

THE
ANIMAL
AT
YOUR
SIDE



MEGAN
ALPERT

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“She had the boy-girl body of a flower, moving once and for all
past the hermetic front door.”

-Medbh McGuckian



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NOTES

DAWN

My sister comes home
smelling of dirt she was buried in,
dandelion milk under her nails.

We wash her arms,
scrub her fingers
with stinging soap,
but still she is not clean.

When she finally speaks,
it's *hand me that trowel*
and *I'll bury the seeds*

while upstairs our grandmother
paces the attic.

Will I wake anywhere
besides this house,
or love anyone ever
beyond my sister
with the skinned knees?

I wake again in the garden
crushing stems against my teeth.

WHAT WE KEPT

We kept the war under our tongues
kept it in our hamstrings
in our bones.

We kept the war in our cereal bowls
in our juice
kept it in our first love
standing in the porch light
waiting to be kissed.

We kept it close
in the hems of our shirts
our face cream
kept it in our bad skin.

We kept it in our driveways
sitting quiet in the yard
flying the Bronx River Parkway, 2 a.m.,
kept it in key rings
smashed into tables,
the imprints they left
on our palms.

We kept it door-to-door
moss-green in hinges.

Kept it mean
under our fingernails
forgotten in our socks—

Sometimes we stood at the edge
of a blueberry field, birds lit
by the last of the sun
but under our skin
the whirr-click of the war beginning . . .

THE WOLF THAT NEVER COMES

The wolf would like a wife

All summer buzzed me awake,
the uncontrollable throats

of the daffodils
open in the yard—

The wolf would like to claw

Inert lawns, torpid houses,
no door swung open,

no pane unlatched—

He would like to set her up against the headboard

Petals or stones against my window,
fitting, uncatchable.

And the waiting clawed off me—

He would like to lick

Perhaps a far-off howl, perhaps
closer

three clear notes—

*The wolf would like the pink skin tender, he would like to gnarl,
he would like to lick*

The dark was soft. It ate
against my skin.

MY AUNT THE ARTIST, THE LIAR

On the path behind the house, we found the teeth,
but no sign of the corresponding jaw—

whatever had been forced down to earth
had been knocked or dragged elsewhere.

My aunt rattled the teeth
in her cupped palm. Sunlight dropped

a dryness in my mouth—
she was not the kind to tell the truth.

A woman, she said, the teeth
were small, like from a woman's mouth,

and she knelt, pulled down to earth,
her fingers nosed the dirt for further proof.

(My aunt's little rented piece of earth,
a house to make her crazy paintings in.)

They weren't animal teeth. I ran my tongue
along the blank spots in my mouth.

She'd try them in her own mouth
at parties, she told me later, cradling my jaw,

Little one, we rent ourselves from earth.

A GUIDE

Must have walked too quickly
or eaten the breadcrumbs dirty—
must have left the path.

(When the thing left for dead rises
and walks, what is the map she leaves?)

The evening news will call the rest of her “the body.”
What rises is different:
half-animal, looks out the sides of its eyes.

No,
 she has gone back for her body.
Visit the original scene. Nothing left
but a hollowed-out rut in the leaves.

DEER SKULL

Coyote chased her down.
Deer treed herself well
through upstate New York—
she was equal to it.
The fire coming out
her eye-holes, nose-holes?
The orange that glows
when the woods are gone.

REPORTING FROM OIL BLOCK 16

We rode to the oil camp in the back of a pickup
on the road that had scared away the animals.
He said his story on the electric company
had been pulled, and we talked corruption. “De hecho,”
he said, “I was a pastor. A year ago my wife
me engañó y no pude seguir. Mi corazón . . .”
(in Spanish, you can say this to a stranger),
“¿No se siente bien?” I finally tried. “No,” he smiled,
looking down, “no, it doesn’t feel good.” My back hurt
from the weight of the tape recorder, the air
of the forest lit us up: wells and pipelines hidden
behind trees whose names and uses we did not know.

IN WOLF COUNTRY

I give you what the wolves left:
a tooth on a leather strap, a few stray
hairs I found stuck to a tree, skull
of a deer the dogs found and licked clean.

Wild dogs, you say, coyotes,
not wolves. You want to transition
without symbols. I trace the sickle scars
where your breasts were, where no one

has ever touched you yet.
They shine in the moonlight—streetlight—
through the window. Later, I thumb
the hairs on your razor and press

my cheek to the rough place
they came from. Sorry, you say, I'll shave
again, and I watch through the mirror
as you file the points down from your teeth.

UNSETTLED

My friend and I went to the lake, found a skull
and took it home. Washed it, set it out to dry
on the shed roof in the sun. Still my mother
saw it, shuddered. We buried it in the backyard
underneath the compost heap. Now my dinner tastes like bones.

The backyard pile of rotted wood we'd pull
apart to see the bugs. We turned a plank into
a table. My friend came to and to the house.
We made a stew of broken rocks. My parents
would not eat the bones (or lick the bones or love the bones).

We knew that there had been a war, and after that
there was a manor; then it all became this town.
Lenape, Wappinger, and butlers thundered through
and through the woods. Sleepless, scared, we'd dig and
listen: shards of them the earth churned up, to us, we thought, to us.

MY MOTHER, TELLING STORIES

Her trowel scraped
bone. My sternum
ached with
little seeds.

She patched the overlayer.
Said, Go down
into the earth,
the only

place I will not follow.
Then rose, skeletal
from my bed.
I lay

awake in the froglight.
A collection of piano
notes hung
outside.

I rode them.