

The Woman

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She felt the earth under her feet cold as late night damp. Her pads were moist now. Her head held down close to the ground, breathing in the dankness. Alert to the noises of cricket and the cadence of the wind overhead in the cloud of interlocked branches—tapping, clicking a million sticks together.

Something frightening was following her, behind her coming the same way. She watched the pine-needed ground pass beneath and behind her. Out of her amble she broke into a lope kicking up small sprays of wet earth after each dig of her paw. The trees ran away in the opposite direction in the sides of her vision. And she wondered what they were going towards back there, afraid as if she were in their place.

Perspiring now she hung her tongue out over her teeth, feeling it go cool and cold, then dry as the wind wagged it. Her nose cutting through the puffs of thin fog she panted out at each footfall. It was cold.

The feeling of rawness that she felt now had begun early in the night when the moon had newly soaked through the forest and made silhouettes of the real things there. The sound had been close, vibrating air, and it had raised the hair along her neck as involuntarily as if it had been a strong, thin wind that had blown the fur up. It had moaned. Some big forbidding something with no control over its agony had leaked out over the rocks around, and passed over grub-laced logs and streamed into holes like blood, leaving the life it belonged to and making all the things it covered sticky with itself. She ran afraid, just ahead of it.

In front of her the woods broke into a meadow and then climbed into a higher place—a country where the trees stood lonelier and crooked, and stone ground only allowed small grasses through, and rocks were broken.

There it would be harder for something to catch her, and she instinctively knew this thing did not belong in unfenced areas. Approaching a stone ledge, her haunches bunched into muscle and unrolled launching her up onto the granite shelf. Her flanks gripped tight and pulled her over the next

one. Food sounds and smells were laying in the air reminding her of the time since she had last eaten. Yet now hunger was crowded by fear and hunting was bad on such a bright-lighted evening.

The cry came again just as she saw the bright ball loom into her eyes. She felt terror wrap her tight and screamed at it as her back legs suddenly and with violence flexed straight back together and pitched her forward. She collapsed, scraping pebbles as momentum pushed her a yard, and flinched, lips pulled in a snarl, eyes closed, her head scraped rock, tearing lichen and her own fur away, leaving raw flesh there.

Scrambling up, she flung her head around in an attempt to regain her balance, her shoulders cramping with exertion. She could not stand and fell again then and again, pounding the wind out of her lungs, and she was so scared she tried to die and could not, and then tried to deny it all, knowing finally what was happening. The moon was too big she remembered. Her legs could not move and were grotesquely bending out at the wrong angles and hurting so badly.

From the sky, moon turned her into a shadow and tried its best to hide what it was doing. She was stretched and changed back, the fur that blurred her outline tremored slightly, tautened as it faded. And as her body contorted and arched, she became a new profile against the night, leaving her naked and unaccustomably wet with dew and soggy moss.

The moan quavered again in the midair of night. It was not so poignant now as it had been earlier when her throat had tilted full back and swallowed all the sadness there, not even knowing it was her own. Now reduced in a shorter neck came a whimper just for quick ears that did not even care.

The woman lifted up on her elbows, her hair covering her face. She was muddy and shaking and was a dull color in the nearing dawn. The moon had gone away, forgetful and unfaithful of its own.

Her hand came up to clear her face. A long fingered hand came up to clear her face. A long fingered hand with scraped knuckles, sore looking, clumsily combed fingers through the tangled hair, and she turned to stare behind her. Back there were the fences.

She was perfect but for her eyes. They were left amber and almond tilted—all wrong and staring back into my own eyes. I do not like this, I am afraid, one mistake here. Round, and too many shadows through the pupil. The cold I am feeling now through my sweat is fear. I will slap water over my face and onto the mirror.

It resides tonight. The moon I mean, in its own cycle. First for me, I must find my dark glasses. Here they are. Okay, now I will paint my nails. Okay now, my hands are a little raw. It is just the detergent I washed the dinner dishes in before dusk last night.