

Sweetgum Country

ANN FISHER-WIRTH

Billy shows us his arm, burned by the sun
 where pesticides sensitized his skin
 those years of his childhood, playing
 in Delta cotton fields. A charred,
 hand-sized lozenge marks the tender crease
 inside his elbow. Alex holds up her chart
 that shows the sickness and death
 in her mother's family, from cancer
 in Cancer Alley. She has made red circles
 for "fought," green crosses for "died,"
 she has put stars around her name,
 my pretty dark-haired student.
 They come to class, my sixteen freshmen,
 and no matter what their topics,
 they all say, "I never *knew* this..."
 Fords and Chevies that will barely crank
 one more time are parked in the reeds
 and slick red mud. Early evening sun
 pours down on the cypresses and sweetgum,
 the Tallahtachie swamp at the edge
 of Marshall County. Turtles poke their heads up.
 Cottonmouths zipper through black water
 or stretch out long and bask on the abandoned
 railroad bridge. Men and women of all ages
 beguile the hours after work,
 the idle hours, with soft talk or silence,
 with bamboo poles and battered coolers.
 They could use the food.
 They fish for buffalo, catfish, bass,
 despite the fish advisories, the waters laced with mercury.

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