

The Wild Has No Name

Spring came like something dead shivering back into existence, out of shadow country into cold glass light. The sun was pierced by frozen spears of air. Tufts of white blossom looked like snow.

Her joints were stiff and she stretched them gently, warming up. The rising sun would soften her muscles and un wrinkle her tendons, like smoothing a stretch of silk before cutting. Heavy scissors slide through fabric easily when you work with the weave. Is it the same when you kill an animal – does the blade cut more easily if they want to die? She kneaded her muscles with her hands and yawned like a bear.

She used to fasten her long hair into a bun, a habit set by the polished style she once wore to her studio. A remnant of a fascination with a physical power that worked in that bubble-bomb world, ticking away, absorbed in its own being as if it was impervious to the forces of nature. As if changing the weather could possibly mean the same as controlling it. After a while her hair had become matted and she'd painfully hacked it off with the hunting knife she'd scavenged; it grew again and matted once more. Now it remained an untended clump on her scalp. It was irrelevant bar any effect it might have on her ability to stay hygienic enough to live.

She never missed her fashion career or going out, friends. She occasionally missed sex and would perfunctorily masturbate, finishing in silence out of caution and then habit. There was no need to mate, and who knew whether it would bear fruit now in any case? Her malnourished form and the habitual stress of staying alive might not admit of life in the case of mating. She thought of it as mating: sex, fucking, making love were ludicrous, luxurious, laughable ideas. It was easier to understand herself as a simpler animal than she once was.

Her disassociation was viewed as aloof and appealing in the city: here it was an accessory to her ability to survive. It wasn't that she hated people, or that she didn't like it here. She truly enjoyed lying in the moss and the sensual sound of roasting meat, the silk of the river, her morning routine. She sometimes enjoyed the boredom. It all felt as though she was preparing herself for something. She assumed that was the apocalypse, but it could have been anything, including uneventfully living out her days in this way. She wasn't certain of her goals, objectives, mission or purpose, except that she would continue trying to live until she died. This idea didn't make her depressed or excessively happy: she was content, deliberate and momentary. Nothing mattered, a thought that manifested in her as peace rather than nihilism.

She embraced more canine enjoyments now and, if she was in a good mood, let herself imbue them with a primate level of reflection. But more often she would simply wade into water or luxuriate in the moss and think no more of it than she sensed physically: spongy support and velvet cool. Rest and the cleanser. If she did allow herself to reflect on the past, it was in terms of disbelief: how had she never thought to come and lie in nightmoss before she came to live among it?

Other evenings she would think about names. She knew there must be a name for this bed-soft species of moss or that bend of river, but who knew it now? And what did it matter? That ancient human construct had melted and she had as much right as anyone to name this moss now and rename it again tomorrow, as the dew soaked it or the deer crushed it. Perhaps she had even discovered this moss. She had certainly discovered it as it was right now. It would not be the same moss when the sun rose high, and then some other creature could name it in their own way.

She remembered her own name, but that too seemed irrelevant. There was no one to distinguish her, and she knew herself enough not to need to call her own name. And she knew this land well enough not to call out loud. She moved in the way she always had: in silence. Quiet had always been her way of being. She enjoyed assembling focus in her mind, engaging clarity in her periphery, maintaining an attentiveness to her surroundings and the movements it contained. It enabled her sensitivity to a displaced object, a new tread or track.

Muscles warmed, she set to her morning patrol. This consisted of checking the placement of previously human objects placed at specific points, which she supported subtly by grasses and twigs so as to be conspicuous to human travellers but with the appearance of being neglected remnants. Their novelty, nostalgia and oddly situated spots ensured they'd be inspected by humans if encountered. She checked the spiderwebs and blades of grass to detect any disturbance caused by the objects having been lifted in curiosity. She was glad for awareness of how to check for fingerprints, hairs, footprints. Her senses weren't as attuned as the skeletal bear she knew haunted the area, but sensitive enough that these checks soothed her territorial mood each morning as she made them.

She was unsure whether she would seek human contact if she found evidence of humans in the area, assuming she was able to choose whether she avoided them. What were people doing on the rest of this land, how were they living, were they desperate and dangerous? Were they indifferent, maintaining lives and careers in the city? She was

uncertain of anything and so concerned herself solely with her immediate landscape, semi-barren as it was, looking to it to soothe hunger, fear and boredom.

As a result of disciplined efforts, she wasn't sentimental. But she did still find herself longing for companionship, and kept a steady and half-acknowledged lookout for young abandoned creatures as she wandered the land. She had tried to kill a doe in order to eat it and then adopt its calf, but at that time had considered the combination of animalism and sentimentality a type of insanity. Despite her hunt-gatherer existence she was glad to be able to occasionally analyse her situation as if detached. She was not yet fully detached. Later in the year, after the doe event, she had come across a warren in which were two healthy rabbits, one of which she had kept and the other which she had eaten. But winter was coming on and after two days of stripping bark and searching, increasingly desperately – searching the glens for berries, the warrens and sets for small creatures, the holes and nests for eggs, the crooks and crests for anything at all – after sucking mossy stones, and eating grass – she had killed the other rabbit too. She had decided a companion would need to be bigger, less docile, able to defend itself. They would huddle together for warmth. They would not eat each other though, in dry times, the thought might tread their feral minds.

She remembered the runway and wondered if it still existed. What was being done there, which rituals would last? In truth she knew it was likely there was still a society in the city, she had just decided she couldn't be part of it any longer, and it only seemed like a matter of time before it was destroyed. It was easier to be here during earthquakes, floods or wildfires. Everything and nothing was at stake here. It was simpler to navigate, losing everything and beginning again was more fathomable.

It had probably been two years since she had come here, away from the city and through mountain gullies, past the decrepit old shepherd's shack that was on the verge of collapse, and through the forest. She was always aware of the bear, the one remaining bear in this area. There had been two but she'd managed to kill one as it was weak, close to starvation: she now wore its fur, both for warmth and as a sign of respect. She remembered having read something about how fur was prepared by ancient indigenous peoples and tried to emulate the process, half-successfully: it still gave off a strong scent, though more like half-living leather than a rotting carcass.

She loved the soaring eagles and feared the cougar and the hungry bear, but she feared the rain the most. It was destructive and insidious. And it haunted her: winter and summer alike, she saw in her mind the ceaseless warm rains melting away the frozen gates that stopped the oceans unbalancing and the world careening off its axis.

One morning, as summer lengthened and became cool, she checked her security measures, starting with the rusting railing and ending at the mildew-crusting stack of plates. She heard a rasping squawk and froze to listen. It happened only once. She placed the plates gently, rearranging the grass and leaves around and beneath them with delicacy, setting her wild table. She moved in the direction that the sound had come from: a familiar grove of aspen that she had come to many times before, leaning against the trees and inhaling deeply.

A lumpen black mass lay beneath the innermost trunk. It was clear that the creature, a large raven with a hooked end to its beak, was weak. She had recently come across a crop of berries and still had the remnants of a fish that she had tried to finish before the bear got wind of it – thus she was satisfied and thought not to eat this creature. She knelt and put out a hand to touch its gleaming black feathers, at which it gathered its courage and jerked its beak to clip at her outstretched fingers. She whipped them back and as the blood flowed from her finger she fleetingly considered kicking the raven to death and plucking its feathers. Its breathing was more shallow than before and she realised her bear hood might have confused the bird. But no. This was a clever and vicious creature.

Taking advantage of its weakness after the snap, she uncoiled a frayed length of rope and in a swift motion circled it around the raven's beak and legs. Then she lifted it, ensuring the beak faced away from her neck, and set back to her den in the crack of a mountainside. Over the days she threw scraps of fish and berries close to it, fresh water from the river. She found herself dreaming in the soft moss: the raven on her shoulder, accompanying her back into society and pecking out the eyes of her enemies.

She awoke with a start. It was almost dusk. She skittered back to her den, then stopped – a frayed tail lay at the entrance. The raven had pecked through the rope binding its legs and was now free. She stopped and crouched, aware of the horizon darkening around her and all that it would bring, but unwilling to enter the cave: as the large creature had gathered strength, her fear of it had grown. The ever-brightening eye regarded her with an intelligence that made her afraid. Yet as it regained health, she felt sadness blooming within at the thought of it soaring off on the edge of the wind. The twilight closed in. Clutching a rock tightly in her hand and shielding her eyes, she stepped through the threshold of the cave.

Empty.

A breath of relief and sorrow escaped her, and the wild skies moved beyond the cave. Without a sound, a tiny brown object scuffed her head and landed at her feet. A dead mouse. The raven wheeled, silhouetted against the twilight sky.

She opened her throat and cawed: bear, human, bird.

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