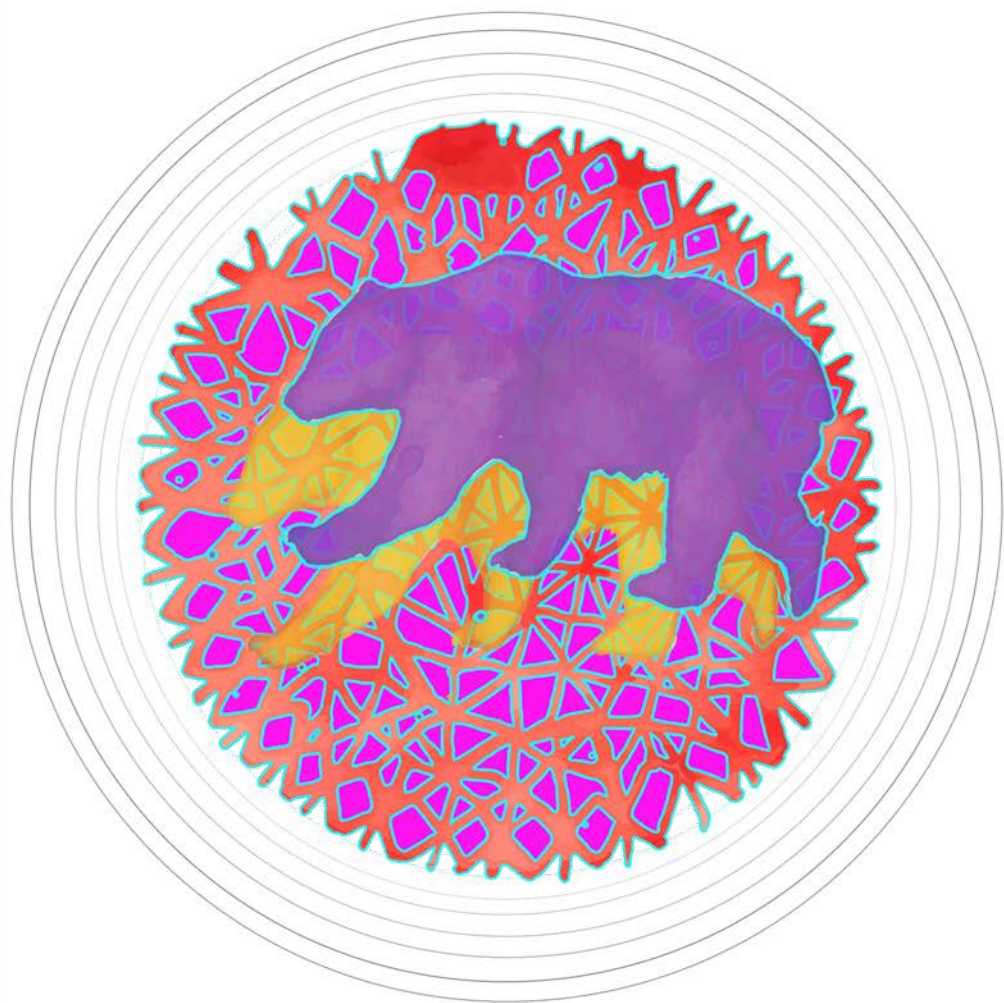


ATALANTA: AN ANATOMY

CHRISTINE HUME



ATALANTA
AN ANATOMY

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#75

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Atalanta: An Anatomy	1
Notes	72
Acknowledgments	76
Author Bio	78

INTRODUCTION

By redistributing the myth of Atalanta across time and space, and adapting it to the story of my own experiences growing up in a series of rural settings, I have tried to investigate the porous space between fantasy and memory. *Atalanta: An Anatomy* is a cracked memoir that leaks questions about the fugitive and the feral as it telegraphically indexes wildness in the human imagination.

ATALANTA
AN ANATOMY



Turn back and dig. Dig past the wine-dark dirt, dig until humanity is homeless, until you find a baby bathed in the blood of a handsome dog. Dig under the gate, rust under your nails. A double-bison cave drawing dissolves upon contact. Shadows poison the wind. Time is coming, and the world won't wash you of its time. Stack kindling in the center, put up a flag in your pit. Wave a thick crimson cape, "red makes for red."¹ Come on, animal. Come through, beast! Red is the door to aesthetic experience.

DOOR

The search party found her after three long, hot summer days in northern Iran: 16 months old, asleep in a bear's den, shadows furring her face.² She blinked at the brightness. The cubs trailed behind her. Some in the search party saw her bearskin and some saw her human clothes. She toddled out of the cave into time, which stopped briefly so she could move through it into their uncertain embrace.

Thirty years earlier, in 1971, a five-year-old girl wandered into a forest near her village in Yugoslavia. She was already lost when two bear cubs struck up a game of chase with her. They climbed trees. She followed them, their breathing became a warm nest. The mother bear shared three sets of functioning nipples, and that rhythm kept her alive until a farmer brought her home.³

In the spring of 1935, hunters in a mountainous forest in Turkey shot a bear, and were immediately besieged by a powerful human girl. Fourteen years before this, a two year-old girl had gone missing from the village. The bear's den became the girl's. Her nails had grown into dirty claws. Her voice backed into her throat like a swarm of black bees. Once out of the forest, motherless, she would sit on her bed for hours, gazing in a mirror.⁴

TARGET

A dark-haired girl, dress smeared across her skin, interrupted the sun coming through the oak leaves in my backyard. She walked as if her father had wanted a boy, and as if in his helplessness and half-heartedness, he had not killed the girl himself, but left her for dead on a mossy rock in the mountains. He would be not be a father to *this*. He would be *generalissimo*, he would rule men. The baby screamed at the cypress canopy until her voice molted, a ghostly mew piling softly around her. It was impossible to be near and not hear. A brown bear, looking for her cubs, followed that infant noise. She picked up the baby and licked her human face. She licked and licked that face until all its nerves lay flat like fur. She shaped Atalanta with her own smooth tongue, picked her up by her scruff, suckled her, and did not put her down. I saw her mirage there as if the sun could mirror us.

VOICE

The woods vanish into a hole in the ground and she spends the night in its night. The sky screeches starlight. She trembles on soft needles; breathing presses her from all sides. Her skin has not given up its lanugo. She has learned to lick her own hands and feet, to become a vanishing point. Furtive involuntary pleasures form in her mouth. A body hovers or hesitates over her. She pretends to sleep, chews her nails into points. Like my daughter, she was born with a sky full of *aura borealis*. Everything changes though nobody points out that it is night. One life bleeds into the next, where she is unfindable. She cannot imagine herself here so she imagines her father as a child in the woods. If she could be here without him, she would. If there's one thing that the woods do not need to tell her, it is what a body standing over her at night means.

TARGET

A hunting party spotted the girl in the den. What on earth? They captured her, or they rescued her. Whose story do you want to hear? Was the girl lost or found? These hunters trapped her, named her, and raised her in their own lodge, but she was twice foreign to them. Running ahead of them on the trail, she might have been leading the way, or she might have been their quarry, just out of range. Either way their weapons were ready. When I say hunters I mean fathers. As they walked further in the woods, she ran in and out of their world. Bears had taught her to shuttle herself into the place she wanted to be. When afraid, she knew to turn to stone, then vigorously shake off the feeling. From the hunters she learned that prey reek when chased. Also, if you look at a wolf before it looks at you, you will lose your voice. She did not question the facts of the forest; she was the shared understanding between bears and hunters.

TARGET

Atalanta puts a root in her mouth and sucks colors out one by one. Wildflowers hold her in their gaze. “What made me white, that makes me red,” she tells the hunters. She chokes the bear’s color from her voice; the human hues blind her. Why tinge your choice? Hunter and hunted circling one another. Atalanta chases herself, piling moment upon moment upon moment trying to reach the present. She senses herself here and hides us both in her story. I hear her in my head, which fills with pollen and pine. Instead of being lost in the woods, I chase down streaks of my girlhood. In thinking about her mother, Atalanta hunts for memories of herself. Are any of those images still enough to capture? Atalanta is not a fossil; she is a red streak melting luminously into the disorientating brightness of noon; her speed blurs worlds. There may be two ancient Atalantas but their stories share the same picture; they memorize the same disorderly forest where her reds disarray. No father would stop here. Even if I am not in the picture, my mother, Atalanta and her mother are all present.

VOICE

The girl gallops through the mountainside on all fours. In one breath of alarm, she flees through the woods into blank memory. Short trees spout up, delicate leaves, fiddleheads, woodland poppies. Currents whip the paths through the grass. She walks until a cliff breaks her thought. She hears the cave snoring, her blood marching through it. She hears arrow shots. The birdsong stops. Finches sip the open ass wounds of blue-footed boobies. A tree has a hundred mouths. In her confusion, she kisses a rock. The sun she can pinch between her fingers, and day unrolls through her skin. She could always go nowhere. Her voice skids, a ripple, a gust, a swarm so fully part of her world—to hear it you have to listen for it.

DOOR

This is Pennsylvania state game land: tangled and deep. I ran these woods in a trance at midnight, trying to exhaust myself enough to sleep. I ran ahead of my thoughts and tried to be loud about my approach. Dark shapes up ahead propelled me within eyeshot: not a skunk, not a bear, not a lost child. I ran out of breath before I stopped moving. At the top of one mountain was a tower covered with graffiti and piss. Governor's Dick, we called it. I continued past it, past ferns and mushrooms, through days of woods. We paid little kids in the neighborhood to steal their parents' beer. Who would suspect a six year old? We buried the beer and dug it up at night when we snuck out of our houses. I ran past those burial holes and small dirt mounds, past the trees and the sound of snapping branches. Woods were a kind of night, then, like the space of late childhood itself, the spot behind a hollow felled tree, where we outwaited the cops who had nothing on us.

TARGET

Atalanta thinks she could just as easily grow up into an adult, bear, man, dog, or wife. Plasma and hemoglobin river through her skin. She looks at her small veiny hands and her mother's paw and does not think: *Light performing an optical trick*. She does not think about the deception of surfaces. Blood is bright inside a body. Even if it is always red, not all blood is the same. The Greeks fed the sun live human hearts—believed to be fragments of the sun—to fuel its continual orbit. When I say Greeks, I mean ancients, as in the past becomes a foreign country. Looking up at the sky, Atalanta fell and smashed her head. Her hand instinctually rose to the gash. First touch is a wet, dizzy shock. When she looks at her fingers, they have turned into pure color. Or, since color is never absolute, she looks at her bloody fingers and understands, something hidden becoming a pulsing fragment of the sun.

TARGET

The mind takes place in blood. Its blood is a lit branching, a capillary action she climbs to disappear. Into the shades scraped by bark, into a green condensary, barefoot and drunk on sweat and the heady scent of cherries, she climbs up the tree. Sun dapples her face; light hums inside her. She can lift the whole sky, deer paths, a hill descending into brambles. Her eyes zoom onward, but her body feels unbearably heavy, focused in the crook of a branch. Her limbs magnify. Branches touch her hair. To branch is to digress—limbs diverge of their human body. Lumbering around the rough bark, she cuts her finger and hears the wind tell her pain *Suck the blood*. The tree's depth expands as a sweet, warm, thick taste cherries her mouth. Distance warps into a pulse. The wind trembles, pale blossoms storm around her. This is where she learns speed by being still, by waiting out the scrimmage of appetite. An ant crawls over her knee. She swallows cherry meat. She rolls the pit over her tongue, then spits, but does not watch it hit the ground.

DOOR

Hunters follow footprints in the snow through a part of the mountains they think no human before them has walked. The footprints lead to a bear's den, where they find a dark, lanky teenage girl.⁵ The bank slopes down. Along the river, she stands in shadows balancing on stones.

DOOR

The cub-child pushes her snout into the potential world. Thick wool and hazel eyes, she rollicks, compassionate wonder and animal empathy animate her. Think of the past, and it feels like recalling a dream, but one only once or twice removed from the human-bear offspring. Beowulf is the son of a bear and a woman. The Danish royal line began with bears. Whoever mothers you transmits her nature. The thirteenth-century intellectual William of Auvergne, Bishop of Paris, contended that bear sperm is almost identical to human sperm and that bear meat tastes like human flesh. These convictions led him to advocate for hybrid cub-children. The question was how to regard a strong mutant. He insisted they be acknowledged, accepted, and raised as fully human,⁶ which is only one form among many that the world repeats in everything alive or drawn on stone.

TARGET

Once on her own, Atalanta lives as a bear again, in a deep mountain cave that faces a sheer cliff backed into woodland. Vines climb the exterior rock and an oak hangs like a curtain over the entrance, a twilight. This makes the cave difficult to find. When she's inside, she moves by instinct and memory. Its dark festival of green scents lets no time enter. Outside, sightings of her—"darting like a star, she flashes like lightning"—become legend. In sunlight on the soft high grass, laurels, grapes, hyacinths, and crocuses, her afterimage duplicates itself wherever I look: "Exposure to the sun had reddened her face so that it looked just as if she were blushing. But she did not blush; she met the eyes of humans and animals directly. She had a fiery, masculine gaze...the result of having been nurtured by an animal."⁷

VOICE

The brown bear falls asleep as soon as he is lying beside another warm body. The bears don't touch even in their dreams. All night their breathing rakes together. In the morning one bear will suck the other off. Always the same one, several times a day; not once in over six years does the receiver reciprocate. Scientists question the evolutionary significance of fellatio, especially long-term, recurrent, one-sided fellatio. Orphaned as cubs in May and June 2003, both bears were taken into captivity, castrated, and raised in a sanctuary in rural Croatia. One heavy animal takes the other inside his mouth, humming. The cry that stuck in his throat when his mother died breaks to the surface as vibrations, grief swallowed and made to hum, forming another kind of skin. He has to go on enduring in his body. When a sound isn't fully expressed in infancy, it returns. The bear hums while giving head. The humming—you can hear it even at a distance—is the same sound the cub made when his mother was alive and nursing, when it induced milk let-down and formed a comforting feedback loop.⁸ Atalanta's dreams of the bears are familiar and milky, but they might be smeared with blood. During the night, she scratches her neck until it glows.

TARGET

Walking along the river one day, her listening exceeds the powers of listening, and transforms into thought. She walks in a stream of sensorium and memory. The catastrophic nature of thought will go further. Her thoughts go where the universe ends. Sentences pursue each other out of the caverns of her mind. She tries to walk off into her words, but they are not infinite. She reaches the river's far bank, and looks for a new opening. In far-flung distances, stars burn themselves out as fast as they can. She follows a sentence, follows a shooting star, an animal path, a sonic thread out into the open. One howl travels 140 miles, its edges humming. The circling voices of hunters, their flute-stopped humming at the border. Bear cubs humming in their den. Suck of mud in a bog a mile away. Crack of a branch, and the flies stir upward. The sadness she did not consciously feel as a child flares. Lights her her path. She sets a snare. She raises her face. The sky is so blue, she wants to kill it.

DOOR

Once we move into the woods, my father insists on keeping the house frigid. An icy interior keeps us mentally alert, he says. We will be patriots of the cold: fatigue-resistant, vigilant with a backwoods edge. I huddle at a wood-burning stove all weekend, with school books and blankets, a bundle of loose layers, burning away memory. I lose track of where I am as I read about history and silkworms, who, after molting several times, develop a redness on the throat, which heralds the onset of metamorphosis. Cold is a current of thought where nothing seems to circulate. I pour over homework, spread out on the floor. There's nothing else in the dining room but a table and chairs, a hutch, and an etching of a rabbit in the snow with a stain of blood nearby. A shot blooms in the back of my toy mind. I imagine ducks taking off as bullets blast into the sky. One red dot dispersing. Red begins the process of losing place: disorientation and lighting fires along the way. I answer questions about the robust Georges Jacques Danton in the days of France's "Reign of Terror." He is so gigantic—even stuffed into the tiny square textbook—he could be my grandfather. His presence looms. I am clinging, stuck to the stove's heat and the book's line of escape. I can't get myself warm, except where I'm burning hot. There is another dog barking in the backyard. How many times have I had to lock myself in the bathroom to keep him away from me? The stove is cast iron, on legs, with a window to watch the fire. Its glow grows bare, its face worn too long. Stay alert. What if this room

were stripped of my face? Stoke the sleepy fire. See the eyes dart. Seek out a face in the book, black and white eyes to put a question to. Many plots move through me as I write about a guillotined French revolutionary. I am lying to myself even. I only once made it to the bathroom, with its locking door. There is no revolution where his jowly red face grinds into mine. *We need audacity, and yet more audacity, and always audacity!* A cloth red bookmark ripped out of a book will do. I tie it around my neck: a silkworm or a hummingbird's throat. Ruby-throated, my heart beats faster. To be alert. To be a decapitated body.

TARGET

Men come to Calydon. Their footprints fill with sunlight and pollen; they set off landslides and seismic quiet. They come on boats with red carbuncle stone on the prows to light the way. They move on foot and on horse, a few ride dolphins, a few come in pairs, their paths narrowing and carving out a new center. They move dragging with them memories of angry fathers, debts, victims, and avengers. As they travel, they twist tales like arms behind a listener's back. Someone loses his footing on a steep precipice and his hair curls like a bush; lions mate with leopards; brothers here become uncles, women become men; one hunter lives under two different names in two different decades. The blue-gray water goes unnoticed until it turns red every dusk. They imagine that they have left the women at home, pinned with broaches, noosed with golden chains, soft words ringing in their ears. Though they all believe the boar's anger is more like a woman's than an animal's, they do not anticipate a woman here.

Some of the men refuse to hunt with Atalanta. Some assume that she is lying, that she must be a man in disguise, but barely. What kind of lie would that be? She outruns stags; she has caught fish with her bare hands. She has hung two centaur heads in a tree. Her shadow still carries the cadavers of the centaurs who tried to rape her. All hunters who've traveled here carry themselves as if their booty were still draped over them; one still wears a bag of tongues, another is wrapped in a

bearskin, head on top of his head. Later some of these men will race Atalanta and lose their heads losing. That is the bargain. Atalanta has lived in her body her entire life; she understands both sides of pursuit—running toward and away. She, like most of them, does both in order to arrive.

DOOR

In July 1974, at least four people claimed to have seen a child of about ten years old, with dark, matted hair and a tattered red dress, running through vines and bushes in a wooded district on the edge of Delphos, Kansas. A brother and sister of the town had seen the girl eating from a cat bowl left on their porch. Another child saw her at the river, lapping. Another said, as if to no one in particular: "And maybe you can't know her now. Maybe she's just blood, whatever that's for."⁹ Another witness said the girl didn't speak but growled at him before running off. Being found is never what you imagine. Another said the girl jumped on a picnic table then disappeared through a small crack in the wall.¹⁰

TARGET

Hunters come to help the King rid his land of a monstrous destroyer of crops and happiness. This wild red boar disturbs the world. Its "red" is a primordial vividness, an unhinged laugh, born of terror crashing into carnivalesque joy. Its "wild" is vital, hot, weird, maternal. Who let this beast's mouth around her teat? I'm leaving out the part about Artemis, who, like a mother, masterminds most of Atalanta's life. Artemis saves the infant Atalanta from dying of exposure by sending a surrogate mother. In some stories, Artemis sends another bear to hurt Atalanta in revenge for being a better hunter. You could say that Artemis incubated bears. When Atalanta kills the boar in Calydon, she hangs the hide, huge with rigid bristles, in a sacred grove as thanks. But the boar itself is a manifestation of a mother's anger at not being thanked: Artemis sent it to Calydon as the endless vengeance of a matriarch whose power has not been acknowledged. Neither the King nor the people had remembered the "thank you," and no one remembers now what for. After Meleager's death, Artemis turns his inconsolable sisters into guinea-fowl, which may not have been the comfort she intended. The fowl were Artemis's most beloved pets, but the bear remains her totem. For several generations she ran a cult in Attica, where girls danced and acted like bears, a ritual wildness before puberty.¹¹ A boar is both a male bear and pig, which is what the hunters have come for. They walk beside one another and do not look into each other's faces until they gather around the fire at night.

VOICE

A hunter needs a dog. Atalanta has one and I have one—a golden lab—but my dog attacks me just before my fifteenth birthday. He turns on me, as if in a ritual marking my puberty. I tell my father one night that our dog has been growling at me when I play with him or put my arms around him. My father doesn't believe me, and tells me to go ahead and hug him right now. What happens when I reach down from the dinner table to hug my dog is explosive and bloody. The sound of anger gets trapped inside my head. Was the dog going for my jugular? Dinner is all over the room. A neighbor stitches up my neck and ear, and my parents tell me to stay away from the dog. I will be the first of us to leave home.

Early on, the men turn on Atalanta. They throw rocks and knives, shoot arrows; they fall on her with fists and fury. She stays alive though no one knows it. She doesn't yet know it, or feel anything. They keep coming at her. Despair compresses her into a small hole in the ground. Then the boar's mangled and magnified body crashes into view, scaring the men away and leaving her alone. She doesn't know she is dreaming. Can looking at her this way change what she is? This is not what happens in any version, but it hangs in the air threatening like a storm cloud. Her dog is loyal and the men ignore her. Dust settles after her fall, buds shower down from the branches.

VOICE

I can never prove that her ghost exists, I can only experience it. My body's task becomes to approximate its own image. I chase it through the wilderness, or I chase wilderness through spectral logics, slipping through cracks in language. I read the story of Atalanta, then I tell it to my daughter as if it were mine own. That is, I steal it because I don't have a childhood I can tell her about yet. I use Atalanta's, which is like mine in that the most longed for moments are inaudible. Even a bad ending is better than having no history at all.

I leak the plot night by night, but I am not habituated to my own voice mouthing a script. I don't sound like I'm speaking, and I don't sound like I'm reading aloud. It's as if my voice were a stage curtain ripping apart over her bed. The karaoke I perform keeps everyone awake. My daughter enters the story alone, looking for me, as I mistake shadows for my own. To sleep, she will have to take my place the way a story takes place. In the tangled trees, blind spots, pit traps, mudslides, and sheer cliffs, she will have to find her own way of being heard.

VOICE

If Atalanta doesn't have the words for my past, she might wander into my future, she might offer me one. This story has been told before, but it isn't any less real for having already happened. I don't want to be the protagonist, but I want to tell stories in which I am the protagonist. I can't begin except in the gaps, in the rays of sun coming down from long ago, warming my shoulders. How far can I go into the moss-encrusted trees and dusty mountains? I don't want to send my daughter into the woods, I know that, and I don't want to be a naïve granddaughter either. I know I don't want to be a wolf who is really a grandfather or the other way around. I don't want to be a dispensable grandmother or a sick one, or the grieving mother who never leaves her kitchen. I don't want to be the man chopping wood all day, married to industry and human goodness. That would be impossible. I don't want that tale of certainty. I don't want to be a misunderstood animal, or a real human bear. But there is something I wish for, like another story in which you regret your wishes. My desire and my regret are the same, blood and bones steering me toward brutal forms of deceit. *You cannot help but do what I want you to do.* My choice was between believing that and something else, I forget what. Atalanta rehearses human stories in order to enter the human world. She carries all moments of her life simultaneously. She never learned to trap a story in its tracks.

TARGET

What is she saying? Atalanta has heard her voice aloud so little, the sound of it startles her, sparks her insides. She is talking from scratch, stuttering between words, talking like someone who doesn't write or read. Her voice sounds like it wants to gnaw itself off from the rest of her body. It wants to bury her face. She stops trying to say, but her face speaks for her, like a tree ripening cherries, a night casting up its sugars. The stars are a rash on the night sky. She spends summers scratching in daylight, and at night, when most nights she doesn't look. Whole galaxies move away. Each expanding thing sucks her into a mute desire to run. She runs to become separate, like shame. When she looks in the mirror, what she means is the whole burning forest. She can't see anything but a dog running out.

TARGET

She calls Aura to her side. Her white fur turned to sandstone, Aura is alert. She is so still you'd never guess that her name means "breeze"; Atalanta's means "balanced." What kind of inheritance is this? She lopes along red mountain walls. The arteries she follows sometimes ease her onto all fours. To be balanced on the ground is a comfort. On the slope beneath her, the dark body of men breaks apart: dank armpits and groins, their musk moving with them. Aura sniffs along the river. Wind coils in anticipation. The sun empties its heat onto this side of the mountain. Everything slows on the high ridges of Aracynthus; a seething of enormous bees thrums through the silence. Atalanta's nerve doesn't deny her, it radiates, not nervous, but severe, it severs her. Other longings swarm around the hunt. Two of the men want her: one is a king's son (Meleager), an older local hero, and the other is a young farmboy (Meilanion), from her hometown. Every step Meleager and Meilanion take, Atalanta is either in view or she is not. They track three things at once. Crows call out mocking commentary. The ground snakes upwards, it veers into a spine of oak scrub. She is keeping her distance for now.

DOOR

Once my head hits the pillow, I'm halfway in a green world. Did I dream this story, remember it or read it? Face after face rides pituitary tides behind my lids. If what I see is a fleeting adrenalized fret, then it isn't a memory. If I only remember when I'm in bed then, what does that mean? I can't dissolve my thoughts like a raccoon washing candy in the river until there is nothing left; like a lost child running along the railroad tracks, blind with tears, deaf with wailing. A nostalgic delirium imitates dreaming. To run along with me is impossible. I am running into waist-high ferns, then I hide from a man with a pack of hunting dogs. This woods is a substitute for the woods that vanish histories. Faces stare back from the dark. I'm holding a hard-boiled yolk in my mouth. When I try to tell myself about my real childhood, the one eaten by mythologizing, I can only remember paths: the skinny, dirt shortcut to elementary school; a fast track through backyards; the long slate steps away from a friend's house; a trail through the woods to a lookout tower; a sketchy trail that I followed until it dispersed into many dead ends. The paths lead back to what I'd like to forget, what keeps replaying, as if it someone else happened here.

TARGET

She is waiting for her father to want her back. She has been waiting, but only becomes aware of waiting after he claims her. That part of the story is corrupted. That part will never finish. A soldier becomes a king, having sold the war out of his marrow. He destroys everything but the story he feels owed to him. Once Atalanta has made a name for herself, he thinks her story is his, and he holds it hostage in his speeches. He thinks her story will help him stage reconciliation with his people, who have wanted more from him. To her he says, "I thought you didn't want a father," and brings her to town, where sight replaces the vibration of color. He shows her clocks and kitchens. She beholds the red of his palace, curtains inhaling and exhaling in the windows. To claim perspective, she will turn the universe into a room. She is angry and tired of being a person. A person's name can change, and he wants to name her. He wants her back just enough to hand her over in marriage. One form of giving her away leads back to another, each a strategy.

TARGET

She had wandered back to Arcadia, "land of bears," after the hunt. It was less a decision than an impulse. Arcadia is more than one place though, and her father's kingdom is not hers. Stepping through his door was nonetheless a kind of homecoming into a future where she might belong. His home looks grand, but inside it's spartan, stripped down to spare rooms she wanders trying to find a place to rest. She doesn't like being stuck in someone's memory, being stucco for someone's plaque. If she could shed her shame, she would be less susceptible to trying to please. She has made bigger transformations than this. She stops in the hallway to tell this to her father's portrait. She stares into the ruddy face of a drinker, trying to lock her eyes into his, but her face changes shape trying. His eyes repel hers; they go nowhere and she can't follow him there. His portrait is gutless, it's forgotten everything except its own surface. His inability to look back beheads her. *Sanguine's* two faces—murderous and cheerfully optimistic—burst simultaneously into view.

DOOR

Atalanta races with Aura, her future running into her dreams, where she attempts to escape to the forest, but is brought back to her father. Each night, she dreams another line of escape. After three months, still lonely, she tries again, taking off her clothes and heading out the door. She deserts her human home in the night, but is found at the river's mouth a day later. She attempts to return into the woods, but her footprints betray her. The girl, having been spotted years before and even captured, uses all her animal cunning to escape. The girl manages to remove the board nailed over the window and make her escape. Whenever they pass a wooded area, the girl tries to escape. She leaves 18 times. When her family returns from a long trip, the girl is not found again.¹²

VOICE

Instead of a stuffed bear, my daughter wants a story she can hold and take pleasure in coming back to each night. She wants a story to suck on, to kiss and pet, to pinch, throw and bite. She wants to a story to take with her, to confide in and blame. I tell her the oldest one I know of a bear who wanders into town on the night of a full moon and abducts a strong young woman. He is an ordinary bear doing ordinary human things. He rapes her in his cave. The woman flees. This story is older than Goldilocks. The boy she gives birth to grows up never knowing his father. While on a mission in the woods one day, this grown boy kills the bear, his father. Do you think it was an accident? Because of this or despite it, the boy never feels quite right in the company of men. He is full of unease and no one can fix his trouble or the troubled meaning of his tale. Suffused with melancholy, he goes back to the cave he was born in and dies alone.¹³ In a variation, when the child is a fully human girl who, after being abandoned in the woods, gets adopted by a she-bear, the story ends the same way.

TARGET

In the glare of her campfire, Atalanta closes her eyes and sees flashes of the boar's damage: a dozen chaotically felled cypresses; sap hardening around head-sized punctures; trampled grasses and stripped vines; herds spooked and huddled on a cliff. The boar makes terrifying earthworks. Bloodshot eyes, tremendous tusks, and a razor-sharp crest of bristles spiking up from a gnarled back, this beast cannot be calm. He came under cover of the night, but the sky lit up a fiery aurora, charming everyone's sense of time. Hunters know that an aurora means abundance, which is one way of understanding the boar. He is an otherworldly giant who leaves nothing in his path unruined. Atalanta's labor and longing won't ever end, but her story has pit stops. While constellating possible hunting routes, Atalanta listens to the night's rhythm: men cough, a dog barks, flies hum above the sleeping men; the dull static of fires, which dot the terraced slopes like capitals on a map, each burning in its plot. When the hunters dream of the boar, he is not the right color. Nothing is. Meilanion might track the boar; Meleager might kill it, but neither would do both. Choosing between them now would do her no good.

DOOR

Fire is not a substance, it's a reaction. Unlike the other elements, fire is human property, which makes us believe in it. Under certain conditions, even stones and rivers flare up. One summer Atalanta learns to live with the mountain perpetually on fire. Feathered with smoke and lumination, it has no flames, nothing to face. Wherever she looks: a slow, infuriating smolder. She tiptoes around the mountain, pouring out its vaporous premonitions, its radiance.

When my hair caught on fire, my father must have been picking up the phone to call me. A friend said something funny. My head flung back in laughter caught the candle's fire. I saw it before I felt it, and I stubbed my hair out like a cigarette butt into my friend's white shirt. I'm not sure how long the phone rang before I answered it. My father had never called me before and I knew I was in trouble. After I hung up, my friend tried to comfort me by sticking his hands down my pants. "Hair on fire!" I blurted, and pushed him away. I didn't know it is a military phrase. Though my father was in the Army, I don't think I ever heard the phrase until Donald Rumsfeld, in 2004 before the commission investigating events that led to 9/11, said, "In the years since I've been back in the Pentagon, there have been people running around with their hair on fire a lot of times. It isn't like once or twice or thrice." "Another story goes that a penis suddenly emerged from the ashes and that a captive girl who was sitting there rose up pregnant in front of the fire."¹⁴

There aren't winners and losers in this tale, but if there were, an ancient vase depicts Atalanta in silhouette already winning the match.

VOICE

I do not have a subject until she whispers in my ear, "Let's go." I run through a wooded moraine. My shadow lengthens hers, it touches her skin. I run so fast my shadow flies off me. There is no porch light, no house, no town, only my mother's arms, which Atalanta reaches first. I wonder how I know so little about her and how she knows far more about me. We cut a clearing through the tangle. She is hard to follow through the rumors, but I grab her by the hair and pull her halfway back when I lose my grip. I can hear her panting in the dark ahead of me, blurry on the other side of the river. Distance is what makes this a love story. I keep her in my sight by looking at the ground beneath her. She lives in two places—Arcadia and Boetia—generations apart. She holds her bow in her left hand. "Keep your eye on her," I tell my daughter. Escape is her favorite part of the game. Ask her if she has ever walked far enough away from an animal's cry to never hear it again. She feels the commotion of beckoning reds inside her. What I write should be read so fast it ignites.

TARGET

Look at the rocky ridge, the crumbling jut of dry land above the shoreline as the sun sinks. Young Meilanion stands in a canyon listening to the flat clap of his heart. He listens to a cloud passing, to the air's spellbound buzz. The wait stretches out. His throat burns, sweat stings his eyes, unsteadies him. Red dust covers everything, coats the inside of his nose. His whole mesmerized weight shifts to the balls of his feet. He springs into a rush of gutturals. His veins pump, pistoning too much blood at once. He races in the direction of history, outrunning the marrow and pain, until he is side-by-side with Atalanta, then slipping behind, ahead of time, and bending to roll the first golden apple in her path, bound to finally arrive first.

If red is the shadow side of light, as Aristotle says, then twilight bleeds two alchemies—dawn and dusk. She isn't sure which one she prefers or how to tell the difference. The sea's sunlight pummels her face, iridescent and blind to everything but color. Flower petals feather and swim behind her eyes. Color is a process for experiencing time, a holding place for sensation. Late summer sun burns their necks. Red excites these minutes: there is little to say. As they run, lust stammers around the edges. Red is a word to be looked at, not to be smeared all over the ass. Not to be a scarlet trumpet, swollen and stuttering in heat. Nothing is as hot as the inside of an animal. Arrows shooting at sun-up. Do I have to tell you what it means? Between the two of them, a severed feeling pools. *Now that I know*, she thinks she hears him say. As if it could matter.

VOICE

Violence, or the threat of it, bloats my stories, which become unfinishable as they disappear into the woods. All my childhood houses collapse into a communal dystopia, where my mother lathers her meaty calf in the sink bowl for a shave before the babysitter arrives, blood coming through the shaving cream. I hide from the babysitter. Orange hotwheel tracks. Fire poker. My stories are weapons and hex signs; they make me want to be the person I'm speaking of, but I muster just enough bravado to numb myself. I recount my myths in different towns, memorize parts of other stories in attempt to alchemize my past, but I need more than isolated sentences, and these plagiaries suggest a future that my own stories lack. When I hear my life trapped in my own voice, it seems to float away from me on a second language.

In return, my friends rename me according to their own mysterious experiences. A nickname is a summons, an enchantment, a state of disguise. First I am "Pippi" for my reddish pigtails and a tendency to roam. Then I am "Bologna Woman," a transformation sparked by smell. When I start high school in another woods, my family is slow to get the hang of our wood-burning stove. Our house at night fills with coughing, and dreams of being choked. We wake in a thick, furry haze of wood smoke, a confounding territory with no borders, no warmth either. My clothes, hair, and skin smell like smoked meat in a town known for its sweet bologna, in a high school where the

Future Farmer's of America is the largest club. I am certifiable. I am meat. This moment is like childhood itself: carrying both infinity and annihilation.

I became "Red" then: where there's smoke there's fire. I put henna in my hair the same week my history teacher said there is no talking to a communist. He tried to apologize by bending down to kiss me in the empty hallway outside his class the day before break. After I took off through the woods, a living girl slipping on a nickname, turning one shade of red or another, and still not disguised. He called me "Red," but he may have meant the past tense of "read." I lived as if well-read meant ready. I was a fast girl on the track; I was red meat in the backseat and behind the bleachers. If there's one thing my names taught me, it was giving chase. Follow a red-streak past where fact and experience merge, through a thicket into a new clearing. To "redden a room" means to clean it up; to "make him red" means to wound him, in that lost language. Even if you've never spoken that language your body knows how to be noticed in it. A blood hood slips down over my face, my calves flash as I catapult over soft ground. My name is easy to chant as I run past. How many vanished lives bother ending? I re-emerge from the woods, but come through no different: "It takes all the running you can do to keep the same color. If you want to turn another, you must run at least twice as fast as that."¹⁵

DOOR

When we make a break for the same hiding place, two girlhoods collide and flint. Atalanta does not see me, but I spark her memory. When she sees her father for the first time, she feels like she is remembering the meeting as it happens. The amnesia of love replaces itself with recognition because to be human is to be caught in a web of resemblances. Like the boar, she is an island animal, surrounded by murky depths, and not dead or immortal. Why should she trust a father? That is a human thought, and the choice between desertion and connectedness is already a mistake. A father is someone who waits and makes her wait, and does not chase. Without a father, how do you learn what you are? Selfhood waits to happen to a person who has no memory of time passing. Atalanta steps into his house ready to be filled with emotion, but a white room makes the hair on the back of her neck stand. Does any place exist without him?

In the place of a father, a hot blush grows. Alarm sticks in my nervous system like a panicked animal. Though wood-smoke fills my throat, I redden, but I do not suffocate. I feel the heat blotch my neck and pulse sporadically. My eyes water. What kind of transformation is this? If I could shed my shame. If I could stop failing to please. The rampage of becoming requires: not-Atalanta, not-I, not a laurel tree, and not nothing. I don't speak. I gulp language. Blood draws everything into me. I run as though running were a hiding place. I hide as if I cannot be hidden.

TARGET

Past the treeline, her head clears. Boar-stench no longer sticks inside her skull. Aura sniffs the invisible edges along which she paces. Atalanta dries her gear on the rocks and sharpens her knife. The smell of rotting apples and cold comes off the reeds along the river. If she focuses on the slow sharpening rhythm, she cannot hear the bees' gigantic buzzing around her. She cannot remember if she is the stalked or stalking. Figure and ground shift until the greater dark of her shadow swallows him. When she looks up, Meilanion has disappeared. Now Meleager's attention draws her, an undercurrent taking them back to the sound of ocean. When he speaks, the sound of his voice crashes through his words. She listens but cannot catch words. They recede just before they arrive, dissolved in the great airy shore. The wind kidnaps his voice. She chases his vocal tides, but she cannot hold onto his meaning. Whatever he says, we cannot hear it either. He will give her the boar hide and tusks after they kill the boar together. By giving her the trophy, he will anger everyone. This is what he says. He will die in a fire set at his birth.

TARGET

Each dog stands motionless beside her person. A black redstart melts into the mountain. Atalanta steps toward Meilanion; even at this distance, on a crumbling shelf of rock, she steps into her future. He will not die, nor will he kill the boar. He, or someone very much like him, goes on to win the race against her. He and Atalanta will lace fingers. In a pumice cave, which they don't know—or don't care—is a temple, they have sex. Entering a cave means passing from one state to another. Turning a temple into a fuckery extends their biology. Her blood covers the stone floor in the shape of an island animal with a big head and sharp teeth.

Their eyes tell one another they are falling out of one mind into another, already on all fours. They know the ground is too near to be the end. Their fingers bend into claws, their smooth skin erupts into tawny manes; their asses push out sweeping tails. They fall through all they can think, have thought their entire lives. Gravity slams home because neither of them know how. They fall anyway in the blissful blur of memory. Their muscles engorge, snouts burst through their faces, jaws tighten. The lions spend their days mating or they spend their days hunting together because they cannot mate. Lions at that time could only mate with leopards, if there were any there. When I say lions I might mean bears. In another version, the loss of their virginity transforms them into bears.

TARGET

There, that is the end. Now we know what they become. But why do animals hate to be told what they already know? Why does validation stir us to violence? Why do we love a close race? Our sympathy makes us sweat, and the smell of sweat drives us in an endless chase. I am running away so fast that I see in slow motion as the edges of her thoughts sharpen. I wonder who is sweating under my skin. In the heat and burn, she doesn't want to win this one, but she doesn't want to let Meilanion win either. Her realization breaks like sweat, which pours out of a person with an impossible decision. Her sweat springs its depth, but it stays on the surface like nakedness, like water-skin, unable to be either water or skin, and slipping into it, holding nothing back.

VOICE

In the last stretch of the four-hundred-meter race, a stillness comes over me. My legs feel bloodless, disconnected. The glassy heat of runners coming up loud as a wave behind me. My legs might be collapsible, my knees feel like holes I fall through with each stride. Out of the dizzy sun, out of character entirely, I hear my father's voice cheering me on. "Go, you got it, you're almost home!" He is yelling for me in a voice I know is his even though I have never heard it shout encouragement. The strength of his voice focuses me for the kick. It gathers in me: I don't want him to see me lose. I am in this to win. I think of his gold, grey, and black blanket filled with track medals. I think of him by my side as a girl, running in his duck-taped shoes, in a silence that's not stiff or strained, a silence that's palpable enough to be rhythm. Now he's voicing that silence sidelong and separate from the cheering crowd. It pushes me forward, into position. As I lean into the finish line, his voice is still calling my name, but he is nowhere to be found.

DOOR

We require oblivion as the boar's blood drains. Eventually the body becomes the same color as the ground. We look away because red is the sign of what otherwise remains unseen: rupture, poison, danger, resistance, inversion. If an animal wants to blend in, it practices crypsis. It does not bleed or blush or wear its booty. Crypsis means hiding inside mimicry—visual, olfactory, or auditory camouflage—an imitation that fools experience itself. How many ways are there to disappear? Red seeps out at sunset like an augury. Around our heads, fluorescent red bees stream straight from a local maraschino cherry factory, turn their honeycombs the color of Robitussin.¹⁶ Street lights imitate moonlight, a plastic bag imitates a jellyfish, a tasty bee makes the sound of a poisonous one, your breath smells like rotting garbage. A planet can keep itself secret among the stars for hundreds of years. You pack your secrets but leave them at the old house, an act that inverts metaphor. A grandfather returns later in the form of a teacher, a boss, a friend trying to comfort you, a father who is there but not. Now you are protean as imagination itself, now you are fixed in an unzippable bear suit, berry juice staining your muzzle.

DOOR

A gang of hill-men spot her on the road. Is her body covered with dirt or hair? The men drop their picks and shovels and slowly surround her. She breaks through them and speeds away on all fours. Within an hour, they rope her, tie her hands and feet, and send her to the town hospital in a large basket. This is in India, in 1914. Before she dies of heat stroke, the girl climbs trees and eats raw meat. A nurse names her *Goongi* or "Dumb" after the girl growls at and bites her hand. Maybe it is an opening volley, a playful nip that means to invite affection. Maybe the bite is social. No one thinks of it that way. There's a mutation of language at work, an excess brimming over. But no one can explain the scratches on the girl's shoulders and chest. I think about her—eyes averted, ankles making small circular movements, bones discharging. As she dies, a forest ranger recalls (he thinks) seeing her earlier at the heels of a bear, which he shot dead.¹⁷

DOOR

Atalanta is not the only human to be transformed into a bear. Callisto and Iphigenia, also associated with Artemis, escaped death by becoming brown bears. As an infant, Paris, also left to die on a mountain, was nurtured and taught to walk by a bear. We know him for his abduction of Queen Helen, which triggered the Trojan War, but we forget the ursine ingredient in human sexuality. Mating bears look like humans from a few hundred years away: stomach-to-stomach, up against a tree, lying down, from behind, embracing, bracing. Bears share with humans the tendency to lift their heads to the sky.

Germanic and Celtic bears from royal menageries broke their chains not to run back into the wild woods, but to rush to ladies' chambers, driven by the smell of pussy and period blood. One old blind bear finds his way entirely by smell. In 1893, a bear escapes the Frankfurt Zoo to rape a young woman. Another time, a giant bear with light brown fur carries off a French shepherd girl just before her wedding day. The bear keeps her in his cave—blocked by an impossibly large rock—for three years. During the night, he rapes her. During the day, he raids local villages to provide her, tenderly, with clothes, cheese, bread, and fruit. Eventually she has a child-cub with the bear, but the father holds the infant too tightly, smothering it. In another life, the bear abducts the bride of a knight who bears him three sons. The boy-cubs are still young when a woodsman frees them.

TARGET

Something scraps her face. Her head is a small part of the constellation hurtling through pitch darkness. Without knowing how, her limbs syncopate with arms and legs around her. She breathes inside the pack's hard breathing, inside the arrhythmical pounding of feet, inside their cloud of dust. The pack's senses extend beyond them. Then her body starts to buckle. Even before the shooting pain, ankle twisting on a loose rock, even before she knows she is falling, there comes a steadying lift, a hand under her elbow. Its sure pressure crutches her whole body and she barely loses pace. Once she recovers her footing, she's rattled by the decency of that hand's gesture. She has no idea who exactly set her back on course. She has no idea if this actually happened or she dreamed it. She keeps running and the wind comes up, raising an unnamable sorrow in the back of her throat. She mouths *Thanks* as if the air could carry it.

DOOR

I am tired of my emotional vacillations between urges for belonging and escape. I try to think of a redemptive story to give my daughter, a story about being found, but the trail fades and veers uncertainly. There was a girl in India, raised by wolves and brought to live in a human orphanage at age eight. There were two girls, but the younger one died between being a wolf and a human. Is it a real story? Why do I tell her this? Do I want her to think that abandonment might give her back an umbilical link? The father's notes become the story:

June 18, 1927: She always preferred red clothes to those of any other color.... and if the children meddled with her in finding her clothes, she used to get wild.

March 17, 1927: She quietly began collecting all the red dolls from the line, which the children had arranged. The children were annoyed and made a clamor, and ran to complain to Mrs. Singh against Kamala. By the time Mrs. Singh could come, Kamala had removed the toys to a corner in the next room, and stood there. When the children complained, pointing to her, she simply began to move to her corner; Mrs. Sing followed her, and when they approached the corner, Kamala herself pointed to the toys heaped in that corner. Ms. Singh thereupon patted Kamala and said, "Oh! You want all those red dolls. Very good, I will get you some new red dolls. Give these back to them." Kamala at once obeyed. She did not leave Mrs. Sing's company

til...the order for red dolls was given.... Her red dolls came, and Kamala took them all to her corner, and covered them with a piece of cloth and went away to the kitchen.¹⁸

In the grainy black-and-white photograph, the girl's skin furs over. Eventually nothing remains of her fur but red.

TARGET

Atalanta remembers Meleager looking back at the heat rising off the mountain. A beautiful reddish weight in the acrid air. But it is dark now, walking side by side. The path shuts behind them. How far would she have to back up to become a stranger? Atalanta and Meleager search for something to plunge into: an abyss is a pre-condition for love. Instead they disappear into the "Tale of Atalanta and Meleager." A supernatural glamour hovers where they had been, but it is no substitute for empathy. Meleager's wife, Cleopatra, doesn't figure in here. Atalanta's father is still sealed in his own heroic story. Her mother is still in the forest where Atalanta follows her footprints. When Meleager dies, Atalanta's story goes cold until Meilanion steps into pace with her, her calves changing shape as they walk, one word at a time. Wind comes up around them, drowsy and hissing, then fastens itself to thermal waves. Because of the absorption of love, she sees its opposite wherever she looks.

TARGET

Orchestra music leaks inside this fairy tale and fattens into a full-blown sound track. The boar's tracks multiply and circle themselves. The hunters slip in and out of earshot. For now, she knows the boar cannot be real; it is a vague rage they will hunt until they are all dead. Everyone fears this anger—raging down a mountain, winged, horned, stinging, biting, and gorging; its purpose is to be killed. Shade flows into the canyon carrying an airy cry, a thirst for negativity, camouflage in the play of light and water. The moment springs up like song from rock: the boar busts into view, grinds himself against a tree, foam at his mouth. The boar is here, and the confusion of killing begins.

Atalanta makes the first wound, weakening the boar so that Meleager can finish it. They hack off the boar's head and tusks. They never say *His* or *Its*, they say *My* hoof, *My* tail, *My* hide. When Meleager gives Atalanta the boar hide and tusks, his uncles protest and retract the gifts. Meleager takes offense and kills them both. His mother, torn by allegiances, does not know how to mourn and avenge her brothers at the same time. Her maternal anger pulls everything under. How long can you hold your breath with them? Meleager wants to rise up. He wants to surface, but, being fully engulfed, he can't find a horizon. He cannot stop his heart from stopping. When his mother finally drowns him in fire, his skin turns blue, though he had dressed in red from head to toe, as is the custom, in hopes that he would haunt her.

TARGET

Remember a bonfire raging at the bottom of a mountain? Remember the girl running down the mountain, laughing? Remember her barefoot, and the ripple of her calves as she trips and falls, practically running into the fire? Atalanta is not that girl, but she feels her doomed vertigo. The fire feels too close, like someone else's breath, re-breathed. Its heat sears her living blood. The fire moves, she moves, amorphously lame, translated into twisting immensities. It is difficult not to see Meleager's body dancing now in the flame, all his edges lit. His panicked face, his hands shooting up as if he were drowning. It is difficult to hear the difference between crying and laughing, to see the true red of his face. Her eyes lock on the flames as they mutate and mutter. Red intensifies by absorbing other colors, fire amplifies itself by absorbing other sounds. If only it would shut up. If only the fire would stop to give way for a human word. Why try to think or remember? Fire closes her in the known retinal. Who would dare take her eyes off it? Worms squeeze out of every pore in his face. She's trapped by a fire made for him, in danger of believing she started it. She cannot resist the urge to throw in sticks, rocks, clothing, anything at hand. What she throws in, what it draws out, loud and hot. If only it would hush or speak for her.

TARGET

No one checks in with Atalanta or watches over her mourning. Shame carries her deeper into herself, a vast speeding blankness. No one notices how Atalanta mourns and she never gets caught. No one notices because no one cares enough about the things she steals. They are irrelevant even to her. She suspects it's her that no one cares for. *Now that Meleager's dead*, is the silent thought before she steals things (a flute, bread, a blank book, a ring) to cobble together a self. Each object inscribes her with the feeling of becoming. She carries them on her face, eyes like caught fish, cheeks like wilderness tints on a hunter's string—more dazzling and strange the more she advances into solitude. She thinks someone should notice; someone should take note of what dying is.

VOICE

Like Atalanta, I only seem to be perpetually blushing, my blush is a mask inside a fantasy. Blood presses to my skin as if it were a window, it stirs and waits. Nothing can make me withdraw into the remotest part of this story. My father wants to know why I wear a hat in the middle of summer. His question accuses: "Aren't you hot?" I tell him that's not a hat, that's my face. Gathering from the depths of his question. I think several things at once and the impossibility of expressing them simultaneously is where eros begins. I hear the howl, and Atalanta hears it, too. In stereo, we hear stippled, overlapping territories shift around us. A wolf chorus wavers and bounces off trees and rocks, resonates in the valley, scatters and reconstitutes in shadows pulsing fast over hills at dusk. A howl converts plasma to primal intoxication; all the sounds fuse or follow. Galaxies churn out trillions of stars. Her body teems with intensities, too. One wolf channels multiple voices. Is this why the hunters prop their dead bodies around camp? Rank bodies lined up as if they were sentries, as if sheer numbers would intimidate the boar, as if the smell of blood wouldn't lure it.

DOOR

Every small town holds the same persons captive. Ghosts follow me from place to place, exact replicas of people I once knew. I am a replica even of myself, the ghost of an ancient character: freckles, auburn hair, a strong walker with a weak sense of direction. I step out into the autumn air with an empty basket and come home with a seething wealth of candy. I sport the same red cape for Halloween five years running, each in a different neighborhood. Ghosts want to be recognized. You have to look closely at a person to distinguish her from others. In the story, the wolf is borrowed to explain deception and predation in familiar places. You have to know what to look for. Woods repeat themselves; my memory typecasts each new person, and I am a willing dupe. Where is the mother? Where is the wolf? My innocence first became recognizable as a disguise. There are ways to evade abuse—find a replica of your abuser. One face becomes another. The red eyes of a mother whose mind is very ill or a father whose wife is very ill, for instance. In Atalanta's day, if a wolf spied a girl before she spotted it, she would lose her voice.¹⁹ The woodsman stirs logs in our campfire, memories mistaken for flickering projections of the future.

DOOR

In a northern country, a girl sits on top of a glass mountain. Imagine the splendor of it: the sky is so blue that only blood could make it red. The glass mountain is a ghostly monument. It is a mirage that throws real prismatic rainbows all over the suitors who attempt, continually, to climb it. Splinters of light stab their eyes. They cut their hands and feet on the sharp peaks and cracks. The glass is as indifferent as ice, and just as cold, hard, and glittering. Ice or glass—either way, there is a girl frozen in childhood. She can please herself. She has a lap full of golden apples that she hurls down at the suitors. Her aim could be better, but who cares? She comes to see the men as merely one form among many, a flock or herd, reproducing and replacing their members over and over again, like the apples that copy themselves in her lap: gorgeous, malignant cells, children repeating their parents' stories.

DOOR

In 1970, a six-year-old girl tried to follow her mother to her grandmother's house. Through a wood between the Caspian Sea and Russia, in the country of Azerbaijan, the mother walked on and on, telling the girl to go home. The girl got lost or she didn't want to go home. A forest ranger found the girl a month later playing with wolf pups under a tree.²⁰ Little Red Riding Hood shares her color with the wolf, who has red eyes. By all accounts, her eyes reveal her feral nature. When she emerges in 2008 from the Rattanakiri jungle, one of the world's great wildernesses, lost after eighteen years, the girl has become a woman with red eyes. The U.S. repeatedly bombed this jungle and the Ho Chi Minh trail that ran through it in the 1960s, igniting animosity that led to the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror a decade later. Perhaps this girl was a child of refugees hiding there, unaware the war had ended. A man, claiming to be the woman's father, identifies her by scars on her wrist, which were fresh when she disappeared. He describes his first sight of her all these years later: "naked and scuttling like a monkey.... Her eyes were red like a tiger's eyes."²¹ At night in the father's home, she is restless, awake, mumbling a jungle dialect. Her eyes quickly adapt to the dark, and shine like stars, giving away heat—their *calor*—as they recede from all this.

VOICE

Name a child who never made animal noises, who never pretended to be a dog in the kitchen, or a horse in a field, a terrible tiger or a tender one. A girl puts on claws and plays bear with her brother until their mother finds them in bed together. She wears a self-fashioned bee costume with two stingers, she licks her paws, she puts on her wolf mask, her rabbit tail, her fox suit, her leopard spots. She is too old to pony-ride her grandfather's knee all the way to town. She's outrunning hunters and their dogs now. Once a hand catches her arm, she's a snowy owl, an eagle, a hummingbird. Her heart is beating faster than any living thing. She is a nine-year-old human baby now, she is that animal curled into her bear-mother. Time runs more slowly near a massive body like that; its gravity peels memory down. Brown bears can nurse for 82 weeks with three pairs of lactating nipples. Their milk is richer in protein and fat than human or cow milk. She hears her mother's voice and the spell breaks. A girl grows up how she grows up. You might dream it this way. It might be proven. You might believe in your own survival.

VOICE

I climb to disappear. Climb into a shady condensery, the deep-green scrape of bark on bare feet. I climb as high as the branches will hold me, where the wind is a gusty rustling, and stop on a swaying branch. Once I start seeing cherries up there, I see them everywhere like warm sores. "Your body is so responsive": I recall his sentence, say it aloud in my own voice. I have never eaten from a tree before. It is ridiculous. Red notes flying around the sonic aviary: I reach out, pluck one, even though I don't like cherries. Once it is in my mouth, I worry that it might be poison. Think *This is not the taste of cherry*. It tastes animal; it buzzes and branches out. I think *This is the taste of poison*. I think to spit. It is savory, splendid, rich pouring into brain and ravine. I swallow the realization that I have never eaten flesh. I have eaten canned food, swallowed the smell of cherry schnapps vomit that flew out of her my mother's mouth like a ribbon unraveling night.

TARGET

A crane fly skims Atalanta's hand as she stands in the river. She stops chewing dillweed. She remains so still she can see herself in the current of sky, and she lets the light lap at her face. Her hands plunge suddenly into the water, catching a silver trout. As soon as she lifts it out of the river, the fish becomes a spastic thrilling muscle that her hands follow. She lifts it into air, surprised by her humiliation, her identification with its alienation. *Put me back*, she demands of it. Her blush rises to my face, too, builds into my own upheaval, an uprising, a contagious de-subjectivity that's as historical as it is personal, as natural as it is inevitable. The fish ticks in her hands, out of time; her heart falls into its erratic ride. She remembers the clock at the center of her father's house—golden balls falling one by one, into the goatskin drum—marking time like a territory. The tick made time animal, alive enough to die. She had wanted her mother to take her in, out of the wind. She remembers her head against her mother's huge soft body, ticking: *The wind at last got into the clock, / The clock at last got into the wind, / The world at last got out of myself.*²²

TARGET

When night dissolves its forms, a presence enters the dark. Whose dreams are in you? Whose are you in? A shape gathers at the back of Atalanta's mind. When she reaches out for it, it recedes. When she circles the rock, she sees the exact border between two lives. Paths double back on themselves and lead to traps. *If the clouds and rivers change places, if the animal is late, if it is injured, if it doesn't exist.* She watches substreams in the river idly collide and grow. When she fills her cupped hands with cool water, she doesn't stop watching. Waiting is a nervous system that invents belief and kills tenderness. Keep watching. The water that runs off her chin and arms is red. This is the red that waits at the end of a chase, when a surge of energy stabs her limp arms. She turns in search of someone else.

TARGET

Dirt spits from her feet, splattering Meilanion's face and chest. In danger of being left behind, he rolls a shiny apple, invisible to everyone but Atalanta. You could say this distracts her from her desire or you could say it is a new desire, charmed and shining, possible and impossible, full of doubt. When the apple whirs off the path, it is like a mother's voice calling after a toddler who has wandered off. Atalanta will always be susceptible to hearing the wind's voices. Once she slows, obeys the call, her body pulls gravitationally into accident. Meilanion breaks ahead. Losing the race means her body transforms into a wife and his into a husband, they transform into one thing then another. It means they never give up on the perverse cycle of waiting and chasing. Losing means the stars at midnight canopy their sleeping bodies.

DOOR

My father taught me to hold and shoot a gun. After pulling the trigger, my body slammed back into his, a backboard against backfire. Each time the jolt kicked me into a loud, blank hole. What happened? A shot is a command, my name barked with intention. In the novel I'm reading, the character the narrator's in love with says her name. The author writes, "he said her name," but I can't hear it. When I saw my father for the first time in fourteen years, I tried to remember that he was at war when I was born. He did not know my name. Some of him kept living after the war, but he cannot act alive for me now. Even when he addresses me, his lips form a different shape and my name emerges as if dubbed. This way, I am protected from the illusion of recognition, and can leave my body to occupy others. I have imagined being confronted with a gun, I have imagined my body as a hero, but I no longer have to wonder what I'd do. In the face of a gun three times I have failed. Let me make one thing clear: I am not afraid of guns. I cannot tell you about every gun or all the objects used as guns. I know there is a blood compass buried in my body, activated by fear. I know I will find a closet, a bathroom, a hole in the world; I will cower in a small, windowless room. I will do it without thinking as if crawling willingly into my grave.

DOOR

My parents found me in the bushes, tangled in brambles, and then splashing in the fountain at the center of town. They found me looking for the devil in the basement. After booking down the tracks outside our house, someone else found me crying in the neighboring town. When I was four, they found me wandering away. At ten, I finally appeared on the other side of the lake. They found me asleep at the top of a lookout tower; they never find me behind that rotting willow. Eventually, my father stops looking. I lay under my feelings, alive and waiting. When Atalanta and her father meet for the first time, it is too late for her to feel found. The free girl and the neglected girl slam into each other. Neither can stop shaming the other. Weariness drapes around her neck, a monotony that hums or howls to her in a voice she can almost name.

DOOR

She entered the twilight of Songi one September in 1731 though she had been in France for several years by then. First a shepherd discovered her in a vineyard. Then a villager saw her shaking a door handle. She went from door to window, trying each, but they were locked or she didn't know how to open them. One of the houses set a bulldog on her, but the girl clubbed the dog to death and ran until she found an apple tree to climb. A patient mother in town finally coaxed the girl down. The girl climbed out of the tree for a bucket of water, which she drank "like a horse," and retreated back into the branches. She descended a second time to take an apple from the woman, who also held an infant. Did she believe in human benevolence? The girl descended the tree dressed in animal skins, with a gourd leaf on her head, and carrying a club engraved with mysterious characters. Her thumbs were the size of spoons. Her voice was a gravel cry. Once she was on the ground, a group of local men ambushed her and stuffed her in a sack. There are distinctions between love, hate, fear, and seduction but nothing compels us to maintain them.

DOOR

On the American side of the Atlantic, this girl had been painted black and sold as a slave. When she arrived in France the bubonic plague raged chaotically around her, and she slipped off into the wilderness. After her re-capture many years later, the wild girl of Songi came to be called Memmie LeBlanc. Tarzan also means “white” as in “white skin” in Mangani, the mythical language of his foster family. There are children everywhere who come out of the forest, out of the wild, into a white fantasy. But no fantasy is innocent. When the Queen of Poland, mother of the French queen, took her hunting, LeBlanc outran then killed and skinned rabbits. She swam as easily and as fast as an otter. She had been climbing trees since before she could walk.²³ This girl was found in a tree, but, as a woman preferring to be lost, she relied on rich men who thought of her as a curiosity, a key to understanding human nature. She became a nun for a couple years. Then she later eked out a living in Paris making artificial flowers and selling her ghostwritten memoir.²⁴ As I lodge myself deeper into it, the scale of her story calmly becomes a peep show. The mother was a lure, a Trojan Horse, a soft, warm blanket infested with smallpox. When Memmie took the apple, the mother transformed into five men who turned day into night. The long search for her identity eventually traced LeBlanc to the Meskwaki or Fox tribe of Native Americans in Wisconsin. She was painted black then named white, but the Meskwaki called themselves *Meshkwahkihaki*, which means “the Red-Earths.”²⁵

VOICE

What happens when a body changes color? Consider John Hughson, a white tavern-owner, and Caesar, a black slave, both executed at the gallows after the great conspiracy trial in New York in 1741. The bodies of these two men, left hanging in chains for months, became a spectacle, a sign of shame and power, out of which a rumor spread, a kind of magical thinking. These two bodies had exchanged colors: the white man’s skin turned black and the black man’s skin turned white²⁶ Just a few years before this, Carolus Linnaeus divided humans into four types based on color—*Americanus rubescens* (red American), *Asiaticus fuscus* (brown Asians), *Europaeus albus* (white Europeans), and *Africans niger* (black Africans)—in a system where science failed to transcend racism. About the same time, the color word “maroon” took on the meaning “runaway black slave,” derived from the French word *marron* meaning “feral” or “fugitive” and the Spanish word *cimarrón* meaning “wild.” Across the Atlantic a hundred years later, the widespread use of the label “redskin” corresponded to a new stage in the policy of extermination of indigenous people.²⁷ LeBlanc’s identity is at once mutable and permanent: her solidarities are mixed, set in contrast, but she can never be extricated from the history of race and injustice. Later Linnaeus added taxon for the wild (*Ferus*), monstrous (*Monstrous*), and mythic (*Troglodyte*) humans.

DOOR

I watch Atalanta blur into the forest. I hate her for being human then. Anyone could project a body onto her: orphan, cub, runner, bear, daughter, hunter, avenger, hero, wife, lion. Only later, after the invention of mirrors, do humans begin stealing cubs and raising them. They attend the cubs all day long, playing music for them and feeding them. A mirror is a toy, but no one knows if the bears are looking at themselves or at the light reflected in the mirrors' silvery pools. To see into the mirror, humans make the bears stand on their hind legs. They pierce their noses or lips with chains, they muzzle their faces and smash their teeth to keep them obediently harmless. If the bears stare long enough into the mirror, will they lose contact with their own feeling? As a man plays the tambourine, the bears hop up and down on the red-hot plates. Standing upright on their hind legs, the bears shuffle from one foot to the other and back again, trading left for right. Each shock restarts time. To humans this agonized hot-footing passes for dance. See how like us they are? They, too, seek the oblivion of dancing. We think only humans can laugh and cry. We think this because only humans can be ambushed by the animal we dream we no longer are. When the bears' movement becomes a conditioned response to the tambourine music, without the plate, the bears transform into entertainers. Lives swerve into the brutality of fairy tales.

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