

# FORAGING

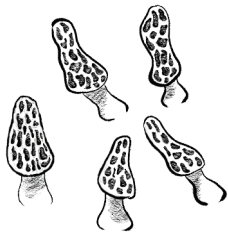
A GRAPHIC ESSAY BY ALYSSA JO VARNER

When I was very young, my father took me to the woods to hunt for mushrooms.

It became a tradition in those rainy months of April and May.

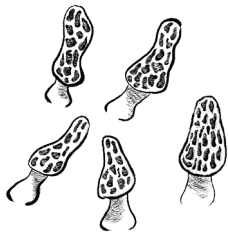


The trick is to sneak up on them. You've got to move slowly, quietly, eyes focused on the forest floor, training yourself to recognize their patterns.



Sometimes you'll glimpse one  
from the corner of your eye, only  
to lose it in a blink. Imagine the  
spongy fingertips of giants  
contracting  
in a subterranean fist.

It's easy to lose sight of  
such small things.

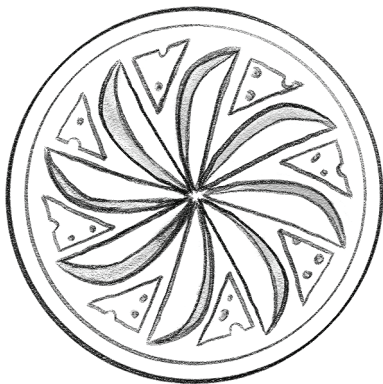



Dad was a mechanical engineer. He loved his work and took it seriously. At the foundry, if he didn't consider the minutiae of a project, people could get seriously injured.

Precision is a form of protection.

I did not inherit his mathematical mind.

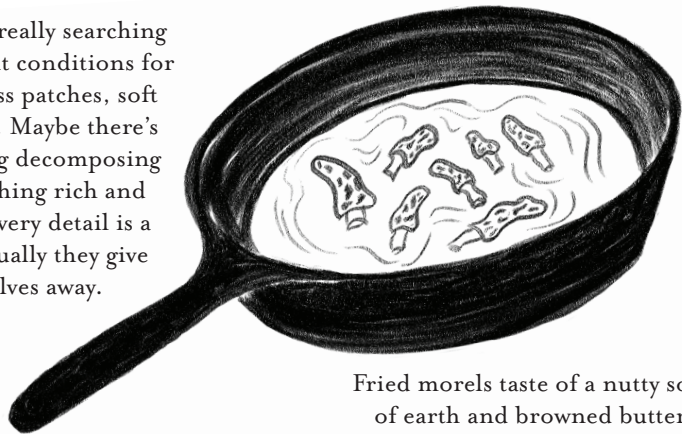
He used to bring me food while I  
struggled over high school equations:  
Plates of apple slices and cheese wedges  
kaleidoscopically arranged.  
His geometry was always perfect,  
mine littered with erasures.





Those simple study snacks  
always tasted extra good.  
They were made with  
such attention —  
each bite bearing the words:  
“Care about this.  
Care about everything.  
It all matters.”

What you're really searching for is the right conditions for growth. Moss patches, soft and springy. Maybe there's a downed log decomposing into something rich and pungent. Every detail is a clue; eventually they give themselves away.

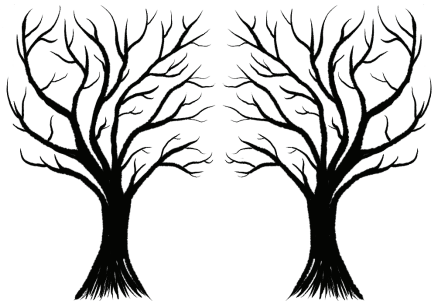


Fried morels taste of a nutty sort of earth and browned butter. Remember where you found them as you eat.

Art requires observation; it helps you be more human.  
Our foraging trips into the woods taught me how to notice. I can see  
when something small has shifted. Avoid crushing a delicate thing.  
Locate what I've lost.



My eye has always been drawn to the stark  
and spare. Give me exactly what I need to  
know and not a line more.



Simplicity is a clever kind of beauty;  
it doesn't wave its arms, merely waits  
to be noticed.

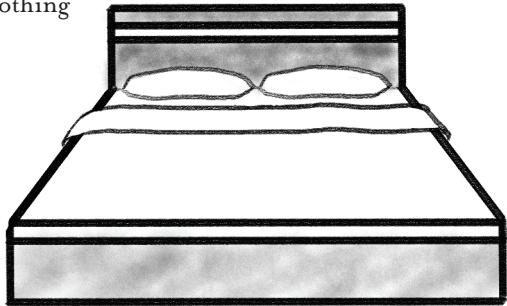
My father died this year,  
on the cusp of mushroom season.  
He was healthy, active, kept an enviable  
garden of vegetables in the backyard.  
At 68 years old, he simply failed  
to wake from a nap.

“Probably painless,” the examiner said.

He'd been home alone. When my mother  
returned she searched the house, his phone,  
the neighbors for every possible clue.

She plotted out a timeline. We all needed  
something to look at, to draw a story out of.

There was almost nothing  
to find.



I'm angry about what I cannot know.  
There should be more complexity than this  
when a person leaves the world.

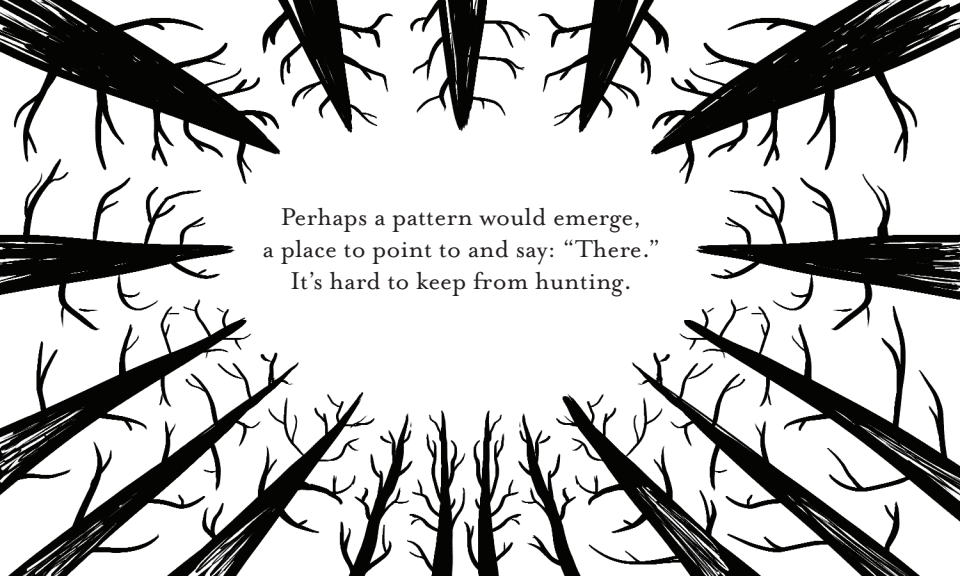
There should be a trail to follow:  
sheets thrown to the floor,  
a broken water glass,  
hands balled into fists.

How can death be  
so simple?



“It’s a blessing,” people say, “a quiet passing.”  
I can see that.

But I tell myself that something  
— a few more details —  
might help me understand;  
I could stare at them until they meant  
something new.



Perhaps a pattern would emerge,  
a place to point to and say: "There."  
It's hard to keep from hunting.

What I have, instead, is exactly what I need to know  
and not one line more.

