

Two

They love each other.

There is no loneliness like theirs.

James Wright, "A Blessing"

Now there are two. Seven deer, I'm told, before
the cougar's appetite growled: one by one they were taken
down to the forest's soft floor. Just these two escaping:
a tale told by the ragged ear of the one, the nervous
watching by the other. But now they still themselves.
Aware that I am near they do not startle, barely move
across the grass, pause like warm brown statues framed
against trees nearly black in the dusk, but silvery
with mist near their tops. I cough, reminded of my own
frail life, but still the deer do not scare beyond a stare
in my direction. There are two: just enough to take care
of the business of grooming. They stand neck-to-neck,
each licking, nuzzling, teasing the ticks and lice from the other's
coarse fur, enjoying the comfort, the contact, like horses do.
As do humans. As do you; as do I. Touch me here, then,
softly as deer's breath. I will touch you there, where

your mother held you in her arms, your neck against her shoulder.

Not where the raging fire begins, where undergrowth sparks

and catches and we are lost in its blaze. No, here,

where the hushed forest opens and the two quiet bodies

have disappeared into the green darkness within.

Christina Lovin

Andrews Experimental Forest

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Terzanelle, Unraveled

for Randy Molina

The important thing is to guess the answer
to the questions that no one considers
until things begin to unravel.

Deep in the forest, researchers' litter:
a necessary evil to find the clues
to the questions that no one considers

until new forests are planted, but refuse
to thrive. Could it be that microbes are more
than necessary evils? To find the clues

takes generations, not years: the forest floor
needs this teeming galaxy, giving and taking,
to thrive. Microbes, surely then, must be more
than parasites. Likewise moss and lichen.

How many relationships can you break
in this teeming galaxy of giving and taking
before you realize your grave mistake?

*The important thing is to guess the answer:
How many relationships can you break
until things begin to unravel?*

Old Growth

*I know a green cathedral,
a shadowed forest shrine...
~ Gordon Johnstone*

The outside world has begun to dry,
yet just within the forest's walls
a few steps in and I can hear
the perpetual clock of moisture dripping
and dropping from the high canopy, down
through leafy boughs, gathering in the moss,
slipping off rhododendron's umbrellas,
then disappearing into the thick matter
carpeting the luxuriant forest's floor.

And green is the fragrance, green is the sound,
green is the taste; and the touch of the leaves
against my hand is green also. And above all,
the color is green. Every imaginable shade
of green--sharp-spined and deep or soft as wool
from shaggy mountain sheep. Besides the gray
of stone and stream, the liquid browns of craggy
bark, and rich red meat of the fallen fir, the only
other color is a quickly diminishing blue,
clouding over like the wet boulder's somber face.

This is Eden: lush bower beside the life-giving
stream. What more should anyone desire
on such a day? Soon night will fall, the mist will rise
from the brook and from the sodden soil. And I am
alone, a state I sometimes grieve. In this place
at this hour, however, I am content. I am here,
surrounded by what and who I believe my gods to be.

Little Fires

I.

There are witnesses. There were plans:
Bats would be eased into cold sleep
deep in the bellies of bombers,
strapped with incendiary explosives
the size and shape of their young
so as not to alarm, but rather
encourage their swift flight to safety
beneath the eaves of paper houses,
balsa wood shops, and flammable factories.
So, when their time was up, the bombs
would set off a holocaust of small blazes
across Japan. That was the plan,
and in the trials a million little fires
burst, flamed, then cooled to carbon.
But Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition!
The A-bomb came along
to "save more lives." Yes, no
more bats were blown up alive.
No opinion was given by the living
ghosts of Nagasaki. No affirmation
was forthcoming from Hiroshima.

II.

Sometimes the Lord moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Sometimes He gives. Sometimes He takes. Sometimes he leaves the job to his followers. Let him who is without sin throw the first hammer blow and drive the first nail to close over the only opening they know: high above the stained-glass Jesus with his lambs, his fair-skinned benevolence. Let him who knows the mind of God climb up and detonate the poison bombs, drop them inside, and set the final nail. *Come ye who love the Lord and let your joy, and let your joy be known* at the screams of the beasts, damned to asphyxiation because one was lost but now is found in the children's Sunday school room, to

continued, with no stanza break

demonstrate like a Bible story flannel board how being where one should not be brings destruction on all one's kind. Let him who is faithful stand and be counted like every

sparrow and each numbered hair on each small brown face pressed against the screen, then falling, falling out of sight, layer upon layer--two hundred bats or more--snuffed, then shoveled out, bagged, and dragged to the incinerator. Oh Lord, let there be a witness. Let it be me. I was the pastor's good wife, who was not good, who did not speak up, who did not speak out. Here, I give testimony to their pleading and clawing, their helpless young clinging, naked and pink, to their soft undersides. Thirty years, now, and still I weep. How is it that a true soldier ever sleeps soundly again with what was nailed over and boarded up? What was left inside to die? Blessed be the cursed. And pitied be the bats: feared because they are not beauty, hated because they subsist on what we detest, what we don't want anyway, dispensable because they are legion and strange and do not sing or show bright colors, but are dark and seek the deeper darkness for their rounds of necessary mercy.

III.

This night, as on many nights, I drive this moonless lane
that digs like half-formed memory between the hills.
Summer grasses crowd the road, ghostly in the headlights' glare.
I ease along, careful of the peepers hop-scotching the damp asphalt.
Ahead, a possum, mysterious color of nothing special,
ambles in his four-handed way along this familiar curve.
He glances twice over his shoulder, eyes black as accusations,
then disappears into cinereal straw at the edge of the ditch.
A bat, two, drop into my sight then shoot up like quicksilver
moths out of the lights' limits. Another bat dives and flies straight
at my windshield, but rises sharply on some vertical vector
like ash from a wind-killed ember. If I could hold one like a brand
to sear my palm: if I could I would bear that sacred scar:
if any penance were enough I would press the sooty wing
to my forehead and wear that dark mark of absolution and holy fire.

New Legends of the Forest: Three Sijo

Lobelia Pulmanaria:

You took your wooden lover slow--
nibbled kisses along his limbs.
But now at peace, you both lie down
together on that velvet bed.
Pale leaf, fall from your borrowed branch,
lay back into the forest's arms.

Fern:

Green star descended to the earth—
we wish we may, we wish we might—
as close to earth as anything
that lives or breathes or propagates—
drink the forest as we do you—
your dark beauty, your open arms.

Moss:

A maiden chanced upon the woods;
into the forest's depths she fell.
She dreamed she saw the sun above
through shimmering waves of jade and blue,
but dove the deeper, till she drowned,
fair hair awash in emerald gloom.