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BLACK TUPELO COUNTRY Doug Ramspeck

Down amid the bottomlands,

where the backwater woods reshuffle themselves from stuporous summer into fall,

these black tupelos and their deep blue fruit make a salve to fend off ghosts. And beneath the flickering, wind-trembling canopy, pileated woodpeckers batter out their secret message to the invisible. A message that old man Llewellyn, dying in his cabin since July, half-hears inside a dream of a speckled king snake swallowing a mouse head first. Dreams like these, as he knows, are trying to carry him into the belly of the infinite. And though his wife and sister and grandchildren make a potion of corydalis, wild buttercup, and larkspur, he sees the world dimming transparent all around him, transparent as the moonlit view from the pond bottom amid the cattail stalks. And too soon, he believes, the black tupelo will lift him in its inexorable arms, and its lapis-lazuli-blue berries will fade paler and paler until his skin falls as loose as the king snake'sthen the pileated woodpecker will

sound the funeral drum,

and only the black tupelo salve smeared out of familial mercy on his stilled chest will prevent his released spirit from swooping beneath the wind-moaning canopy.

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