

Rebecca Huntman
WHAT THE TWIG WANTS

I.

What the twig wants is to split open, step out of its skin. Its wanting is there in the way its bark knots at the joints, furrows like a river. There, where it would rather become the sea: A bird, wing tucked, broken but tough. Alligator rough. A baby bird with an alligator mouth, one round eye staring before takeoff.

There is something delicious in the bump on smooth wood, the ruffled feather in flight, the pimple of the eye. That cautious offering—a dog’s snout waiting to be smoothed. The ridge on a lover’s forehead, that tender stretch before brow bridges into nose. Underneath the skin waits a living being, wanting touch.

You have to sneak up on an animal like that, feed it beer until it warms up under the black lights of a bowling alley, allows the girl to drape herself over lap and neck, her French manicure glowing bright as bowling pins.

II.

It’s March, a mercurial month. The snow that fell overnight covering Sweet Gum and Gingko, already melting. Not in drips but chunks that fall under the weight of the sun in kaleidoscopic shifts, the world changing with each turn of the lens. Plunk: the order of tree falling. Plink: the geometry of sky and ground falling with it—one version dissolving, making way for the next arrangement.

I want to talk to you about watery things. Those places we pulse at the surface of our lizard skins, tender but separate. The first touch always tentative. A re-fitting, that period of awkwardness as we re-remember who we are when we come together. The moment snow turns to water, loses its grip on branch, begins its slide to Earth.

The dog sighs, nuzzles into the couch, dizzy from holding its whirling head on such an axis.

III.

The first shape any child will draw is the circle. A round head, then the body, also round. Later she will add arms and legs, lines that with practice become contours, the edges of the self claiming its borders: Inside. Outside. “Me” in a body facing out onto the world.

Still, the child understands the way the skin opens, how porous the passage. The self can be a dancer, a ninja. A head can be a sun covered in hair or rays. Her skin made of butterflies or ears, even mouths. Outsides become insides, a sweater she doesn't yet know to pull right side out.

IV.

The stuff in my eight-year-old palm is not wet. Not dry. Neither solid nor liquid but rolling. Moving like a living thing. Reflecting like water. Quicksilver: This element that once lit Egyptian tombs and Mayan divining pools. This substance that will animate fluorescent bulbs and surface mirrors, expand and contract inside thermometers, fill my teeth, then be removed when the world discovers how unstable this type of matter can be, how easy to catch under the skin.

My young hand offers itself, brings silver to eye so I might see myself. Watch as metal beads and un-beads, rolls down the gutters of my palm, pools over a lifeline, splits into lives and half-lives...

V.

...and continues rolling. Four hundred miles to Ohio. Forty years to the moment. Reaches three fingers into the mouth of this orange bowling ball that has been shared by so many. Now release.

How perfect you and I become here, converging over the common goal of bowling a good ball— a spare, a strike, even a gutter ball bumping off bumpers and making its way slowly, so slowly, over the smooth floor of the alley. Every score or non-score cause for hugs and hand slapping: fourteen billion-year-old bursts of hydrogen disguised as skin swapping mid-air with each palm-to-palm exchange; twelve billion-year-old stardust circling from one breath in Lane 1 to the next in Lane 2.

In Lane 4, a booty shake. In lane 13, a four-year-old in pajamas spinning round and round, stumbling in and out of lanes. In Lane 12, you and I draped under the shimmering lights of the bowling universe.

Could we have opened to each other in any other place? Without the Miller Lite in narrow-necked aluminum cans? Without those children bumping across our borders? Without the intersection of Van Halen and Bee Gees bouncing through speakers?

VI.

I almost trip over the twig's wanting as I run by. There it is lying next to a Gingko leaf left over from Fall: half-closed like an accordianed fist, its skin brown yet supple, plump from winter snows that keep it from going papery dry— its stem stained dark, that rough nub marking the moment when leaf first separated from the idea of itself as tree, when tree first let go of the version of self that included this leaf.

There and then gone. The Gingko's imprint on my mind becomes an umbrella, a crumpled fan. A sprig of Paper Whites pushing through wet snow.

Aim for the third arrow, you tell me each time I release the ball. And each time I squint I find it lacquered on the slick floor.

Let go, I whisper. Breathe. Follow breath's path as it ribbons through lung and ribcage and out into the day.

VII.

Not umbrella. Candy apple. Death star: My foot crunches over a spiked seed ball dropped by a Sweet Gum tree, but I am already running past. From New England to Mississippi these star-apples fall common as dirt.

Only later will I pick one up, notice the long, black hair curled around its stem. Who left it here to thread through these spikes? Nestle into holes left from releasing seeds, craterous as eye sockets?

Did she touch the thing or did the thing touch her?

I am wanting to force this story back to its beginning, find that root where hair met object, boy touched girl, song entered skin. Determine if one belongs, or is only visiting.