

THE TREES IN NORTH AMERICA

I

And so, in the spring of her twenty-first year, the bandages come off and nearly everything goes back to the way it had been. Delores hears stories, many of them, about soldiers with purple hearts and survivors of horrific accidents who are disappointed to continue their lives without certain appendages. These stories, without exception, end on a note of positive affirmation. Has she heard about the man who lost his leg and became a marathon runner, or the double Dutch champion with only one foot, or the water skier with no arms? All true, she's told to remember. Lemonade from lemons.

But unlike certain veterans Delores does not wake up after long nights with a phantom pain where one of her fingers used to be, as if her body were remembering its former self, trying awkwardly to generate a sensation where a finger once was. The fingers on her left hand are gone, gone completely, and it seems that her body has neatly forgotten them. But she still has her right hand with its full compliment, and she has her left thumb, which should be good for something.

What she tells her mother is that she feels angry for the loss, and that she blames herself for allowing this to happen. But it's not her fault and everyone knows that. What she tells her boyfriend, Dale, is that she regrets the things she will never be able to do now, in her current state. She will never ride a bicycle comfortably, never hold a phone in one hand and write with the other, never applaud as vigorously as she once could. Dale says that he understands but that it isn't so bad, not if she sets her mind to living the way she wants to live and not allowing herself to feel, always, that she has been resigned to something. She never cared about riding a bicycle before, Dale says. "But look," Delores says back, "I'll never wear a wedding ring." And although he might have suggested that her right hand is still a perfectly reasonable alternative, and that there is no reason for

her to let a little thing like tradition get in her way, he says nothing, as he often does.

“And I’ll never hold a baby,” Delores tells her mother, “not the way a baby needs to be held.” And she won’t be able to wear gloves either, not the way they need to be worn, or snap the fingers of both her hands at the same time. She also won’t be able to read a book with the same ease she has come to expect, or wear as many pitted olives on her fingertips come Thanksgiving.

But she can enjoy the time she won’t have to spend in the garden. She has an excuse now. She can hardly be expected to manipulate those tools. Her father tries to convince her that she needs to do what she’s always done, no matter how awkward, that she needs to be stronger than her loss. But he seems unable to separate himself from his long familiar language of green thumbs and clichés about this hand and what’s on the other. It doesn’t matter, though. Delores is already resolved to regret the things she does not have whether or not she wanted them in the first place.

She plays the carpenter’s saw like a cello and she plays it more frequently and with greater attention now, having decided that this, of all things, is something she can embrace in spite of her missing fingers. She is happy to remind anyone who asks just how difficult an instrument it is to play. And it should be apparent, she says, that the difficulty has increased and that the quality of her playing has not diminished but takes more effort now. She wonders if they’ve heard about the woman who lost her fingers but still made a thirty-inch handsaw sing? She’s determined, even as she mothers her regrets, to prove that an incomplete hand can still produce beautiful music, and she’s not about to advertise that the musical saw requires less of her left hand than a piano or a guitar do. She has, instead, prepared an elaborate answer for anyone who might think to challenge her achievement by suggesting that she hasn’t really overcome anything at all, and that unlike certain athletes she has not chosen a medium that will allow her to succeed against probability. She knows she won’t get the chance to say what she has prepared because no one is likely to challenge her situation and because she wouldn’t say such things anyway. There is some consolation

in the slow burn though, and since she doesn't have the luxury of waking to an unbearable itch in a finger she no longer has, which would allow her, however briefly, to think that everything was once again as it had been, she finds that imagination has become more important than ever.

Her boyfriend, Dale, says, "You should have seen her; you really should have seen her." And he says, "Man, oh man." He says Delores was the best guitar player he had ever seen, and he's seen his share. He's seen the best of the best and he knows what he's talking about and he means it when he says that Delores was good. Delores says, "You're embarrassing me."

Dale says he isn't disappointed in the saw. He tells Delores over and over that he thinks the saw is a wonderful and beautiful instrument and that he's not an expert or anything but that he thinks she's probably the best saw player around. She smiles when he says this because she knows that he means it and that he's wrong but that he's doing the best he can. She knows that as a guitar player she was important to Dale and that now she is only someone he loves. That may be no small thing but it is still less than what she was before. She had been a girlfriend, yes, but a collaborator too, and she was involved in everything that mattered to Dale. She might strum a chord still, but who can't? If it had been her other hand, if she had lost the fingers on her right hand, she might be able to fake it. But this is wrong too, just as useless. Instead she has found herself more inclined to hide away; she goes to Dale's shows less and less frequently. "Because it's easy to be a fan," she says. And Dale reminds her that she is so much more than some groupie, which only makes matters worse.

Her father, Archie, is a large man who manages, because of his profession, to talk about Delores's body like it doesn't belong to her. He says, "The fingers are not as vital as you might think, not like the liver or the uterus." And he means well, she knows, but sensitivity is something different for him. He says, "I mean, think about it." He says this while he's standing on a ladder, as Delores hands him a small tree saw, and after she has said, "But they're my fingers" and "Are you sure that planting a tree in the living room is really such a good idea?" And he says, "I

mean, think about it. Tell me this won't look great." He claims to have taken structural damage into account. It's not as if he plans on moving any time soon and why would he do something that will damage the house, his house, the very house he owns and lives in, where he raised his family. "No," he says. "This is going to look great. Trust me." She does trust him, she tells him so, and she wonders what her mother will think each autumn when it comes to her to rake the living room. And the aphids—had he thought of them or whatever insects this tree is sure to bring with it? It's not as if the cherry trees didn't invite enough bugs already. "At least it's not a box elder," he says. "Think of that."

Archie got the idea, he says, in a pancake house in California. And although that tree was an enormous and thriving elm around which the pancake house had been built, he says that this tree, a green ash, the kind of tree that seems to grow more successfully when it's ignored for years at a time, should do quite well inside his house, where it will get more carbon dioxide (he says), and where it will be easy to ignore after a while like so many pieces of furniture. Cold winters will do less damage to an indoor tree, he says, but that's only one of many benefits.

Delores watches as her father weatherproofs the enormous hole that he has put in his ceiling and crawl space and roof. She says, "What about us? Isn't this like leaving a door open all year?" He says that he has taken the weather into account too, and that before the autumn comes he will devise a means of keeping the house warm in spite of the hole. But for now, he says, a tarp will keep any rain out and, isn't it time for lunch.

Her mother is named Ruby and she spends most of her time in the garden. It is not yet mid-June in zone 2 and already she's digging up bulbs where she means to plant some new annuals. "No one likes a dying flower," Ruby says. She comes into the house with dirt under her fingernails and a bunch of late tulips that she places in a vase on the kitchen table, where Delores and Archie are just sitting down over egg-salad sandwiches.

"The problem with nature," Archie is saying, "is that we like to think we can live outside it." This is nothing new to Delores or Ruby, who have heard, countless times, his various lectures. He is currently about to argue that if people will only embrace

nature more fully and really live in it, they will see, we will all see, that lives have improved. That this is a simultaneous defense for his current project and a plea for bringing more trees indoors is both transparent and—Ruby is likely to say—not going to get him anywhere soon, because one tree is enough, and until she is convinced that that one tree can be kept insect-free, she is not absolutely sure that it will stay. “The problem with nature,” Ruby says instead, “is weeds.” Delores’s younger brother, Christopher, has just stepped into the room and it seems to Delores that it’s a little late in the day to be rubbing sleep from one’s eyes. But Christopher is, nonetheless, newly awake and doesn’t appear too happy about it. He’s seventeen years old and apathetic to a great many things.

“Speaking of weeds,” Ruby says. “Why did I find so many this morning?” Christopher shrugs his shoulders and says that he must have pulled a thousand weeds yesterday and that he’s sorry but that there is no way he could get to them all. “Seriously,” he says.

Among the things Christopher is not apathetic to are punk rock and the rate at which certain reptiles can regrow severed limbs. It is not surprising to Delores that her brother would have such an interest in reptiles considering that his father (and hers) is a high school biology teacher. Having a father in such a profession has its advantages. Christopher has had access to pets that none of his friends could rival. And although the interest in constricting snakes and horned toads and very small alligators has worn off most boys by the time they hit late adolescence, Christopher has continued to collect and study all sorts of scaled pets and rodents with steady interest.

But Delores, who has never shared her brother’s interest in creeping things, has not found her father’s job so rewarding. After all, he was the first adult most of her friends ever heard use words like *erection*, and *intercourse*, and *vagina*. The frankness that so embarrassed Delores in high school is also what endears him to her so much now. She’s never seen him blush.

2

Archie has chosen the green ash because it is a hardwood, and because he knows it will grow better than most hardwoods in this climate, and because he doesn’t have time to wait for an

oak. He is not doing this for posterity but for himself, and so he wants a tree that can get off to a quick start. He knows, still, that even a fast-growing tree is nothing to sit around and watch, but he is as patient as he is likely to get and his perfect health is hardly something he can count on forever.

He is a solid and heavy sleeper who snores like a jackhammer. His family has grown accustomed to the enormous noise he makes at night, and they have long since stopped making jokes about it. In spite of how deeply he sleeps, he doesn't often stay asleep through the night. He wakes, regularly and repeatedly, to get himself something to eat or drink. And sometimes, in the middle of the night, if he can't get back to sleep or when he can't resist something sweet and a glass of milk, Archie can hear Delores playing music in her room. Through the kitchen wall he can hear her playing the same notes over and over again. Weeks ago he could have named the songs, or at least whistled along with them. He's no expert on classical music, to be sure, but he knows a thing or two and the songs she had played were as familiar as advertising jingles. But now he's finding it harder and harder to identify the sounds coming through the wall. Delores doesn't seem to be returning to the country music she embraced for so long, and since her guitar playing has come to an end she has also stopped listening to her country records. The classical music is nice, Archie says. Nicer than the country. But these new variations are hard to like. He tells Delores this and then reminds her that he doesn't know much about music but some things just sound nice and some things don't, and he's just talking, whatever it's worth.

She has told him, repeatedly, that things are different for her now, that she sees her missing fingers as a constant reminder that she can't go backward. Archie is confused by his daughter's behavior. The music she plays now, on a saw that his grandfather left him, is unadorned and dark. She plays cycles of notes, like scales, with only small variations for what might be hours on end. She tells him that it is her attempt to strip music to its barest elements, and to find something beautiful in the spare repetition of notes. "Like certain words," she tells him. "Like certain words repeated too often." "Or," she's said, "the way your very home can feel foreign when you wake up from a strange dream." This, he admits, is something he understands.

Archie has always liked Dale. But he's disappointed, though he won't say so, when he hears Dale explain that the musical saw is not exactly what he had in mind. Dale says he knows that many great country bands have featured saws, and that many of his favorite albums spotlight some terrific saw playing, but he has trouble imagining his band finding a place for the instrument. His is not the downbeat country music of hackneyed cover bands but something more spirited and lively. Dale says this to Delores late at night, when she gives him back his guitar and says, "It won't do me much good to keep it now." Archie excuses himself from the room when he can see that something significant is about to happen: a breakup or reconciliation. He is unsurprised, some moments later, to hear Delores's voice raised slightly.

Archie has taught high school juniors for nearly twenty-five years. What had begun as a summer job and some substitute teaching has turned, by gradual steps, into a profession. And now, with a little hindsight, he sees that he is not cut out for this sort of thing. Not that he's likely to do anything about it. But he finds himself tired of the repetition, tired of the students coming to him each year with the same lack of interest. That he has been voted teacher of the year seven times might have motivated him in years past, but now he feels bored with it all.

Initially he had approached the beginning of each school year with a sense of excitement, like he had a chance to change the world, and to turn his students on to some ideas that they had never even considered. He had to teach them about their bodies, sure, but he didn't have to make it boring. His students, he had thought, were learning about the wonders of the human machine and the natural world. If only one of them went on to a career in marine biology, or medicine, or anthropology, he thought, he would count himself successful. That none of them ever did was only one of his disappointments. What also got to him was the ease with which he could identify his students on the first day of each semester. He could pick out the smart ones, the clowns, the reserved ones who would blush at the mention of a reproductive organ. He could know, with some certainty, who was going to fail before he knew their names. It didn't help that their names were always the same anyway.

He stands in front of a new semester of students and says, "We are going to use words like *penis* in this class." And since his is not an optional course, Archie can say with some authority, "Please get used to the idea." He stands in front of his students and gives them their first assignment: to collect and identify by name (common and Latin) the seeds of twenty-five different trees. He gives them an enormously long time to complete this assignment (six weeks) and says, "Please try to find at least one tree that doesn't grow anywhere near your house." He knows, of course, that they will have to go beyond their own backyards, but they won't go any further than a local nursery in town if they can help it.

Ruby says, "The problem with nature is weeds." By which she means to say that her job as a florist would be made easier if not for the weeds that grow, inevitably, wherever flowers will grow and even where they will not; this much Archie knows. He says, "The problem is not the weeds but our perception of the weeds." By which he means to suggest that there really is no such thing as a weed, but that certain things grow and some of them are more pleasing to our eye and some of them are not, and those that are not pleasing we call weeds. Ruby says, "If I can't sell it, it's a weed. If it grows, uninvited, in my flower beds, it's a weed." By which she means exactly what she said. This conversation is nearly automatic now, and gets shorter each time they have it.

Archie feels responsible for nature. He feels that it is his job, in spite of whatever ineffectiveness he might currently feel, to remind people that we are not alone on this planet, and that horrendous injustices to the natural world are not limited to South American rain forests. His arguments fall largely on deaf ears, he is sure, but he continues to make them in spite of himself and because, after years of saying the same things, he feels that it is easier to continue than it would be to stop.

He and Ruby have not seen their oldest son for more than three years. He left under cloudy skies. By that point he had been arrested a number of times for a number of reasons that did not include drugs in any way; for that his parents were grateful. He had stolen cars, among other things, but he denied his

involvement in many of the forcible break-ins of which he was accused. And since he made such half-hearted efforts to conceal the robberies he did commit, his parents began to trust him in an unpleasant way.

Ruby says, "Do you think Tom is all right? I hope he's all right." And Archie says nothing, because he doesn't have an answer, and because he knows that Ruby doesn't expect an answer from him. She just needs to say certain things now and again, he knows, and so he waits for what seems a reasonable period of time before he changes the subject.

3

When Archie said, "How would you feel if I planted a tree in the living room?" Ruby waited and held her breath. She knew that one of two things was going to happen and neither depended on anything she had to say: Archie was either going to correct himself and acknowledge that this idea of his was a bad one, or he was going to move directly to the garage, where his tools were waiting to be put to use. She waited and was about to tell him that she also thought that trees were best kept out of doors, in nature. But she misjudged his pause. He said, after a deep breath, "I should dig first." And so he began and made quick work of the living room, an admittedly underused corner of the house, but one that has been, for several years now, just the way Ruby wants it.

So, while Archie set to work inside, Ruby got her own tools together and went to work in the yard. She's had two or three good weeks of summer already and the heat has stayed down. The perennials have made a good showing. Some, in fact, bloomed early and have held on later than she's seen in years. She cuts these close to the soil and moves them indoors where vases are waiting. She digs up the bulbs and stores them, or leaves them buried and plants above them.

Christopher has not weeded as thoroughly as he assured her he had. She expected as much but is still going to let him hear about it. She says, "Why did I find so many weeds in the yard this morning?" Christopher says that he must have pulled a thousand yesterday and that he's sorry. "I mean, how was I supposed to get them all?" he says. And Archie says that it is

human perception that determines what is and is not a weed and that it's unfortunate that we are so determined, as a society, to banish weeds. There are some lovely weeds after all, he says, many even flower. The grass we mow is a weed, he says, let's not forget that. And this gives Christopher a little support, it seems, because he says, "That's right—who are we to say?" And Ruby says that no one wants to buy a weed, which is where that particular conversation finds its conclusion. Then she looks through the kitchen window for a long time as Delores and Archie work on their sandwiches and as Christopher sets to work on an enormous bowl of cereal. Ruby says, "I hope Tom is all right." She turns to see that Delores is watching her, and that she has a sad look in her eye. Ruby asks about Dale and how late he stayed last night. Delores explains that Dale wishes she could yodel because he thinks yodeling is really what his band needs right now. "*No offense or anything,*" Delores mimics Dale, "*but the saw is just so sad.*" She uses her fingers as quotation marks to emphasize the word. "He wants a new banjo player," Delores says. "Like he needs another one."

In the garden Ruby is a master. She can manage to keep every bed in bloom throughout the summer and she has, through no small labor, managed to make a name for herself as an expert on all things botanical. She is featured prominently each year in several local publications for her ideas and designs, and more recently for her arrangements. The flowers she sells are not the flowers she grows (she has fresh cuts shipped in daily), but her personal garden is no small testament to her hard work. She succeeds in the garden in spite of the local climate. A point of pride.

What amazes Ruby most is not the difficulty with which she manages to get her flowers just right, but how easily weeds reproduce themselves. Why can't the flowers grow so well, and seed so efficiently? She has admitted, on more than one occasion, that she is much less likely to enjoy a garden that has not been manicured and shaped by human hands. Which is to say that she is not inclined to keep volunteer trees or a bed of wildflowers. Wildflowers are nice—she doesn't want to be misunderstood—but they are meant to be in the wild, in nature. And no garden is natural, she says, any more than the clothes she

wears or the food she eats. These things have come in contact with human hands and have ceased, therefore, to be natural; why would she try to convince herself otherwise? Everything started at some point in nature, that much is clear, but let's not be lazy about this whole thing. Ultimately, Ruby says, she is just too protestant to take credit for any bed of flowers that would have grown just as well without her. A respectable garden, she says, requires work.

Ruby heard Delores talking to Dale. She heard Delores say that she was not so interested, as she once might have been, in honky-tonk, that she was not as enamored as she used to be. She didn't want Dale to get the wrong idea, she said, but she's not the same person she once was. Dale said that he needed Delores to be strong right now and that being strong meant being consistent, and that meant she should try to find what mattered most to her. And it sounded to Ruby that Dale was trying to tell Delores what should matter most to her, which is no surprise. Ruby has not been fond of Dale from the get-go and her opinion has not changed since Delores had her accident.

Maybe Delores should make a clean start, Ruby says later. "Maybe you should find a way to wipe the slate clean," she says. She may be saying too much and her plan might backfire, but she's already weighed the risk against the benefit. But she doesn't want to be misunderstood—it's not a bad idea to begin again, she says. There will be other boys; there will be other reasons to go out on a Friday night. "Yes," Delores says, "I guess there will be." But she doesn't know, she says, that a clean start is so easy as her mother says it can be. There are questions to be asked and there are answers and maybe she needs to be patient. Ruby may have said too much. She will push no harder, not tonight.

The saw is such an interesting instrument, Ruby tells Delores. Did she know that some people play the garden hose like a French horn? Yes, Delores has seen such things. But Delores is quick to remind her mother that she is not playing the saw because it is unique or unusual. She is playing it, she says, because no other instrument can manage to produce a sound that is so haunting and ethereal. The saw, she says, is not a substitute; it is not a stand-in for something else, but the genuine article. She

plays the saw because that's what she does and she wouldn't have it any other way.

It's true that certain music dictionaries have been quick to dismiss the saw as a novelty even if they afforded it an illustrated entry in many cases. They poke fun, but so what? And besides, the saw is no easy thing to play. Sure, just about anybody can make the saw sound a note or two—it takes hardly any effort—but has she considered, Delores asks her mother, that for all of the respect it gets as a serious instrument, any infant can make a piano sound. A cat can do it for what it's worth. But to really make music with the saw is no easier than it is to do the same with a piano. Delores knows enough about other instruments, she says, and she knows that the saw is harder to play, by a mile, than a guitar. So what if it didn't take a craftsman in Vienna a decade to produce her instrument, so what if the best examples are those you can find at any hardware store. Does difficulty in production of instrument have anything to do, really, with the quality of its playing. "Let's be honest," Delores says. "Let's be honest and admit that there is no other instrument known to man that can be used to play "The Flight of the Bumble Bee" and then be used immediately to cut down a tree." Ruby has to give it to her there: she can't name one. And she wouldn't mind using Delores's instrument to do some cutting herself, she says. Delores laughs and Ruby says, "Well, it's much later than I thought."

4

When his sister chopped off her fingers Christopher knew that something important had happened. Not something good important, but something big important. This was not something that would fade quickly into the background he knew, even then. He felt guilty at first for his interest in seeing his sister's hand. He knew that he couldn't just come out and stare at the thing or inspect it very closely, but he was as curious as he could imagine being and he couldn't help it if he was.

Her hand, once he caught a reasonable glimpse, didn't look so strange. He was disappointed, of course, that it looked so normal, so common, and so much like any hand with the fingers folded down on themselves. Even he could make his hand look fingerless from the right angles. Delores's hand looked fingerless

from every angle, of course, and that made a difference, sure, but he could only see one angle at a time and that one angle didn't look so bizarre. He didn't talk about Delores's hand any more than he felt compelled to, but certain questions were unbearable. Did it still hurt? Was there sensation in the nubs? Did she wake to feel an itch or a tickle where one of her fingers had been? She answered his questions until their mother told him to stop being so insensitive. She was a good sport, Delores.

Christopher feeds crickets to the various rodents he keeps in his room. He watches them eat up, then he watches them hide themselves away again. He's decided that maybe his interest in rodents and reptiles is not as spirited as it once was. He has kept his aquariums full of various and assorted pets for so long that he has trouble remembering anything else. But maybe he's outgrowing his interest in pets that cannot be trusted to run freely in the house. His friends have dogs and cats and they seem happy with them. He likes dogs especially because of their willingness to play games. And although the eating habits of his snakes are interesting and complex, he finds that as companions the snakes are less than stimulating company. A dog, he thinks, is what he will get next, after his current set of pets have died or been set free. And he wonders what his mother will think if he sets any of these creatures loose in her garden.

But he finds himself less willing to abandon the enormous ant farm that sits along the far wall of his bedroom. He built this Plexiglas experiment with his father's help and it has been more than adequate for the hundreds of ants who have made a home of it. And while the snakes and toads and mice have begun to seem less interesting to him, the ants have caught his attention like never before. There's a section of the ant farm that serves as a starting point, a point from which every other point is down. But once his ants have moved below that point (they have two entrances to their tunnels), they have created for themselves elaborate and complicated pathways that wind down and around them like a maze. That all of these pathways are consistent and well used seems to speak to a sort of efficiency that he's come to admire. They waste nothing, these ants, and more than that, they manage to keep their world in good working order. Periodically a pathway will collapse (Christopher would be

lying if he claimed to have simply observed these small natural disasters; if he is a god, he is an active one), and he is amazed by the speed and efficiency of repair efforts or the construction of alternate paths. But what amazes him most is that the ants work so hard but seem to accomplish so little. Their paths produce a fantastic pattern, and the ants move around themselves so fluidly, but in the end Christopher sees that for all their effort they have accomplished nothing. They work because it's what they do and sometimes he pities them for it.

In his father's biology class Christopher finds himself uncomfortable with the questions his father asks. He doesn't say *penis* at home with any sort of frequency, and why is it that he feels so obligated to do so here? They all know the word and they don't need his dad to remind them of it. "Get used to it," Archie says, and Christopher realizes that he might need to get used to a few things.

When Archie assigns a project to the class, Christopher doesn't take notes. He will get around to collecting seeds (how hard could it be?) sooner or later. Right now he is only concerned with the fifteen minutes he has to endure until the bell rings and he is set free to lunch with some people who are not related to him. Archie shows some mercy and doesn't call on Christopher to name some places where one might find seeds or where one might look to identify a specific tree by name. Christopher is thankful, in small ways, that his father seems to recognize how uncomfortable this must be for him. He also knows that a good place to find seeds is in his house, where a small tree has recently been planted. He doesn't share this information with his classmates because he knows that they care about trees no more than he does.

"And speaking of weeds," Ruby says. Christopher has heard this tone before. He knows that his mother is not happy with his work in the backyard. It isn't because his work was lacking but because she needs something to complain about. Ruby says, "And speaking of weeds, I found so many in the backyard this morning." Christopher says, "I got most of them." This is where his father chimes in with some speech about weeds and having a positive approach to nature. We must accept that nature is

not dependent on our perceptions of beauty. A weed, Archie is saying, is only another kind of flower, a beautiful grass, and we shouldn't be so quick to banish them altogether. Not that we stand a chance of doing so even if we should try. "That's right," Christopher says. "Who are we to say what a weed is?" And besides, he thinks, there's no way he could have pulled them all. Ruby says that if she can't sell it it's a weed and Christopher sees that he'll make no headway with her today.

He pours himself a bowl of cereal and ducks behind the cereal box, visually solving a maze he finds there, a maze so easily solved that he has trouble working his way to the dead ends. He wonders who could possibly find this sort of thing challenging. His ants could do better.

Ruby says, "I hope Tom is all right," and Archie just stares back at her. Delores puts her sandwich down and pushes herself from the table with the palms of both hands. Christopher sees, as well as he has ever seen, the smooth, rounded flesh where fingers should be.