

Mourning

**A short, short essay by Allen Butt,
Creative Writing Class of 2008, Beaufort, SC**

When I was nine, in Arizona, citrus groves surrounded me. Sunday afternoons, my father drove through them to steal oranges and grapefruits and tangelos. He carried them home in a white plastic bucket in the back of his truck (tan, though he, color-blind, insisted it was green), and he juiced them. He, my brother, and I drank the juice, soured by the grapefruit, and I learned to like it.

He took me to those groves to hunt doves. I was too young to hold a shotgun, so I watched. He told me to wring the doves' necks. He showed me to watch where they fell, to walk to the spot, to squeeze a bird's neck between my thumb and forefinger while it opened and closed its small beak and its eyes rolled up and down. I dropped them in a white plastic bucket.

One day, we got twenty, mourning and white-wing. My father and I sat on lawn chairs in our front yard with the bucket and two pairs of scissors. He walked me through the steps. First, he said, you have to cut off the wings. Then you wedge your thumbs—together, pads facing outward—under the sternum. Bend your wrists, tearing it in two. Throw away the heart and intestines. Peel the skin from the breast.

At the end, twenty pieces of meat and a bucket that needed washing. None of this seemed strange to me. I don't think today I could do it, choke a wounded bird to death. I no longer have whatever quality allows a person to do this. When I was nine, it was the nature of things. My father said we never killed anything unless we ate it, said straight-faced it was "The Law of the Jungle." A week later, I ate dove breast, washed down with citrus, thought nothing of it.