



STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

# Neither Heads Nor Tails

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My father lost his left nipple in a hunting-related accident. He said it didn't make him any less of a father—it made him more of a man, really. What happened was it was still hot two weeks before bow season opened, and he was in the garage in his undershirt, limbering up his favorite bow. After a couple of half-draws to get the limbs warm he pulled the string back all the way, no arrow, and held it for a steady ten-count. On eleven, though, his shaky fingers let the bowstring slip. It sliced forward like razor wire. His nipple spun through the air, slapped the wall of the garage, and stuck. The way he tells it he kind of grunted a smile then—the nerves in his new cavity were still too shocked to relay anything up to his head—and walked directly inside, cupping his hand over his chest to keep the air out. By the time he got a towel and made it back to the garage, which he'd had open, Telly, our golden retriever, was sitting there, sweeping the concrete with his matted palm frond of a

tail. My father could see that what Telly was trying to do was what he always did when he was guilty: gulping down his smile. There was still a wet smear on the wall where he'd licked the nipple off. It didn't make him any less of a dog, my father says. Really, it made him more of a dog, probably. And it's not like they could have sewn it back on anyway, right? And risked getting it back on but rotated half-around now, like a dial? No, and anyway, my father and his nipple stump—does it make me any less of a son for staring at it when we're at the beach? 'Oh, that,' my mom says when she sees the fascination in my face, and then tells my father to be sure and get the sunblock down into that, dear. That's the kind of place a cancer will just *pool*, if you let it. Because it's easier to play along, my father dollops the sunblock in, around, and after it's slick then, and we're all just lying there in the sun waiting to get dry enough for the drive home, I'll sometimes cue into my father's right hand, slapped across his chest like there's a flag in the area. But there's not. And he's asleep anyway, his right finger just skating around the oily rim of his caldera of scar tissue, that divot in his life.

What it does—and this is the part I mostly hate—is make me sneak touches up onto my own chest. Sneak touches and maybe even a light pinch, just to be sure, at least until my mom slaps the back of my hand and hisses

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*Not in public* to me.

It doesn't make me any less of a man, I don't think.  
But it doesn't help either.