

Dreams of Loss and Forgiveness in the Southern Appalachians

Mindi Meltz

Remember? You dreamed you were a spider, with a swollen abdomen and a tiny head. Your thoughts were small, your instincts big. You began at the center, and wove roundly: that was the way.

You began and ended the sacred spiral.

The spiral was invisible, the same color as the air, but you felt its every vibration in your body. You made it, and it made you. It took you all day, and that day was a year of your life, with its own seasons of sunrise, innocent morning, and liquid afternoon. You crouched still in the center as the seasons changed, and you never gave up hope.

People wondered how you hovered there, as if floating in the air. They did not see the dream that supported you. But that dream was your home. You waited, timeless, in the center. You wove that dream in the shape of the answer, and you knew that when the dream came true, the answer would stick. You would feel it. You would run for it. So you waited, and you were always ready, and you never slackened your attention, and you never wondered when, and you never gave up.

In the evening, no answer had yet come. A string of people came looming up fast, with noises too foolishly huge for you to hear, though you felt them a long way off. They blundered through, screaming, and destroyed everything you had built. But you did not weep.

You did not whine or rage or fall limp in despair.

No, you just rebuilt it in the morning, and tiptoed back to the center, and hunched down again.

You were the shape of meditation—the invincible rhythm.

The world, forever destroyed and remade.

Hunger without fear.

\*\*\*\*

But remember this: once you dreamed you were a turtle, waiting at the edge of the highway.

It seemed a frozen river, just lying there, and you had thought of crossing. You had thought about it in the space between your heartbeats, considering. But now the river broke loose from nowhere, and on came the terrible motion, faster and bigger than you could see, and you shut yourself in your shell and disappeared.

Now the river stilled, but you were slow about trusting, and by the time you thought to emerge again, wrinkly flesh from patchwork stone, on came the roaring blur, and again you must retreat. You could never trust it. You could only stare out, thinking very slowly along the deep tunnel of consciousness between your ancestors and this moment, shocked repeatedly into oblivion by the speed of the machines.

For days and nights you watched, and there was no pattern, as there is with seasons and creatures and other known things. There was no change in temperature or light that could tell you when the roar would begin, or when it would end. No, for it came at random. Like the way the seasons have begun to fall apart, with hot days burning holes in the winter, rains drowning the summer, and late freezes killing the spring. Once the world had a cycle you could count on. There was a time to travel and a time to be still, a time to give birth and a time to be alone. But the world isn't like that anymore. Now the world is like this road, this wrong river, this burning ice.

So you stood scared and turned the road in your turtle mind, too slow for the roar that was coming, and the dream refused to end. And you did not know what to do. Maybe once, lifetimes ago, you were human, and then you knew what it was. But even then, you did not really

understand it. Even then, you were never safe, and even then, it had no meaning.

\*\*\*\*

Not since childhood have you dreamed this dream: the dream of being a hummingbird, flying so fast you were still.

You fed on the love of flowers, and made miracles for fun. You built nests of fairy fibers, and your sons and daughters hatched fierce and already purring with motion, each one the size of a word. You raced and bombed each other with your bright bodies through houses of leaf and shadow, tickled the air with your passionate calls, ate your insect meals at thirty miles per hour, perched on pure air.

They hung a feeder for you—the people. Oh sweet, grown-up people, slow and dumb and awed, but with color all over them—see?—and light and darkness inside, like the leaves—and the things they felt, there in the head, there in the heart, there in the hand! You were grateful for the sugar food, though you knew it was your due, because you were wonderful; you were the highest evolution of beauty. You stood before them in the air sometimes, asking what they were doing there, in the garden of plants, around the table of talk, looking up at the sky, going home with faces bent low.

Forward, backward, still, then gone. Nothing could ever catch you, so life was laughter. You were the colors light made, in the spark of a moment that would never come again. The people plodded among you, and they thought and planned and ruined the world and were sorry. But none of it mattered. You broke apart the order of the universe with every motion. Forward, civilizations were built; backward, they crumbled. You moved sideways through time, and stopped it, hovering, every time you licked long through the hallway of a flower and lost yourself in bliss.

\*\*\*\*

But you're older now, and you have a bad, recurring dream. A stuck dream, a wrong dream. Each time you dream it, it only gets worse. A paradise-lost dream. A dream of kudzu, hanging over the skeletal shape of the Eden that once was.

You dreamed you were far, far from home. You couldn't remember, anymore, the place you belonged to, but it wasn't this. It wasn't these forests, or these fields, or these houses, or the banks of this river. Maybe you grew and grew, insatiable and unstoppable, because it was the only way you knew to travel. Maybe you thought you could extend across borders, across mountains, and even across the sea, to return again to the place you came from—a place so far away that only human beings could conceive of the distance, let alone traverse it.

You dreamed you killed everything in your path, and you were so lonely. Nothing needed you; nothing responded to you; nothing stopped you. No ancient pattern hooked you in. All you could do was spread out and out, ever searching for anything that recognized you. You covered everything, and knew nothing but yourself. Nothing towered over you, nothing moved beneath you. In the end, you were always alone.

You dreamed you were kudzu, which somewhere, once, in another place and time, was sacred, but here was only death—a Walmart among plants, a ruiner of communities.

You didn't mean to be.

You meant to be beautiful, just like everything else.

\*\*\*\*

Now you dreamed of the end.

You were a bear running from the dogs, after all the leaves had fallen.

"We have to kill you," shouted the dogs. "Oh please, please let us kill you."

And you said, fleeing through ruined hemlock, through pine, through shivering, teenage stands of bare poplar, "I am a bear. I am made out of mountains, born from cave darkness, a god drawn by firelight. Nothing hunts me. You cannot kill me."

"We have to kill you," shouted the dogs, their voices flying through every space between. "Let us kill you!"

Rocking along like a great, furry boat on soft-padded feet, over granite and quartz, over the dead leaves of memory, you roared, bewildered, "Why?"

"Because the man wants it," yelled the dogs. "Because he tortures us and will not feed us, until we kill you."

You must find a place to hide. You must find a place to rest. Because all through the autumn you've been stockpiling a winter's worth of acorn, ant, and honey inside your body. And now it's all draining away, as you flee. A bear is not meant to run this way, over long distances, up mountains and down them. A bear is not a refugee. A bear is the soul of a place.

"Follow me," you pant. "Do not kill me. Follow me into the darkness. For this is a time of sleep, not death. Let us curl up now in warm chambers of stillness, and in the spring we will awaken and all will be new, and men will be kind, and the world will begin again."

"No!" shout the dogs, their breath warm and sudden behind you. "Now, now, now!"

You run with mouth open, the wind drying your tongue, your hair sweaty and chilled, your vision fading, your feet tumbling over one another.

"Stop," you whisper, "stop and think what you do. The winter comes, a time of reflection. The winter comes, and we dream. Stop this ceaseless running and violence, stop and remember, for we are in the time of ancestors now, and our ancestors are the same."

"We must kill you!"

You slip down a wet bank of leaves, into a ravine you cannot escape, and keep running along a winding line with no way out. The forest above you is silent. The birds have all flown, to warm heavens far away. The squirrels are sleeping in the trees. The sun is shrinking in the sky. "Oh, I must rest. I am weary, and have nothing left inside me. I am no longer bear, but only a running, desperate thing. Can you not hear me? Can you no longer hear the voice of silence?"

"We must kill you!"

"But why? Why must you obey the man, who tortures you and does not feed you?"

"Because we love him!"

"I have nothing left now. I am running. I will not be able to last the winter. I will not last one moon. I will not last these few paces more. What is love? I am the wilderness."

"Love is what we do. We are dogs. We love the man in spite of everything. You do not understand."

"But I do," you weep, falling into the embrace of old, old leaves—a mountain falling, without sound. "And he will never know that I know. For I've used up everything now, and I will not be able to enter the winter. I have nothing left. I have no gifts to bring to the underworld. I will not be able to dream, and so I will die."

"Yes, yes," chant the dogs, wagging their tails. "We will kill you. And we will give you to the man—our gift to him. It is all we have."

\*\*\*\*

What remains, when the elders have passed on, leaving wide spaces of sky? Nothing makes sense anymore. You dreamed you were the last hemlock, in a forest no longer familiar.

You were dying now, but this was not the beginning of your dying. You had begun dying long ago, when the dying began. When you spoke, you spoke as "we." When you died, you died

together. What killed you, you never knew for sure. It did not speak to you. It was a white ghost thing, from somewhere else—native to another land. And "another land" was not a concept you understood, as trees.

Your final nourishment rises up from the dead body of another hemlock. This, your ancestor, holds for you the wet loam of your survival, and you channel upward the old stories soon to be forgotten. *What were we?*

*We were the elders. We began many years after the impulsive young poplars colonized the land, in their shade, from the moist earth their roots contained. But we lived many years longer, and we made the world.*

*What was the world?*

*It was a cathedral. It lived between and beneath our downy boughs, our layered skirts of green feather fringe; it extended from the mountains to the sea. It was cool in the summer and protected in the winter. It took a long, long time to make.*

*What was it called?*

*It was called Forest.*

You were soft, more feminine than the spruce or fir. You were the special friend of the rabbits and deer who delighted in the taste of your spicy needles, and of the chickadees who ate your seeds, and of the old peoples, who are gone now, who knew the medicines within your skin, in cold, lean times.

A hemlock was always a rare thing. Most of the young ones died. The soil, the light, the passage of the rain—all must be perfect, in order for one to live. And you waited, until that perfect moment. You were patient and slow. Not like people today. Not like the weeds, or the kudzu, or the fescue, or the poplar, or the pine, or the honeysuckle, or the bittersweet, or all the



things that fight and spread, and are planted and destroyed, and are bought and sold, today. No, you belong to an older time. A time when all the world was made of rare, perfect things.

You are not afraid. You have only ever lived in one place, forever. The bodies of your ancestors hold your roots in a tight embrace. You listen, breathe, feel—living and dying at once. A human being is walking near. Hush. It is coming closer. You can hear it thinking.

It passes on by—the human—with its rootless, crashing feet. It does not hear the grouse, the turkey, the squirrel, the salamander, all crying for the loss of you. It does not recognize the ghosts. It does not know how the story of water—the way it moves upward and downward through soil and plant and sky, the way it pools and concentrates, elongates and evaporates, and mists upon the leaves, and quenches the thirst of insects—is all different and confused now, because of your dying, because the hemlocks no longer carry it, or breathe it out in the springtime, or encircle it in their shady shapes. The human does not taste how even the air weighs less without you, and is wafting forever away.

And yet, this human is the saddest creature in the forest. Because it feels what it cannot know, and it knows it cannot feel.

Because it has no language for such a depth of mourning.

Because it cannot remember what it has to give.

Because it is responsible, and it is helpless.

Night falls, and you gather darkness in, as you have for so many million years. Morning rises, and you breathe it out for one more day. You are not afraid of dying. But the human doesn't remember how to live in the forest, and the human is thinking, thinking, trying to remember how to love the forest, and the human passes on into the darkness and into the cold dawn, and is lost in this place. You cannot show the human the way. You cannot tell the human

how to fix all the wrongs that have been done.

The human can only walk the lost walk, brushing closer and deeper into the wet needles, the inner chambers of the cathedral. The human must listen to the dreams of the forest, and walk the way of empathy.

It is the only way home.

\*\*\*\*

Do not be afraid.

For last night you dreamed you were a river, carving your way, without trying, to the bottom of the world.

You dreamed it was easy, at last, to be part of everything.

The crayfish, the bears, the water striders in one place and the twisting salmon in another—they belonged to you, and you to them.

Here the bearded rocks pressed you into smooth, braided ringlets, and here you waited, trapped and churning, for days and nights in pools, and here you lifted the blood-colored mud and dragged it, and here you fell. And you never made any mistakes. And you never made any choices. And you knew no regret.

You dreamed you began at the top of the world, where the ancestors sat babbling around a fire in the snow. You thought you invented yourself there for the first time, but you were older than life. Remember your childhood, when the round-banked meadows passed you, cold and sweet, through the sunlight, and you ate rain that the sky had lifted from far cities, and your flesh was transparent--always changing, always round? And then the cliffs, and the white air that divided you, and the thirsty moss where you lingered, and the stones softened like forgiveness, that you forever held close to your liquid bosom and forever passed by into oblivion—and you

fell, and fell, and fell.

You were the river that unites and divides the people. In every place, you were the center of that place; you were the source of its life; you were what made it a place. And yet you never stayed anywhere, and you were never in one place at all.

You were how people prayed, when churches failed them. You were the place they sat beside, with bowed heads, when civilization failed them.

You fell, and you fell.

Last night—in your dream—it was another language you spoke. No "if" in this language, no "but." No "hurry" in this language, and no "hope." Yet the movement was in you, hard and fast; the movement was what made you river. You were going to the bottom of the world. You were going to the center of the earth, because it wanted you. It pulled at you and longed for you—the heart of the world—and you wanted it, and all you were was this desire, all your motion was this desire, and this desire held no suffering, no urgency, no doubt. All your life you had longed for this earth, for the deep invisible center of the magnetic earth, against whose body you flowed and folded limbless every hour, every moment as tight against it as a snake.

You are going there. You are going there forever.

Do not be afraid.