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Red

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Red

The pang wrings the organs in the depths of my gut, twisting them like soaked cloth, a piercing twinge that beckons the saliva to seep into the crevices of my mouth, collect at the corners of my lips and coat my tongue. It subsides, then I conjure up a chunk of meat, slightly oozing, waiting for me to tear into it with my shard sharp teeth and my mouth waters again. It consumes me, the need to be fed. I find myself thinking of nothing but rabbits whose pulpy flesh and innards run like warm butter over my palate and down my throat, or of the fawn whose limber muscles are lush, melting like fat over a flame on my tongue. Instead meals of wild berries have replaced them, doing nothing but puckering my lips and staining my once chalky white paws. Mimicking the birds that once dwelled here, I've sampled meals of bugs and beetles of sorts but they crunch and crackle repulsively, spewing bitter juices that my stomach only rejects in a foul pile of bile, fur, mashed berries and insect parts. I am not well.

Once burly yet poised, I was a graceful animal, my coat sleek, almost lustrous when sunlight shone through the trees at the right angle. My hind legs flexed, ample and taut, when I crouched to ambush my latest

prey. My jaw jutted sharply when I clenched my teeth around the neck or underbelly of a vulnerable animal. Oh, I can still taste it! That last piece of meat, my last meal, it stays with me as if scraps were still lingering in my mouth. The warm blood lubricates the tough hide I've plucked effortlessly from the bone, as if it were a petal from a flower. Veins and vessels from the carcass barely quiver against my tongue as I lap up the last bit of syrupy juice spilled upon the forest floor, hardly caring if some of the underbrush mixes with it. I can still taste it.

Just yesterday I caught my reflection, slightly distorted in a rippling puddle. I remember inhaling the purity of the rain, when I caught a glimpse of myself in the water below. I saw ribs poking through my furry flesh, which is now only patches of matted hair. Other joints were visible, like that of an old crone's arthritic hand, almost as if they might protrude through my skin at any moment. My body once curvaceous and muscular is nothing more than a series of sharp angles and sagging skin. My jaw is slack, encrusted with bits of dirt and dried drool from relentless hunger, where my snout is coated thick with mucus and mud from burying it in the soil in hopes to come across a scent of a hot-blooded body. My

hind legs drag behind me now, relying on my front ones to transport me at nearly a crawl.

Today, like most days, all I am able to do is surrender to the bed of pine needles and dead leaves below me. I'll lie on my side, tongue hanging exposed, to aide my nose in detecting a meal. Sometimes I wish the earth would take me so I could become part of the soil to enrich the vegetation. The small animals would return and my brothers and sisters would be able to feed again. It tears into me, this ravenous hunger. I am the prey, hunger the predator, and I've lost all defenses. It rips open my abdomen just as I mutilated others in the past. My insides are relished by hunger's greed. I see myself feasting, burying my muzzle into luscious intestines, voracious, red painting my face. I am hunger, the intestines my abdomen. It paralyzes me from limb to limb, but I refuse to let it eat me alive.

What was that? Oh please let it be some other carnivore that could engorge his stomach with my masticated limbs. If I cannot eat then I'd rather be eaten. But my ears are twitching erect without warning at this snap of twigs. My heart thumps with anticipation, threatening to crack

my ribs with its momentum. If I squint just enough my eyes must sharpen into focus. Oh! Look at the flickers of red illuminating the blanket of greens and navy blues of the canopy! An animal with a coat that is redder than the blood I've spilled for my meals, more vibrant than the berries I've been unable to digest. So long it's been since my nose has quivered from a new scent. It wafts from the direction of the red amongst the brush, permeating the familiar smell of pine, soil and wild flowers. As poignant as honey on my tongue, it is sweet with a distinct bite that tantalizes my nostrils, stinging them slightly. It's so strong I can almost taste it, unlike anything I've encountered before. How my mouth waters and nearly froths! Another slash of red. The foliage bleeds with open wounds. The breeze swirls the scent into my nostrils again. But this time, something familiar, a trace of identity of this animal. Something in the scent is seems ripe, untouched, fresh; too much so to be wild and roaming. It is so close that I can lick the air and taste it.

It must not hear me approach. I cannot let it escape. It is survival that has ignited this rash spark within the pit of my stomach, swelling into my blood, my heart and brain aflame. It has consumed me. My once firm

legs tremble beneath me with each step closer to my prey. The smears of red defiant against the dark brush breathe the scent that so closely resembles warm honey and maple that my nose yearns to gorge upon. Little wafts will not do. The scent is potent now, as if the very heat from my feverish body ferments the animal's flesh. My ears twitch again, but not from the splintering of branches. How curious. I would have thought it to be a robin's song but the melody is not as shrill. The song comes from the red animal. Its scent, growing potent as I approach, churns the juices in my empty gut. It gurgles like a strangled rodent. I will throttle the creature between my stealthy jaws, wrenching the life from its lungs. The red coat now overlaps the greenery. It is all I can see and I know it's blood is as red as it's covering.

Closer and closer still, but wait, it halts. But I will not stop the hunt, crouching low; I must become part of the underbrush. It turns slightly and there is a new color luminescent against its deep red coat. Golden tendrils, fine like wood shavings; against flesh that resembles a ripe peach. How scrumptious that plump flesh will taste, docile between my bite. Part of the coat is falling away, revealing its golden mane. The

wind swirls the golden tendrils over the red coat and I am so close I can snag its mane with my claw. Only moments until my fang rip and scalp the hair from its body to get to the meat. I wonder if its blood is as sweet as its scent. A voluptuous hunk of meat will enliven my tongue again! I will rip the flesh from the bone; rupture every organ that will spurt salty sweet liquid, an extra treat. Unrelenting, I will bathe my face in its juices, tepid and savory. I will lap the supple remains from every crevice and clean my paws and snout with my taste buds. Just one more inch and these jaws will rupture that quivering vein under its sheer skin, lips nearly grazing its blue swollen trail and...

A gleaming flash, crack and snap! Oh, my ears endure the throb radiating from my pierced ankle. It travels, the beating, tremmoring through my veins, sending thorn-like jabs throughout my limbs, up my neck, to my skull. It aches and pulses as if broken shale has been jammed into my bone, threatening to sever it from my paw. It's gnawing and gnashing, but if I thrash it digs in deeper with more excruciating pain, and I am dizzy from it, my stomach threatening to splatter its contents. I can sense the animal, smell it, and nearly taste it. A piercing howl and whine.

I can feel it vibrate in my throat. With glinting, serrated points flickering light at their tips, these silver jaws criss-cross, mangling my limb into fibrous strands. The creature approaches closer still, its musk permeates my nostrils. But the pain has purged the hunger, eaten it alive, eating me alive. I cannot hold my weight any longer. I will lie down, just for a little while until it subsides. The forest, *my* forest is dwindling, fading. The creature has stopped moving, no snapping twigs, scent lingering. A shadow looms, shrouding what little light there is breaking through the leaves. Those eyes, they peer through its red coat, cobalt eyes, its golden mane framing them as they boar into my skull. This animal, so close, it shows is glaring white teeth, taunting me. And the red, it torments too, so glaring it pulses and a forlorn whine surfaces from my chest. But this is not how it is suppose to be. I am the hunter; I am the savage beast who slaughters its prey! The creature's eyes, they stare. My vision is blurring. It stares with its ice colored eyes, chilling me and I am cold. It is so very, very cold. The red throbs. I am so cold. Please, cover me with your red coat.

Halle Murcek, 2009