

Alison Hawthorne Deming

WILD WOMAN OF THE WOODS

First I let the vines grow over my door,
stopped opening the suitcase full of lies,
progress in a thousand glossy shades
of appetite, making me think, I need
this need, always the fiction the body writes,
always the need finding an address in the flesh,
driving me through the city like a whale
through krill. I wandered, spending more and more
time in the woods, where hunger was real, chance
protecting some lives and turning some to food.
I wanted to be no more safe, no more
damaging, than creatures, to be their equal.

I gave up

cutting back on green's profusion, wanted
to be in beauty and of it, to be lush and bend
like wood around a wound or obstacle
as ancient trees take into their flesh the slash
of lightning strike, the bullet's sudden insult
or barbed wire's slow violence subsumed
in growth, an incident in an otherwise metabolically
balanced life.

Once, in that other life, houseled and clean,
I read that whales in their evolutionary history had been
terrestrial but changed to live in the sea because
that's what life asked of them. I'm not sure
what life is asking of me. I hear the house-happy
women whisper and jeer. She will steal
your children and eat them for supper – look how
the wind whistles through her lips, her hair
a nest for spiders – she will steal your soul and
make you wild.

I'm not sure what it means to lose
your way home and start seeing the wild as a force
that can enter at will and remake you, life,
what Earth does through you, and it can change
its mind any day. Yes, I was lonely, hungry, and cold.
I slept on dried moss and pine needles, making
what bedding and bowls I needed when I needed them

and leaving them behind when I did not. What days
meant to me were joy and grief – watching a guileless rabbit
nibble on grass, then piercing it for roasting.
I wept watching flocks of starlings whirl,
herds of elk feed upon the grasslands,
communal bats spilling from their caves at dusk
to feed on insect hordes riding the aeolian,
but when I came alone to the watering places
the creatures fled knowing I was not their kin.

Some nights I crept near parking lots bordering
malls and movies, crouched in leafy cover
to eavesdrop on couples whose conversation
was so casual, as if it were nothing
for one to say to another, “Well, what
do you think of that?” Or for a man, thinking
no one was watching, furtive and fast as a rat,
to press a woman against the side of his car.
I could have been as sure with my need, if
I had believed it would do no harm.

My idea
of wildness became more quiet, encompassing
the forest’s slow-growing entanglements, no longer
goshawk, cougar, and grizzly, but wolf lichen, wild oak,
and moss, the ground in process of penetration and repair.
After I memorized the paths of a hundred stars,
dying was easy, like becoming diluted in forest mist.
One day I got lost in a fog so thick I could no longer tell
where my body ended and the space surrounding it began.