

Her Name Is Not Ghost

Not an hour after I received my diagnosis
she was back in the yard: the gray fox,
her sleek creature's body half-tail and
full-tilt into the November dusk, nosing
through the succulent planters, inspecting
the shadows of the beauty-berry bush
like she forgot where she buried the treasure,
now stock-still, now dashing forward,
curious, purposeful, everywhere despite the fact
she should be nowhere in this urban grid
of xeriscaped lawns, halogen streetcorner
moons, the ever-present waft of detergent,
and certainly not in this particular yard with
its four-sided fencing a full story high
(my husband says all we need is a moat)
yet here she is, oblivious to our borders,
one paw hanging like the royal hand waiting for a kiss
while she tests some new scent on the wind.
How she keeps getting in I'll never know,
but I'm rooting for her, brave thing in this yard
full of labrador turds and other harbingers of peril.
I name her Ghost then take it back, worried that naming
is a kind of owning, and in this moment
I want to own nothing, to quit the house,
lose my skin in a puff of musk and follow her into the night
slimming through fenceposts and slacklining tree limbs,
tenderfooting the spilled innards of a dumpster,
terrorizing the night bugs, sharing her secret joys:
the last of the persimmons still clinging to the branch,
a stand of juniper in the steaming rain
and the taste of my own clean fur,
my only fear the headlong suns rushing the highway after dark
and even then the fear is something like amazement,
the road between here and home
full of quick, roaring mystery,
so I keep crossing and slipping and slinking and searching
for the Wild Hunt as it passes, the scent getting stronger now,
my coat thickening to meet the cold,
its color all I need of a name.

Mad Kinds of Faith

Everyone I know is building an ark.

My step-father and his chicken farm. My best friend and her nips and tucks. My sister-in-law and her garden, the garlic bulbs she planted last year finally stretching their necks to the sun.

Last week my brother called to tell me he has rectal cancer. Afterward I texted him a cartoon of a doctor: "His condition is serious, but its location is hilarious!" He texted back, "Guess this is what I get for being such a pain in the ass." Even our emojis were laughing too hard. I booked a flight to Black Mountain.

My 7-year-old niece tells me about the book she's writing. It involves a spotted dog named Ella who sets out to find the Crystal of Life. I ask her why Ella needs the crystal to save her. She shrugs. "Doesn't everyone?"

At Montreat Park the big kids walk barefoot in the creek and kick up glitterstorms of mica. My one-year-old holds her toes in the water until they get so cold she cries. I thaw them with my breath and hands until they are warm enough for her to dunk again. Hours and hours of this. It never gets old: the surprise of the cold, the ritual of my love.

This early in spring Black Mountain is still waiting for its leaves, but all that naked space clears the stage for the Daffodil Spectacular. The whole town, just smattered in yellow. Carpenter bees everywhere, stumbling drunk, boring holes in the woodwork.

Over tea his wife tells me that, after his diagnosis, my brother took off his hospital gown and said he better start working on the roof.

Back at his place, he makes French toast casserole and sings "Time after Time" in falsetto. My niece does the disco finger across the living room. I should write it all down, but I don't want to miss a thing.

Easter Sunday: we hide plastic eggs filled with marshmallows all over the yard. The kids go bonkers on peeps. I ask my niece why Easter is her favorite, and she says she likes the part where we hunt for treasure. "Like Ella the dog and the Crystal of Life," I say. "Yeah," she says, "but I'm pretty sure she just forgot where she buried it."

When we were kids, our father would take us to church on Easter Sunday. We'd listen to the story of a man who was buried and rose again, and then we'd take the story home and

recast the genre: Zombie Jesus Attacks! Tomb Raider Resurrection! I would be the toilet-paper mummy. My brother would be the angel who rolls away the stone.

I can hear him up there on the roof, hammering away. Noah in the rain.

That's a line I want to save, but my daughter falls asleep on my lap before I can grab my notebook. A light catcher in the window throws rainbows across her belly, and for a moment she is glowing as if lit from within. Her body is a stained glass cathedral. Her body is so heavy it hurts.

Outside, the tulip tree wrestles with the wind and petals froth the windows, pink and bright. In my lap my daughter opens her eyes, then closes them. Then opens them again.

HOWL

The coyotes have been going mad all autumn. A new fire station went up across the lake and every time the siren sounds, they howl like their hearts are breaking with want of it. All night long, egging each other on. Wailing their love songs and lamentations to the Great Howler in the sky.

When they wake you, you howl back. Language is mostly unnecessary, I think.

At one year old, you are a master of desire.

This week your favorite word is “more.” More pony rides on papa’s lap. More water to run your hands under, amazed. You’ve known our names for months, but this is your first sign of abstract thought.

(I almost said it was your first command, but I have learned that names are the first and sweetest command there is.)

Watching you discover language is like watching all of human civilization emerge from the mud.

At first your body made the sounds for you. You seemed as surprised by them as we were. *Grunt. Yawp. Wail.* When you found your tongue, the hungers got a shape, and the first shapes were Others: *Mama. Dada. Nana.* Our little fiefdom. Now you take your body’s hungers and point them outward, building the world as you go: *milk, book, June-dog, night night.* You practice needing bigger, needing better, needing more. Unfolding the empire word by word.

Maybe a Self is just a vocabulary of needs.

I try to get you to say what you want more of, but most of the time you don’t know. You just want more.

In other words, wanting isn’t about lack at all.

Parenthood has the annoying side effect of turning me into a philosopher. On the upside, I am learning how to ask better questions. For example, the old snake pit “When does life begin?” is not nearly as interesting as “How much of us is alive?”

We shed nine pounds of skin cells every year, our bodies scattering like breadcrumbs. We could donate all our blood and keep making more. There are more bacterial cells than

human cells in any given body, and our biome has preferences and agendas of its own. Not even our cravings belong to us.

How much of us is alive? The parts that feel pain.

I like to think you are too young to know what pain is. Of course that's not true. Every living thing knows how to hurt.

By the time they cut you out of me, I'd been in labor for three full days. They forgot to top off the epidural while I was under anesthesia, and when I woke, the pain was hallucinogenic. In a fever dream I saw myself spilled open on the table, and you, purple and too quiet, ripped from me like a root vegetable. I didn't want my screams to be the first sounds you heard, so I begged them to take you away.

When I woke again, I was alone. My longing for you cut deeper than the pain.

Where does Self end and the Other begin? Ask a mother when the stitches are fresh.

I'm surprised at the dexterity a word like "more" requires. First the lips pucker in a tight, pointed kiss. Then they part like a wind tunnel, a long, lonely "O" curving toward a vanishing point of throat where a distinctly American "R" leaves space for overdraft. An ellipsis of the mouth with desire running through it.

More is the shape of our bodies too: a strung-out torus through which food and other lives pass, taking on pieces of the world until the world becomes us. Until we become the world.

Separation was always an illusion anyway.

Maybe a Self is like a Magic Eye trick. It only appears when you look for it. The brain reaching for a border where there is only pattern and more pattern.

More gets a bad rap. Its Amazon's fault. Whatever we want at our fingertips in a matter of hours. We've closed the gap between wanting and having. We've robbed ourselves of the right to long.

Longing is another word for love.

Your first birthday comes and goes. The neighbors bring you enough toys to last us another few years. You like the bubble machine best: flying technicolor breasts streaming across the yard, defying the laws of gravity, so many bubbles you don't know which one to pull from the sky first so your hands reach for them all. One by one they disappear at your fingertips.

Yes, my girl. Howl.

My old roommate joined the cult of Orgasmic Meditation, and once I got past the part where strangers diddled her bits on their way to enlightenment, I found the whole experiment endearing—instructive, even. I mean, you gotta love a religion that throws chastity to the wind and puts all its money on women's pleasure. About damn time.

Every day, she begins her spiritual practice with a desire inventory. She sits down with pen and paper and pulls desires from her subconscious in groups of ten, each desire going deeper and getting clearer than the one before until, theoretically, she hits bottom. The root cellar of her wanting. The desire to end all desires.

That's the problem with desires. They have roots.

But longing is a bottomless thing.

Mine goes something like this:

1. A long life
2. A happy life
3. A photographic memory
4. A selective memory
5. No memory at all
6. A continuous present with you
7. The right words
8. To feel
9. To feel
10. To feel