coordinates, for an immediate status report, demanding the status of the damn cargo. When the boy looked up, the burnt cloud was like a spider against an overcast sky.

I expand into the sleepy town, one that, in detonation, would always be withdrawn from my knowing. But I am a slow and tiny death now and I cling to the metal mesh of screen doors, to the lead paint of the post office wall, to the bone marrow of its waking residents. I become the skin of the town's muscle and bone so as the military helicopter

flies low over the roofs and the shudders and walls shake, I ripple like a windswept wheat field. The shadows of the helicopter blades over the wood-board houses are hovering fingers over a piano, already touching.

Ben Rose / Oak Ridge, North Carolina

Ben Rose is a writer based in North Carolina. He wrote that, if selected, this would be his first publication.