

The grown-ups called them indecent.

You could catch them in dimly lit alleyways and watch as the trails of their smoke floated upwards as it dissipated, winding and snagging on the vaguely illuminated brick walls. They were a quiet bunch, and though they moved in flocks of five or six, they were elusive, much like the smoke that curled ever upward from their crooked yellow beaks.

Their feathers were a mottled brown and black, their red combs faded and torn, their discolored yellow feet scraggly and dragging. No one knew where they got their cigarettes, but each had a single stick hanging lazily out of their mouths, the ends of each igniting briefly as they inhaled. From far away they looked like fireflies.

And, again similar to the smoke that wove its way through their feathers, the chickens were hard to catch.

The kids in my neighborhood used to place bets on who would be first to catch one, and over time the bet had devolved into who could manage to wrap their hands around one for a full ten seconds. See, despite the fact that the chickens hobbled up and down the street, getting close to one was like trying to light a candle in an strong wind. Over time a designated group of them formed, each member tried and chosen to be an asset worthy of the challenge. I'd watched them coordinate numerous decently-well-thought-out attack plans involving bait, ambushes, and even sacrifice (one of the kids had volunteered his younger sister), and yet the closest I'd seen anyone get was a hand brushed against one particularly scrawny chicken's tail as it streaked away. That kid, whose fingertips were stained with ash, lived a few doors down from me, and ever since he has been hailed by younger and older kids alike. I was one of them. From what I'd seen from my front steps, the kids had managed to surround a flock of four under a streetlight down the road. It was just after dusk, the group was silhouetted with the

fading golden sunlight and the sharper streetlamp light as each member tiptoed inward. I could barely see the animals themselves; only the soft cursive lines of smoke that drifted above them, and the flicker of burning tobacco between scrubby barefoot legs coupled with a blur of dappled murky feathers and the rusty flash of a mangy claw. Everything felt like it was holding its breath; not even the night bugs were whirring, and the only sounds I could hear were the soft gargling puffs of the chickens, the quiet winds over the grass, and the bated breath of the kids.

Each member moved with an almost exaggerated precision, with each child's arms held out for balance as they inched their way forward. I remember thinking how odd of a sight it was; how strange to look outside your window and see a group of eight six-to-eleven-year-olds all standing in a circle under a streetlamp at sunset, not to mention they are all moving towards a group of chickens with cigarettes in their mouths. I was not the only kid spectating; there were a few heads hanging out the windows. And, interestingly, I noticed with a quick glance, and not all of them were kids. The adults found the "phenomena" (the name they'd given to the creatures, though the kids never bothered with specific nomenclature) unsavory, even going so far as to organize their own campaigns to knock the flocks out, though they were about as successful as the kids were. I supposed it was the pure intrigue of whether these things could even be caught that drew their attention, though it very well could have been simple as the childlike curiosity as to whether the kids would be successful that held their gaze as the circle ever-so-slowly tightened.

The chickens themselves did not seem bothered until the group was about three feet away. I

remember watching the children freeze, the younger ones more out of fear rather than cautiousness as the sound of buffeting feathers steadily filled the air. The flickers of red and orange from the ends of the cigarettes grew faster; what before looked as peaceful as a swarm

of

bugs now became something more daunting, like a small pile of silent firecrackers. The brave children stepped inward once again, the soft crunch of their feet on the gravel road now drowned out by the soft rustling and distressed throaty-sounding clucks. The smoke rose faster, cursive lines curling in on themselves and becoming jagged. The surrounding group stepped closer, now about two feet away from the chickens; if one kicked out with their leg it would be engulfed by blotchy brown feathers and cigarette ash. I now couldn't see the chickens besides a frantic feather every once in a while, sometimes accompanied by a sharp flash of light, too brilliant to be natural, and instead was left to construct the scene in my mind, the nonexistent visuals complemented by the now scraping staccato trills and rumbling of feathers of the chickens as they and their smoke whirled within the group of children.

Then, the kids made their biggest mistake; they converged.

The effect was similar to sweeping a spoon through a drop of dye; the chickens seemed to disintegrate, seeping through cracks between lean arms and legs in a way that could not have been natural. They blurred ever so slightly as they passed through the rifts in the so-close-to-foolproof circle, shrinking away from waving arms as if they were smoke itself being shooed with a flourish.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion: the tensing of the shins as each child's weight was shifted forward, the cry from all children as they lept inward, the final raspy screech from the chickens and a swoosh of feathers or perhaps something more, the twirl of golden smoke in the illumination of the street lamp, and in a blink it was over, with seven of the eight children standing defeated with their hands to their sides, looking at each other as if each had known it wouldn't work from the start. All except one turned to look down at the scratched-up ground

that

they had stood around for so long, claw marks now almost overridden by dirty footprints. One of the younger ones stomped her foot in frustration.

Then, another sound arose from the weighted silence; one that contrasted so strongly from the low rumble of feathers and smoke-stained clucks that I almost did a double-take. It was a clear sound, as light and unwavering as a candle in a still room, one that attracted everyone's attention like moths to a flame. It started as a low hum, then grew to a joyous howl as the last child—one of the older boys—lifted his hand into the air triumphantly, waving his closed fist in the air like a flare. In his hand, elegantly backlit by the street lamp, was a single mottled feather with a thin stream of smoke pirouetting off the top.

As each child realized what it was, the boy's victorious wail was joined by others. The group circled around him, each child brimming with excitement and pride, some reaching for the feather while others jumped for the joy of it.

From behind me, I heard the soft hums of approval and the rustle of closing shutters and front doors from the adults that had been standing outside watching the peculiar-yet-uplifting scene take place. As I turned to catch another glance, it seemed the crowd of spectators had grown over the course of the scene, and for that I felt myself grinning.

When I turned back around, the boy with the feather was handing it to the younger girl who had been frustrated, who held it up to the light with awe. As she brought it to her face, the feather seemed to waver with the movement, as if it weren't fully corporeal, and the tiny plume of smoke continued to flow from the top. The feather was passed around the group, each one holding with the most care they could muster. I sighed, once again struck by how strange and beautiful it was to watch a group of kids pass around a feather barefoot in the middle of the road,

each with a warm halo from the streetlamp and the now rising moon.

When the feather made it back to the older boy, he lifted it to the light one last time before tucking it away into his pocket, patting it gently with his now gray-stained palm. Soon, as the night became more and more sure of itself and the light from the streetlamp was the only thing illuminating the road, the children dispersed down the streets and into their houses. And, as the sounds of their bare feet dissipated into the night air, the night bugs once again began to whirl, and the quiet wind brushed its way through the grass once more.