

On Weather: Creeping Cedar

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The little girl who tromps down to the creek, after the season's first rain, spring rain that comes after the crocuses, after the thaw, she wears black rubber boots trimmed with red that gallump against her calves. She has scabby knees, and tangled hair worn free, and sloshes through the mud, slips under the wire fence and into the brushy woods. She is bound for the water, which turns the gnarled creek bed to a current that sings through pine woods. Rain pools around trees, soaks bark, clings to leaves. The girl goes bare-legged through the cool morning. She is a heathen child, unchurched, a wild child who knows a horse's back, the raw rhythm of a canter, hands gripping the mane. She sleeps half-hanging from the bed, and woke this morning that way. The house was quiet.

She wanders silent through flooded thickets down to the creek bank, and watches sunlight stream through branches in long prisms. At the brook's edge, the girl draws back and springs to cross, legs splayed, but she misses, and slides down the mud bank. Water spills brisk and icy into her boot. She lets out a yodel, pushing her tongue against her teeth, wades upstream touching rocks and ripples and leaves with her fingers. She believes in tree gods, adores this world wet and green.

She clammers back to the bank as a new shower courses from the morning's low clouds, another day of rain, beating mute drum taps on young shoots. And the girl's heart quiets from its patter in her ribs, as she flops onto the earth in a patch of creeping cedar mosses and decaying leaves, as damp pricks her spine, the smell of mold and evergreen quick in her nose. Rain beats on her eyelids and the ground seems to absorb her pale limbs. She feels dead—or maybe deathless, lying there, and thinks of the big white dog that wandered to the woods to die, a year ago, and how the dog's heavy body lay on the leaves, ribs gnawed at by buzzards. Thoughts come slow, with rests in between, that she'll go back to the house, eat an apple, gallop on the bay pony if the weather clears, and give it sweet feed, the pony's lips tickling her hand, as this shower tickles her neck and seeps to her shoulders. She breathes deeply. Limbs splayed in the rain, the girl again thinks about the white dog—that this is the only way to go, if go she must, at the very end, to wander back here wrinkled, a bird woman, to die with the trees.

The little girl got up and walked home that morning. Oh, the years flew. When she wandered off to die, I watched it happen, how she weakened and curled up between my ribs, knees to chin. She starved quietly, and if I feel her at all these days, it's the way that a healed bone throbs when it rains.

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