

THE WOMAN OF THE FOREST

I.

We have arrived at the height of summer by the banks of a dry creek to observe, in a clearing, the delirious growth of the wild plants .

Fascinated, we witness a strange living mosaic of parts of dismembered creatures: crows, manticores, horned birds , ducklings bearing jewel encrusted crowns, rabbit eyes sprouting the antennae of insects; rooster's coxcombs; dark green turtles' shells hosting purple spots, red horse heads adorned with tassels, on threadlike necks, neighing over a Queen Anne's lace.

We come upon a plant isolated from its neighbors, immersed in bracken: giant fly's wings and bird feathers shroud the stalk; a horse's head is fixed atop a mole's neck, it's face flecked with beetles , preening in outlandish impossibility above primitive virginal leafiness!

Each plant is a sinister, ominous, absurdity, selfish , willful and vile. In the life and death of heated summer they writhe their crippled stalks, stretch their filamentous tongues, wheeze, pant, cackle, titter, screech and bark in wild rejoicing !

II.

Far from settlements, the forest stood between the mountains and the land. What roads there were that entered it quickly disappeared, vanishing in the underbrush or between the trees . No farms or villages lay in its vicinity; along its outskirts one found only the odd isolated homestead.

Twenty years had passed since a woman, scarcely more than a girl at the time, came there seeking refuge from mankind. Now she lived alone, surviving off the land on edible shoots, berries and small game. Her isolation was never disturbed by outsiders. The rare intruder, motivated by curiosity or the desire for adventure, soon retreated from it in bewilderment, and did not return.

Her native village lay several miles distant on the other side of the mountains. Her mother had died in childbirth; she was raised by her father and his family. It was on a stifling night in late summer, shortly after her 18th birthday, that a middle-aged stranger, a vagabond passing through the village, came to call at her house. He

took advantage of her inexperience and her father's absence to have his way with her. Then he disappeared and was never again seen in the region.

The family was close. No one rebuked her for what had befallen her. Nor did she consider it wrong to have yielded to love. The earliest unmistakable signs of pregnancy unshackled a joy beyond bounds. There was exultation in the sound of new life ringing in her blood, the realization of a purpose for being, a deeply possessive maternal pride.

Yet with the coming of the spring, the anticipations of fulfillment quickly gave way to the execrations of hatred. For the child had died before its delivery, and reeked as of a sick death. The little corpse which, in the darkness of the womb had never known the daylight, shed a radiance of its own, black and sour, emanating outwards from her body with inhuman force.

She fled to the forest depths, shedding with her garments all association with humanity. Concealment was her goal, her vow of chastity the legacy of bitter experience. Over the years she so nurtured her sickness that in many ways she became superhuman, perhaps no longer human at all, rather an embodiment, a power, a diseased spiritual energy, the malignant in nature.

As all traces of self-consciousness disappeared she became fully integrated with the enveloping abundance of life. She, too, had come to resemble the vegetation that sheltered her and from which she drew her sustenance, yet another impossibility of ornamental growth. She grew slovenly, neglected herself, became obese. Congealed milk hardened in the swollen breasts that drooped over her belly. Kneaded and compressed by the inclement weather and the cycles of the seasons, her flesh became suffused with the texture of the humid carpets of leaves covering the forest floor, pressed down by the weight of their own accumulation, rotting, densely compacted, steaming, ingrown and overgrown, in all stages of decay.

It was now that flowers of every description blossomed from the substance of her flesh. The largest were red, black and white, the smaller of variegated hues. Garlands of wild daisies encircled her brow; clusters of thistles and asters spangled the long black hair that fell to her waist. Myriads of tiny violets, buttercups and irises sprinkled her legs and right side like stars. Implanted above her heart bloomed a great white chrysanthemum. Black orchids dispersing noxious aromas anchored their roots beneath the folds of her right breast. Covering her vulva

were mats of ivy , their leaves edged with needle-like stickers, curling like snakes or points of fire.

Her face also sprouted life. Carnations grew over her eyebrows,

a rose from her right cheek. Below the left side of her mouth rested a cluster of three small poppies.

The rest of her body was all but concealed by foliage that grew around it.

Warped by the tragedy of her womb, her body had, in its own way, given birth to the cornucopia of life that, in sickness and paradox, grew upon it. She was once again the pregnant mother decked with flowers; or like the plot of an untended grave, gone to seed. Once again a harvest, a springtime of growth created, not by the radiance of the sun, but by the black heat of her dead child. She was, together, Persephone, spring and pregnancy, and Persephone, death and the underworld.

Her knowledge of magic , absorbed from the trees and the flowering plants, came to her gradually . Intricate wavefronts extending outwards to the forest's boundaries evolved from the shapes and patterns of distribution of untended vegetation. The unraveling of their woven skeins of mystery gave her command over storehouses of natural and supernatural energies. By resolving primitive riddles latent for eons in waters, rocks and land , she acquired control over magical forces of ancient provenance, originating in those times when the ferns were first engendered from the pre-Cambrian swamps.

Through her knowledge of magic a terrifying power devolved upon her: spells to quicken birth or cause miscarriages, spells to cause or cure disease, to spread blight, to shield creatures from harm or bring about their death. By means of this magic she could disguise herself , assuming any shape desired from a tall giddy plant crowned with luxuriant flowers, to the humblest toadstool.

This was not the only magic she knew. Buried deep in the processes and cycles of nature reside clues to the origins of the world, rhythms and tremors that pulsed through history, crossing and recrossing unto the end of time. Through a slow assimilation she became sensible of all the innumerable conjunctions of place, of proximity, of associations by kind and by distinction, by whole and part , making tangible the spiritual climate of every district of the forest. By means of this magic she established rapport with its plants, grasses, animals and insects, its' rock formations, its' rivers and soils. Through the irrevocable extension of her powers the whole

forest landscape came to be shaped to the image of her misfortune .

Following upon a long period of trial and error, and after severe ordeals of initiation, the woman gained mastery over the most sinister forms of black magic. Sexual energies of hideous intensity , of unimaginable violence lay locked away , latent , at the heart of pollens and spores. It was this power over the temporal mechanisms of procreation which gave her the awesome force of a supernatural being, reigning like a veritable deity over the life of the forest.

Her magical powers enabled her to escape detection by outsiders. Through her sensitivity to the balance of forces acting at any place in the forest, she always perceived the arrival of intruders long before they were aware of her. She would then assume the form of some tall, gawkish ornamental bush or flowering tree. The unsuspecting visitor, though unaware of her existence, would immediately be struck by the menacing presence of a metaphysical force in the surrounding environment that, in the form of an ultimatum, warned him away. He was led to understand that further lingering there would constitute the violation of a natural law, immutable though unknown. This sense of the ominous and inexorable, of a supernatural terror arising from some indefinable source , fell upon him suddenly, like a heavy penance. All who received this warning left the forest immediately, and did not return.

Numerous accounts testifying to the mysterious character of the forest lay the foundation for a growing lore of folk superstitions . Stories abounded of ghosts, evil spirits, ferocious animals , savage runaways, recluses, outlaws. The scope of these dangers magnified with each re-telling, until the forest came to be regarded throughout the region as treacherous and unwelcoming , even haunted. Within a few years it was deserted save for its lone occupant. Roads disappeared, choked by overgrowth, or blocked by rotting trees felled by lightning. Once abandoned it grew wild with jungle-like profusion, turning strangely beautiful.

The woman now ruled the forest as her own domain. All living things acknowledged her as their invincible queen, united by a common bond in which there was mutual rejoicing.

Love left the forest. Fashioned to the image of her soul the living realm exuded pain and paradox. Under her care weeds, bushes, flowers, the very blades of grass , spoke to her each in its own way . They stretched their

languorous tongues in mad intensity at her presence. The banks of the streams were burnished a dark red color. like iron rust . Vines flourished, made of exotic metals never before seen on this planet. To her ears came the cornet sounds arising from the sharp-edged grasses , and the cries, as of open-mouthed hungry birds, of the wide-bladed grasses. Whenever she roamed , a bird of pure unalloyed silver perched on her shoulder. Locked away in her heart's repository lay the diabolical knowledge of magic and malignancy. Ever did she radiate an infernal aureole of death, fierce as the dazzling reflection of the sun's light reflected from the polished surface of an embossed shield.

III.

Twenty years from that August day when the woman had sought refuge in the forest, a hunter wandered into it in search of game. He had been hunting since dawn in neighboring woods, with little success. As he stood in a meadow that morning he saw a deer suddenly burst forth from a wooded covert. He raised his gun, took aim, fired but missed, then set out in pursuit of his quarry. Together they covered much terrain, most of it unfamiliar to him, until they came to the outskirts of the forbidden domain .

Here only traces of past roads survived. To continue his pursuit, he had to chop a path through the underbrush. The deer knew its way about and doubled-back on itself frequently. Though never losing sight of his coveted prey , he was unable to catch up with it. It was not until the afternoon was well past its prime and the heat at its most intense that the hunter admitted defeat. Laying aside his rifle he sat down on a large rock under the shade of a clump of trees.

While he ate and rested he looked about for indications of ways out of the forest. He'd known for some time that he was lost. These fields and woods were more than unfamiliar; dislocation was endemic to them. Its inhabitants and their distribution around the countryside were alike beyond his experience. Seas of grass, their long narrow blades keen as knives, or curled like snakes, or pointed like the sharp beaks of small birds, were locked in endless strife against preening summer plants, ludicrous and awkward, drunk with self-infatuation. Chaos abounded, all things stained by strife , as if the region were subject to some universal law of absurd form. Nor was there any evocation of the lyrical, nor the pastoral, nor

in any way was Nature at peace. Under the unsettling pressure of the day's heat his hearing was assaulted by the clamour of teeming choruses of angry, discordant voices, vainly demanding their selfish right to life. Yet through all this could a kind of vicarious lyric be heard, voices cackling rather than singing, brimming with malice and scorn, crying egoism, not love.

The deer, taking him by surprise, as if fleeing a greater danger, sprinted out from a brake into his visible range on the open meadow. Seizing his gun, the hunter took quick aim. The shot rang against the hills as the bullet flew through the empty air. He stood up running and once again fixed the deer in his sights.

Yet before he could fire the deer, emitting a savage cry unlike anything the hunter had ever encountered, a mixture of many animal voices, reared up on its hind legs. Its' body turned to silver; then to a bull's; which was transmuted to that of a horse, saving only the horns; then, save for these and the horse's mane, turned to a duck's, its' neck sheathed with the stiff bristling multi-colored feathers of birds; then the duck's body quickly became that of a pig.

By the time the hunter ran up to it, the deer had completely disappeared. In its place stood a tall, bedraggled, deep-rooted plant. Residual sounds hummed in the surrounding air, cries of terror, violence and willfulness that seemed to emanate from the back of his consciousness.

Collecting his gear, the hunter moved on. He set his direction by the sun and headed to the northeast. At the edge of the meadow a woods descended the sides of a steep hill; beyond this he discerned a stream coursing through a narrow valley. Across the stream was a clearing and what appeared to be the promise of a road.

Partway down the slope his attention was drawn to the soft glow of a warm reddish light. He traced this to a single herb. Its cluster of five leathery leaves, shaped like small billows and serrated, stood concealed beneath the branches of a great oak blocking the sunlight. Its aura, he realized, came from within, for the patch of ground on which it grew was covered by deep shadows.

The herb was devoid of any green coloration, giving the impression of a lost jewel, forgotten on the forest floor. Apart from the glowing light its intrinsic hue was dark and opaque to sunlight. Though odorless, a powerfully tranquilizing atmosphere envelopped its surroundings. Its roots had not penetrated deeply into the sandy soil and

the hunter pulled it loose without difficulty. As he continued his descent, he carried it in his left hand.

Unbeknownst to him, the fields of force emanating from the herb regulated the metabiological energies of this part of the forest. It was by its activity also that the woman of the forest detected the presence of intruders. Possession of it would make it possible for someone to approach her undetected.

His first sighting of her was in the clearing on the opposite side of the stream. Her back was turned to him while she worked, gathering fruits and leaves for the evening meal. What he saw was a mound of grasses and weeds moving about in agitation. It did not occur to him immediately that he was dealing with another person. Forging the stream he recognized the flesh tones that emerged through the overgrowth. This made him think that a large animal had somehow gotten itself entangled with the flowers and vines. When the unmistakable outlines of a human form appeared, his astonishment was complete.

In the course of his coming closer to this strange being he had occasion to recognize the intimate connection pertaining between her and the herb in his possession. When turned in her direction, its tiny yet forceful heart-beat pulsed sparks of a silver hue. Moving very quietly, he was able to come within a short distance from where she stood. Then he halted, overcome by incredulity. Up to then she had neither seen nor heard his approach, nor sensed it in any other way. Finally he broke the silence by saying:

"Hello there! Who are you, may I ask? Have I come across some being not of this earth? Have the laws of nature been suspended? Have I gone mad? Can you at least tell me where I am?"

Terrified she turned about to face him. There is no way to do justice to her state of mind. Over the previous decade no more than a dozen persons had entered the forest, and none had come into her neighborhood unnoticed. Safely camouflaged, she would induce a climate of supernatural dread over the wilderness, from which they always fled. None had ever returned.

The brutality of the shock overwhelmed her. The power by which she gained complete control over situations and events was concentrated in the leafy cluster in the hand of the hunter.

"Stand back!" she shouted. Her voice rang with menace. "Come no closer!"

He froze in his tracks, but did not retreat:

" Fabulous being that you are indeed, I dare not call you animal nor human ! This entire forest, so it appears to me, has been shaped to your will and desire, for surely it is in all ways as strange as you! Tell me from what realm you derive, if you be indeed real! Or might you be an illusion, a mirage conjured up by my inflamed senses to my depleted mind ? Are you here by chance, or is it our destiny that we should meet in this your forest, at this time?"

She hurled invective at him: " Begone! Get away from here quickly! I ceased long ago to have traffic with humankind!"

Her voice rang hollow to his ears. Sure of his command, his tone became mocking, indulgent:

" That I know is not true. Your body bears the indications that, sometime in the past, someone left his mark upon you. Yet your age remains a mystery to me: in some ways you appear to be very young, little more than a girl; yet you are also older than I, older even than your own years , bearing witness to events before the time of your own birth, older than anything that now lives in this forest. I see the evidences in you of the origins of life itself in the churning depths of the ocean. "

Terrified, she began to tremble:

" That is not for you to know! Death was in my origins. Vengeance have I sworn against my birth! All ties of community were broken when mankind cursed me with its mark! And now you must go, at once! Do you not understand? You will surely die."

He continued to gaze at her, unheeding, as if in a trance. Her warnings were ignored:

" But now, see! Nature herself has restored to you that abundance of life denied you by humanity! In you do I see life and death inseparable in intimate union! You need not fear me, nor anyone else! How long have you been in flight from yourself ?"

In spite of her long rejection of human society, she found herself relenting. Her voice, though still unfriendly, had lost its sharp edge of hostility:

" Twenty years. I am content to live here, nor have I need of others. You have already seen how I have refashioned this world to the image of my sorrow, and I am content that it should remain so . I promise you safe conduct out of the forest; but you must go at once."

It was as if the hunter heard nothing at all of what she said to him. He continued to stare with relentless fascination at the foliage that grew about her.

" What are you like? I intend to see for myself." He moved forward to touch her.

" Stand back!" Her voice flashed hatred. There was also the suggestion of things far more sinister, a distant echo of her failed powers.

" Your womanly nature, which you can never shed, is steeped in sorrow and unrequited desire. I will bring you back into the world of the living. I desire to have knowledge of you!"

" That is forbidden!" she cried. Her voice bristled with malice:

" My skin is vile!"

" And to think that no man has touched you in twenty years! Let me be the first to touch you! " He advanced steadily upon her. Again she cried out:

" To touch what is forbidden is to inflict sacrilege upon Nature. Touching me you bring onto yourself the whole of the living kingdom as a curse. Do you imagine you are uniting mere skin to skin? Heart to heart? No; you will not be uniting skin to skin, heart to heart, but rather will you be uniting life with death! It is not a permissible touch that you seek , but one that will call down upon you the terrible vengeance of natural law.

Do you imagine my breasts yield milk? That my body gives delight? That my womb brings forth brood? Once my flesh , even as yours, was linked within the great chain of humanity. No longer! That is gone forever! If you touch me you unite the real with the unreal, the possible with the impossible and, excommunicated from life, you must die!"

" Union between man and woman", he replied, " from soul to soul : how can this transgress natural law? It is Nature's law! If we touch we forge a bond as ancient as the soils of the tropical rain forests. How can it be anything but consecrated! Let us delay no longer: I will touch you with life!"

The hunter then resumed his steady march in her direction. Beside herself with fear and unmasterable desire, unable to flee, she shook like the dense crop of weeds upon an exposed heath at the advance of a sudden storm .

" If you touch me", she repeated, " you will unite the real with the unreal, the possible with the impossible. Do not do it: you will suffer!"

" But behold", he cried, " I have already touched you!"

The fingers of his free hand gripped a patch of skin on her left arm . Chills coursed through her body at the

sudden recognition of her nakedness. Giddiness, shame and tenderness flooded her being.

" You see? Where is your natural law?"

She clutched his hand and fell into his opened arms.

IV

Together they grappled in the clearing, moving down towards the river. Maddened by desire both gave themselves up to passionate embraces. She buried her head on his breast as he took her by the hand and quietly lay her down, clinging to him, besides the banks of the flowing stream.

The hunter envisaged no further obstacles to her seduction. His senses inflamed, he moved to overpower her. Kneeling forward he bent over to kiss her; but as his lips grazed hers without yet touching, she gently pushed him off of her and turned away. She pulled herself to a sitting position, but did not move away, torn by internal conflict. Finally she said:

" You have triumphed. Destiny has brought you here to violate my inaccessible dominion . Now I must yield to you; but there is one more thing that you must do."

The hunter sat down at a short distance from her.

"And what is that?" he asked, his voice brimming with ill-concealed anger. Tenderly leaning her body against his, her dark gaze penetrated into his eyes, intoxicating him :

" In the forest , to the north , grows a white pine, alone, ringed about and hidden by greener kindred. One sprig cut from its branches is sufficient to break the forest's power over me. Then may I depart from here safely. You must go there and bring it back to me. Only a few weeks remain of the season during which this is possible; you must start at once. If you return before the coming of autumn I will be able to invoke the incantations that will break its spell , and then I will be free. Then can I once again avail myself of mankind's protection, as a woman and as a mother. Then may we love one another in freedom. "

The hunter was not appeased and continued to argue with her:

" Wild creature; why do you imagine that your ties with humanity have ever been, or could ever be, broken? It is you alone who have proclaimed yourself an outcast! Your

heart continues to long for maternity and fulfillment. Your womb is still fertile despite the death of your child. Your breasts are still filled with milk. What has all this to do with a sprig of pine?"

"No", she replied with a new determination that caught him off balance : "You understand nothing of what you are saying. You must leave on your mission at once. Follow this silver bird that perches on my shoulder. I give her to you as a sign of fidelity. She will take you to the wilderness of the north. You will have adventures. You will undergo rites of purification, from which you will emerge victorious. And when you return, bearing the sprig of the white pine, we can be united for all time. "

She looked at him straightly. Startled, his breath caught in his throat. Her eyes, formerly hard and gleaming with points of terror, now burned with a wild sensuality, possessing and overpowering him, a pair of deep whirlpools warning him away even as they enticed him, with infinite promises of bliss, to enter . Once again she pressed his arms, darkly, with meaning.

" Go bring me what I ask of you. Then we may love one another until time itself is at an end . "

His soul was devastated by confusion. Lacerated by emotion , he lifted her up once again and tried to kiss her. Pressing a hand against his lips she seductively, yet very firmly, pushed him away.

" Go now. Soon it will be dark . " He realized now that he had no choice but to obey.

One final time, just before vanishing from sight, did he turn to face her, as if pleading for her to relent. In a friendly fashion, yet firm in her resolve, she waved him off. She watched him go until no visible sign of him remained. Then she began walking back across the clearing.

The twilight was settling in and a faint yet stiff breeze, the first to relieve that hot summer day, aroused sad keenings among the clustered leaves of the trees. She began walking along the banks of the stream to the prepared arbor in which she had chosen to spend the night. Emerging from the meadow, she entered onto a strip of marshland extending about a quarter of a mile along the river banks.

There she noticed a brightly shining golden light coming from a clump of bushes and vines at the boundary between the marsh and the woods. It was not familiar to her and she approached it with caution. But when she came close enough to see what it was, she pulled back in terror.

Concealed in a frothing sea of lawless vegetation, swaddled by the silken husks of decayed life, lay the body

of a baby, newly delivered, mired in mucus and blood , yet whose delicate skin glowed intensely from interior light, as if it were a piece of sun entangled in the vines. An all-consuming horror filled her soul, as from a premonition. But when she ran over to examine it more closely, it disappeared.

