

## Hoppers

**Brenden Kimpe**

The heavy July heat beat down upon Arthur's back as he scraped at concrete covered in rotted straw, grimy sawdust, and hog shit. His eyes turned skyward with a discontented gleam as he observed the sun directly above him.

"You better muck these pens as best you can 'fore I get home. Be damned if ye didn't." His father's words echoed within his head. One of the hogs shuffled over to him and poked around with a curious snout. A swift kick from Arthur's boot sent it running to the other side of the pen with a whimpering squeal. Arthur didn't understand why his little sister, Cecelia, didn't have to help him with the dirty work. He was working alongside his dad by the time he was her age but instead, she got to enjoy the air conditioning inside with mom. It wasn't fair. He threw his shovel to the ground with anger and frustration. He wasn't going to do all this work right now. In that moment he didn't care if he didn't finish the pen. After all, father's belt could only do so much.

Most of Art's time was spent outdoors. If he wasn't forced by his parents to do chores or other odd jobs, he would be turning over rocks down by the creek, playing war with sticks and branches from the grove, or finding new ways to annoy Cecelia. One thing Art had been up to this summer was grasshopper catching. "Hopper wrangling" is what he called it. This summer had been particularly abundant with them, and

the poor chickens couldn't keep up. Art would often watch the ladies as they combed the yard like it was their job. Rambunctious conversation was constant between them as they spied hoppers who were either hiding or frantically jumping to escape the relentless flurry of beaks. They usually started early in the morning behind the chicken coop. Moving east, they would edge closer to the barn until they skirted its walls. The hoppers would rhythmically smack their bodies into the warped wood of the structure in frantic jumps, heedless efforts to escape the insatiable maws of poultry. White flakes of paint would rain upon the grass alongside confused insect bodies. The chickens ate until they were full and then ate some more. Their distended crops soaked in the afternoon sun day after day as they relaxed in gravel divots with food comas. No matter how much the hens worked, they never seemed to make a dent in the hopper population. His parents had been complaining about the damage they had been doing to the garden, so Art took it upon himself to help solve the problem. Fully deciding to ignore the hog pen, Art began to search for potential high-jumping victims. It wasn't hard. Strolling across the yard would kick up any hoppers that had been hiding in the grass or gravel. They would lurch through the air with black and yellow wings before finally settling on a spot fifteen or twenty feet from their original position. They were nearly impossible to spot on the ground, but once they had taken flight, Art tracked their movements with his sharp young eyes.

There were a few different types of hoppers on the De Wit farm. Art didn't know any of them by species but rather assigned names to them based on their colors and how much he disliked them. The dusty gray hoppers usually stayed on the gravel of their driveway or in dirt patches throughout their parched yard. Art called those ones "Mudders." The other common type were green and yellow hoppers that stayed within the grass and garden. These hoppers were the real problem on the farm and tended to leave the most bites in the vegetables. Art hated these hoppers and called them "Choppers" because of how they chopped the leaves from his mom's poor pea plants.

Art developed and refined a technique for catching hoppers that, unfortunately for him, morphed into a form of expression. Their jumping legs were the best source of defense that the hoppers had, so naturally, Art sought to develop a way of disabling this advantage. He tracked a Mudder as it flew up and landed a few feet away in the gravel. It was

facing away from him. *Perfect.* Moving slowly, Art brought himself right up to the back of the hopper and reached out with his right hand. Using his thumb and forefinger, he pinched the back legs directly at the knees. This disabled its springy jumping mechanism and prevented the hopper from escaping. From here, Art could do whatever he wanted. Usually he started with the legs, so that's exactly what he did. Bringing the Mudder into the barn for privacy, he pulled off the two jumping legs and set them aside. Forcing this sense of helplessness upon the hopper brought him immense satisfaction because now it could only crawl around like a normal, lowly insect. Art had a stash of Styrofoam blocks that he had saved from the previous year's Christmas presents. They had been coming in handy this summer as he used them to display his eradication efforts. He didn't display every hopper. If he did that, he would have run out of room on his foam long ago. Instead, he kept the ones that had brought him the most fun. This hopper was already earning itself a spot on the foam as it attempted to scramble away on four legs. Art picked it up and brought it close to his face. The Mudder regurgitated tobacco juice all over his fingers as it attempted to make Art let go. *Stupid things.* He set it upon a section of open foam and spread open its wings. Using sewing needles that he stole from his mother, he pinned the wings in a fanning gesture that displayed their colors in all their glory. The Mudder still attempted to crawl away and ripped one of its own wings from its socket in a blind panic. This wouldn't do. Seizing it, Art thrust a needle through its abdomen and cemented it onto the foam block. Brown liquid stained the white foam beneath its mouth as the Mudder continued to throw up in confusion. Eventually, the Mudder stopped moving as Art stabbed with the needle twice more. The stupid hopper had ruined itself. He tossed the empty husk of a body to the side. Thankfully, it was still early in the day and Art had plenty of time to keep hunting before his father got home. He knew that his fun would stop as soon as his father realized that he had never finished mucking the hog pen. Maybe Art could show him all the work he had been doing with the grasshoppers, and he wouldn't be so mad.

Strolling back into the afternoon sun, Art spied the biggest hopper he had ever seen—it was a Chopper too. It was crawling up the fence bordering the garden and was at least five inches long. Its green body was covered in armored skin that boasted bumps of green and yellow that blended with intense purpose. A spark of anger fluttered within his

chest. This Chopper alone could ruin an entire pea plant in the garden. Behind this spark of anger was a trickle of fear. He had never seen such a large hopper before, let alone a Chopper, which wielded a formidable set of jaws. He ran inside to put on a pair of gardening gloves to protect himself. His mother's voice piped up before he could slip back outside.

"You done with that hog pen yet? I got some work for ye when you are."

"Naw not yet. I was taking a bit of a breather, but I know I don't got much left." Art knew his lie had fallen flat when he felt the burn of his mother's eyes boring into the back of his neck.

"You face me when you're talking to me, son. What kind of boy disrespects his mother like you do?" His mother's face was deeply set with sun-kissed wrinkles. She was a hard-working woman with an even harder heart. She had love for her children but showed it in the only way she knew how. When Art was eight, he had woken up early to start weeding the garden and surprise his mother. For over an hour before the sun came up, he dug into the dirt with his small, grubby fingers and uprooted weeds and other pesky plants that threatened his mother's true children. A smile sprung to his face as he heard the screen door slam shut. He knew that his mother would soon see the product of all his hard work. He jumped up and greeted her at the edge of the tilled soil.

"Look Ma! I been working all morning for you!" His jubilant expression had slowly melted from his face as he saw his mother's hardened eyes. Art had unknowingly uprooted nearly an entire row of carrot plants and was well into a second before his mother came outside. He had received two punishments that day: one that moment from his mother as she exposed him to the true power of a flexible green stick, stripped of its bark, and another later that night as his father invited him into the barn. Art was very careful about himself after this.

"I said, what kind of boy disrespects his mother like you do?" She walked over to him and raised his chin with a rough finger until his eyes met hers. They possessed the same glint that he had seen that morning in the garden. The same hardness that drained the blood from his face and permeated his dreams after a bad day.

"A bad one, Mama." Art replied with a practiced tone.

"And are you a bad boy, Arthur? Because you sure as hell look like one right now."

"I'm not a bad boy Mama, I'm just hot and tired from workin' out-



He set to work on his morning chores. First, he needed to let the chickens out of the coop. There was a small door on the backside of the coop that sat on a hinge. Every evening as the sky began to darken, the ladies would dutifully make their way back to the coop for the night. He could hear the chatter inside grow stronger as they heard him fiddling with the latch. Swinging the door open, they frantically marched outside. Sometimes they would try to squeeze through the door two or three at a time in their efforts to be outside before the next hen.

"The early bird gets the worm," Art said to them, chuckling to himself. It was fun to see them get to work. It sounded as if they were gossiping with one another about how nice of a morning it was or that last night got a little crazy in the coop. Only this particular morning was a little different. As the hens spread out in the yard, they began to look confused. Once again, there were no hoppers to be found. Not a single Mudder or a single Chopper was around for them to gobble up. Ordinarily, hoppers would be frantically jumping about to escape the ravenous hens. After much contemplation and a few annoyed pecks at Art's ankles, they began to scratch around for something else to eat for breakfast. *Strange. I should check the pole barn. There never fails to be some good sized Mudders down there.* A certain unease began to set itself into Art's brain as he worked his way down to the pole barn. There were no hoppers, no mosquitoes, not even any flies flitting around the manure pile. He was about to round the corner when he heard a shrill scream from up near the house. His adrenaline spiked and he sprinted towards the blood-curdling noise.

Arthur was breathless as he ran towards the house. The screaming wasn't stopping or even faltering in its intensity. He stumbled upon a horrifically familiar scene as he flung open the screen door. Cecelia was bent over his mother's knee with her skirt around her ankles. The same stripped, green stick that had kissed the back end of Art the day before was now being whipped across her bare bottom. The switch was leaving red lines that immediately became raised and blistered with each hit. It whistled a warning before each hit and whomever was on the business end could not help but flinch in anticipation. *Thwip. . . Thwip. . . Thwip. . .* His mother's face was like stone. Her knuckles were white as she clutched the switch with a conviction that made Art take a step backwards towards the still open door. Her jaw was clenched, and she was muttering with each swing. Art couldn't tell if his mother was speaking

to Cecelia, or herself.

"Please Mommy! I didn't mean tooooo!" Cecelia cried, "My hands were slippery, and I didn't mean it!"

"You ought to know enough to dry your hands before picking up one of my jars of green beans. You can explain to your father why we don't have a full dinner tonight." The words were choked as they came from his mother's mouth. She administered a final whip before pushing Cecelia off her knee onto the floor. Reflexively, she curled into a ball and began to sob, holding her knees to her chest, not daring to bother pulling up her skirt. Art was sick to his stomach. Such a thing never got easier to see, even if he saw it often. His breath hitched as his mother caught sight of him in the open doorway.

"What the hell are you doing leaving the door open like that?" His mother yelled. "Inside or outside? Make up yer damn mind!" Art hesitated for a moment before he decided he wanted to be outside. He was turning around as his mother beckoned him towards her.

"Matter of fact, why don't you come in here and clean up this damn mess. Your stupid ass sister just broke one of my good jars." Art could see his mother's eyes set upon him with a hunger that chilled him to the bone. His own bottom burned with the memory of yesterday's beating. Before she could grab onto his arm, he dashed outside. He blocked out the string of threats that chased after him as he left the house, they would ring true when he returned.

*Burning tears of anger and helplessness are all that populate the faces  
of the damned.*

*Wishes of what could be done otherwise are snuffed out long before  
they can take root.*

*The dirt in which they desire to grow is pallid and dry,  
only moistened on the rare instance enough spit is mustered to leave  
its tight-lipped home.*

The De Wit farm consisted of 13 acres of pasture, woodland, and areas occupied by buildings in various states of decay. Art wound his way on trails devoid of plants due to white-tailed deer, rabbits, and numerous rodents. A small creek that ran through the De Wit grove was often visited by several patrons, teenage boys included. It was not a quiet place where he could go to think. The water ran over smooth stones and gur-

gled with pleasure as its miniscule waves bounced between the trunks of trees that populated the riverbank. Maple, aspen, pine, boxelder, and ash raked the sky with their gnarled branches that were weighed down with bright green leaves. The wind brushed through these leaves and created a hush of noise that ebbed and flowed as the seconds ticked. The occasional bird flitted from branch to branch, either chattering amongst themselves or shouting at Art for walking too close to their tree. The incessant buzz of cicadas filled the air and Art with a sense of nostalgic summer nights as a younger boy. No, it was not a quiet place, but it was a peaceful one. A place where Art could forget his problems and indulge in his own activities. Ones that brought him his own pleasure and joy. His mother found comfort in her gardening, his father in his work, and his sister in her books. Art found comfort by feeling powerful.

His spot was tucked in a far corner of the De Wit farm's grove. A small, abandoned garage was overgrown with trees and shrubbery. The house that accompanied it so many years before had been destroyed long before by the test of time. The garage now stood alone; its single large door was an imposing tan landmark among the greenery. To the side was a door with a rusty handle that had been broken for many years. Art had installed a hook latch to replace it and keep out any unwarranted visitors. Flipping the latch, he entered the musty interior. In his fifteen years, ten of them exploring the expanse of the farm, Art had acquired a plethora of treasures. A rusted and broken down '64 Ford Galaxie 500 occupied most of the space in the middle and had greeted Art when he first entered the garage over eight years ago. Its wide-bodied frame jutted out in sharp angles. Art thought it was real neat how a portion of the car tire was covered with the rusted fender. It used to be a deep green color but that had now faded several shades and orange rust lay spotted across the surface. There was a dump site not too far from the garage from the previous owners of the farm. When Art and Cecelia were younger, they would comb through the massive piles of junk in search of bottles, cans, broken kitchen appliances, license plates, and any other artifacts that caught their attention. Many of these retrieved treasures lined the workbench and filled the cupboards within the dilapidated garage. It was also here that Art kept his collection of hoppers. Sheets of stained Styrofoam covered a majority of the back wall. Hundreds of sewing needles held his prisoners to them. Choppers and Mud-ders of various shapes and sizes were positioned every which way. Some



of them had spread open wings to look as if they were flying. Others were positioned next to or in front of each other with entangled limbs, mimicking an embrace or a fight. There were even some specimens that were partial in their composition. Heads, wings, legs, abdomens, and thoraxes were individual in their display, the rest of their bodies having been tossed aside. Once again, Art thought of how strange the disappearance of all the hoppers was. The summer so far had boasted a number of hoppers that rivaled any other year on the De Wit farm, and it was strange that they had seemingly disappeared overnight. Grabbing a few of his choice tools, Art set out into the grove, determined to find at least one hopper. He felt slightly guilty for all the sewing needles that he filched from his mother over the past few months.

"I'm not sure where they have gone to. I had a brand-new box in my drawer just last week." His mother had attempted to explain the strange disappearances to his father one evening while they were sitting in the living room. She had asked him to purchase another box for her when he went to town the next morning, but James was not a generous man.

"You and yer damn sewing. Whutchu need that many needles for anyhow? Cantcha just use the same ones?" His father had replied to her simple request.

"Y-yes, and I usually do." Clara never sounded so small unless she was speaking to her husband. "I must've misplaced them somewhere. It's really no bother. I can get by with the few I have."

"Why'd ye ask me in the first place then?" His father said in a huff. "Women always expect the man in the family to provide, but ye already got some, dontcha?"

"Well, yes, but they sometimes go dull, or I need a bunch at once. I'm awful sorry, James." Clara was nearly in tears at this moment. She knew that she had already pushed it too far.

"Hell, them needles ain't dull! How 'bout I prove it to you? Would that get ye to stop yapping?" James De Wit slowly walked to his wife's sewing desk. Spools of brightly colored yarn, worn thimbles, and an old sewing machine covered the desk. He swept them aside with one arm, sending everything crashing to the floor.

"Oh James! Please don't! I don't need any more needles, I swear. I just wanted some extras, that's all." Art cringed at the memory of his mother's excuse. It was poor, and she knew it at the time but said

it anyways.

"Extras? So now you need extra needles? Isn't whatchu have enough? Don't I buy enough shit fer ye already?" James was in a rage now. His face was running through darkening shades of red. Spittle dribbled from his mouth and settled onto his stubbled chin. He reached into the third drawer from the top and pulled out three sewing needles. One was a size fourteen. Clara would use these needles for quilting and mending any of Art's summer shirts. The second one was sized at sixteen. Being a heavier needle, Clara used it for Art and his father's work jeans whenever they tore holes in their knees. Finally, the size eighteen needle protruded from his pinched fingers. Clara rarely used this heavy of a needle. Only when they needed to mend the heavy canvas of a tent or while she was working with leather did she employ the use of size eighteen.

"These here look plenty sharp to me, don't they?" His father strode across the room, strangely calm now. "Don't they?" He repeated. His gray eyes locked onto his wife who was cowering in her chair.

"Yes, yes, they do. They'll do me just fine." Art, who was sitting at the top of the steps, listening in, knew that there was no way for her to backtrack now. What was said had been said. What had been done was done. There was no going back now, and yet, they all—Art, Cecelia, Clara—tried to do so. Every time.

"You better hold still now. I want to make sure you understand that these here needles are sharp enough for you." His father grabbed ahold of his wife's trembling arm and lifted the sleeve. Clara's skin was tanned and leathery from her working in the garden. Taking the size fourteen needle, James pushed the point against the outside of her bicep, creating a dimple of pressure. A small whimper escaped Clara's mouth before Jame's hand clamped over it.

"You shut the hell up. I don't want to hear another word outta you, you hear?" James' voice was barely above a whisper and Art had to strain his ears at the top of the steps. Soon, however, his ears were straining no more. In fact, his hands were now clamped over them as sounds of a struggle emanated from the living room down below. Muffled cries came from underneath his father's hand. A chair was overturned. Clara had worn a white bandage around her right bicep for a week afterwards. Nowadays, there were three white pinpricks of scar tissue that stood out against her sun kissed skin, each one larger than the last.

*Why do memories seek to dismantle what is here and now?  
They are perverse and malicious, lustful for the dwelling upon them  
over long nights.  
Forces beyond imagination feed upon such things.  
Misfortune is the only thing bestowed upon those who happen to  
encounter them.*

Art's legs were sore from sitting on the stone for so long. His eyes were misty and unblinking. Soon, he needed to get back on the trail; the day was becoming sweltering. The tall trees offered momentary steps of relief as he passed through their shadows. As he walked, Art noticed a distinct difference in the grove around him compared to when he first came down to the garage earlier this afternoon. The trees were still rustling against one another with the lazily blown breeze, but the chatter of songbirds had ceased. The drone of cicadas was no longer there. He stopped in the middle of the path and strained his ears, tipping his head to one side to consume his surroundings as much as he possibly could. The trees seemed to be taunting him now. Shushing him. The skin upon his back crawled until the hairs upon the back of his neck stood on end. Even the bubbling creek seemed to drown itself in the background, putting forth no discernible sound. He set out on the path once more. A new type of persistence was in his steps as he traveled towards the house. The silence was unceasing as he came upon the trimmed yard. Thinking that he would find his mother and sister there, Art went to the basement first and found that there was no one there to greet him. Working through the kitchen, living room, and bedrooms, Art was met with nothing but silence. A deep and suffocating silence that was now pressing into him like a thick blanket on a warm and sticky night. The blanket seemed inescapable. It was scratchy wool that smelled of sweat and mildew. He ran outdoors and was unable to find them in the garden or outdoor buildings.

"Hello! Are you guys home?" Art's voice echoed between the buildings. "This ain't funny anymore." He was met with no response. Falling onto a bench that lined the garden, Art's tired body slumped over with frustration. *Where could they have gone? I was only here an hour or two ago, wasn't I?*

His eyes snapped open as a noise rang within his eardrums. It

was a low droning buzz that seemed to come from the pole barn. *Finally*, he thought, *at least there's something still here*. There was an absence of chickens and hogs in their pens, but he was entirely focused on the noise within the pole barn. It became stronger as he drew closer. The buzz rose to the volume of a chainsaw before suddenly ceasing as he rounded the corner. There was nothing there. No hogs or chickens. No mother or Cecelia. Not even a single hopper resided within. It was impossible to tell if the noise had been in his head or not. He decided to make his way back to his garage in the grove.

"I'll wait there for a while until it gets a bit dark out. They gotta be back from wherever they are by then." Art said this to no one in particular, but it was comforting to hear a human's voice, even if it was his own. His returning walk through the grove was uneventful. Closing the latch on the inside of the garage door brought him a strange sense of relief. He was home now and in a safe space. Art wondered if they may have gone into town without telling him. Mother rarely went into town without Father, but Art couldn't remember if he had seen the rusted pickup in the yard or not. A chill crept across his arms and coaxed gooseflesh from his skin as he thought of them leaving him home alone. Something like that had never happened before. The bumps upon his skin only became more pronounced as he noticed a sound emanating from the other side of the garage.

*Click. . . Click. . . Click. . . Click. . .*

He investigated the opposite corners and found nothing of interest, just a bit of trash and some leaves that had blown underneath the walls of the shed. It was like someone was repeatedly unsheathing and sheathing a spring-loaded pen. The clicking sound occurred again, this time from the other side of the garage.

*Click. . . Click. . . Click. . . Click. . .*

He moved towards the sound but stopped when he realized that it was coming from within the old Ford Galaxie 500 in the middle of the room. The dusty windows of the rusty car were inky darkness. Art could not see inside as the clicking became more persistent.

*Click. Click. Click. Click.*

It was clearly coming from inside the old Ford, but Art was much too afraid to look inside. An empty feeling was appearing within his gut. This wasn't right. This wasn't natural. He needed to get out of this shed. Now.

*Click Click Click Click*

There was no longer an interval between the clicks inside the old Ford. Art was about to make a mad dash for the door when he saw something inside. It was at this moment that Art could have saved his own life. Of course, he did not know that at the time, but he would soon. There was a small green stick that was repeatedly hitting the inside passenger window of the car. It was tapping with ferocity now. The clicks blended into a hypnotic rhythm that held Art's shoes to the floor. The glass in the window spiderwebbed with a loud **CRACK!** The clicking ceased. Art finally took in a breath, not realizing that he had been holding it since he laid eyes upon the strange stick. His eyes finally broke from the car window to the back wall, where all his prizes were stuck in an extraordinary display. There should have been hundreds of various types of hoppers and their appendages attached to Styrofoam blocks, except there were none. The blocks were devoid of any hoppers or their parts. Tobacco juice stains from his slain victims riddled the dirty Styrofoam. Even the sewing needles were missing from their rightful places. Having forgotten the strange stick in the old Ford, he went to the back wall, gaping at its emptiness. Art felt a flash of anger as he realized someone had been there. Someone had taken his trophies. Whoever it was had defiled a project that was an entire summer in the making.

The clicking noise resumed once again with startling clarity. It had risen to a loud clacking noise now and it seemed to dare Art to turn around. It teased him but he was frozen in place. A slithering feeling gripped his body and held him rigidly to the cold and broken concrete floor. The stick was now floating through the air. Art did not see it until it passed his right shoulder, gripping the front of it, urging him to turn around. The stick was not floating after all. It was attached to a mismatched body of horrors. Hundreds of hoppers coalesced into a jiggling body of insectoid origin. The strange stick belonged to a larger arm made from decapitated Mudders and Chopper legs. The face of the creature was too horrific to look at. Despite his pleading sobs, the stick reached out once again and tilted Art's chin so that their gazes could meet. Hundreds of compound eyes were fused together into what can only be called an abomination of nature. This wasn't natural, of course. But then again, neither was Art. Its maw creaked open with a whispering sigh—

*Oh, why do you seek to discover what is beyond you?*

*Tampering with the very existence gifted to you,  
you abuse it.  
You seek the answers to questions that are rarely asked.  
I hold their answers.*

**Brenden Kimpe** is an English major with certificates in Creative Writing and Writing, Editing, and Publishing. He enjoys strong coffee, purple sunsets, gothic novels, and complaining about everyday life with his cat Marceline.