

Alison Hawthorne Deming

WOMAN

From *With Animals in Mind*

I have never seen a mountain lion, except in captivity. But I have known them in my imagination. This winter, while experiencing the dual life adjustments of bringing my ninety-three year-old mother from Connecticut to live with me on the outskirts of Tucson and going through my own process of menopause, I found myself hungry for two things: solitude and rhythm. Solitude is the easier of the two, though to find it within the demands of balancing professional, artistic, intimate, and family life can be a challenge. Rhythm had me stumped. For forty years my body has participated in the lunar cycle. Without my will or consciousness, my body has enacted the mathematical principle of the universe – that everything has a pattern and a cycle. When the cycle played out month after month, my womb hoarding then releasing, changes my body produced on its own time, I took this as news that I was part of the wisdom of the universe, whether I knew it or not. What did it mean, then, for those cycles to end? The popular literature about menopause speaks mostly about the problems of hot flashes and hormone replacement therapy. Mechanical matters that did not say a word about what troubled me: the condition of my mind and my soul.

And so I began my morning project of getting up every day for one lunar cycle before first light, taking my notebook out into the wildlife corridor behind my walled yard to be present to the coming of the light. No hormone replacement, silicon implants, or eye tucks for me. I know I am aging. I know this change is one of many in which I will have to depart from certain cycles in which I have grown comfortably at home.

There is not time to deny this or to cover it up. My body's lesson to me is that the paradigm of perpetual youth, like the paradigm of obsessive growth, violates the basic principle of how things work in this universe. I intend to watch this process and find what meaning it may offer, knowing that meaning comes only when you look for it, whether in art or science or God or the backyard. So, beginning in mid-December I wrapped myself in an old, white wool Navy blanket and sat in the dark, waiting and watching for I knew not what.

I came to know birdsong as more complex than I'd ever recognized, came to know how the moon moves at this hour day by day from west through south to east, how rain upon rare and welcome occasion in the desert blurs the ink on my pages, and how easy it can be to write a poem each day when all one asks for are the senses to perceive and a mind that insists upon language. I watched thrashers, gila woodpeckers, cactus wrens, and ravens. I watched cholla spines take and reflect first morning light. I heard palm fronds rustle awake with the waking of the resting doves. I heard coyotes by the gang wail, yip, and call in the beautiful chaos of their untamed song. And I found myself watched. I was watched by the great horned owl, emboldened in the crepuscular light and moving closer to watch me some more. I was watched by the timid but curious rabbits, the doltish doves, and the fearless thrashers. I was watched by the coyote who sat a long time to contemplate me, then squatted and took a leisurely piss before trotting off on her business. And I was watched by the unseen eyes of early morning. I could feel them watching me, almost as if their watching had the sound of breath. Was that a wisp of movement on the periphery of my vision? Or was it a ghost, only the movement in my mind, the animals that have lived in our heads since ancestors carved water birds

and half-lions out of mammoth tusks and learned to outwit their predators? Was it the bobcat my partner Malcolm has seen moving confidently on its patrol through the yard? Was it the mountain lion my mother swears she saw passing outside her bedroom window? Was it the mountain lion sizing me up and finding the white blanket over my head a confounding image that made it impossible to gauge my size and suitability for breakfast? Was it the mountain lion watching me just to watch, because animals – even the puzzling human ones – call other animals to reflection and wonder?