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James Arthur's first collection, *Charms against Lightning*, was published in 2012. He is an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins.

Tree-Planting

James Arthur

The crew come from all over, because the money is that good.

Women, men –

many are students planting as a summer job, moiling in the mud, sweating
bug spray.

One day off, four on, in cut-offs above long johns, with a bag of saplings
on each hip.

As one hand does the spading, the other slides
a pine plug

into the ground. One breath, one stride, and the smack of shovel cutting clay.

Some highballers

who've been coming since before the crew bosses were on the crew
are old-timers

of more than 35, masters of the trade, who've customised their shovels
by cutting

inches off the shaft, or by grinding a kicker off the blade. One planter, famous
for having duct-taped

his fingers to the handle of his spade, tells the story again, deadpan –

It's not so easy

to wipe your ass when you've taped a shovel to your hand. Nights off, planters pile
into trucks

for the long drive into town: for hot showers and the bar.

There are fights:

some locals are sick to death of kids with nose-rings, mohawks,
and money to throw around.

One planter's working toward a Philosophy PhD. One guy stays up all night
getting drunk

on a lawn chair in the river. And there's a new guy who no one else can stand.

His crewboss

is *against* him, he says – *fuck her* for giving him another bullshit
piece of land.

He has no tent, but beds down in a rusted-out sedan
with an ex-fighting dog

that wants to kill every other dog in camp. Always keep your head down,
getting off a helicopter,

and always walk downhill. Always wash off the trucks before going into town.
Don't plant too shallow.
Don't plant too deep. On the downtime between contracts, the planter with the dog
vanishes
and never does come back – fired, everyone assumes, until a story gets around
about the man and dog
walking out into a field with a softball and a bat, to play the game
they always played:
the man would crack a high long shot for the bleachers, and the dog
would run it down,
except this one time, when the man somehow timed it wrong. As he began
his downswing,
the dog sprang into the air, jaws open, catching the ball, and the full force
of the bat coming down:
the dog lived. The dog died. The outcome is unclear. – Let's go back
to the field, with the leap
still inside the dog, the blow still unstruck. Man and dog are happy,
each in the company
of a creature he truly loves – so let's leave them as they are,
in the field.
Quiet. No breeze. The red stitching on the softball
hanging in the air.

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