

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Brian McCarty
Mascot

I passed Marvin the Mountain Lion on a corner
across from campus—street corners the off-season habitat
of mascots. It was a near-sublime wilderness experience
amidst brick bistros and late-afternoon buzzes.

His football jersey was immaculate:
“MARVIN” spelled out across his back in letters
clear and bold as a mouthful of mountain air,
no evidence of late-night stalks
through the horizonless bluestems outside of town.

Every now and then
he would pussyfoot from awning shade
onto scorched sidewalk to shimmy and wave
a poster promoting a new pizza parlor.

I watched as gawkers stopped for impromptu photo shoots
with the freak—neck and brawny arms bronzed
with brazenly human tan; bulbous feline head creased
with toothy—but not-too-toothy—smile.

I too considered asking for a photograph, weighing the risk
of loss of life or limb against the adrenaline rush
of walking away with the perfect selfie.
But I decided against it, moved by something like pity.

How would I feel, caught in inner-species limbo?
Mom a successful orthodontist,
dad a member of the Felidae subfamily?
Eyes unable to fidget from crepuscular gaze?
If a bunny darts across his path,
he must swivel his neck to follow it.

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It seemed a lack of human decency to call attention
to his defects. I fought the urge to crawl
on all fours down the sidewalk
or sharpen my nails against a city park cedar,
just to let him know it was ok.

I feared he would misunderstand,
that instinct would nullify years of evolution
and merchandising. I imagined him pouncing as adoring fans
waved banners and foam fingers and
flash bulbs made the world new again.
Narcissus

I know selfies whose charm exceeds the original
flesh and bone conjunction of stinks
that wriggles loose from the frame
to gather static electricity, grow hair
and swallow.

Fingerprints scaffold my mirror;
each replicates a swirl hole's vanishing point,
where reflection pops on streambed stone.

I Google pictures of myself
and tumble through blossoms bent like broken gramophones
but never settle to the bottom.
I tremble like trees at dusk that seem
to have outpaced their rings,
the way their bark chips like old frescoes.

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This pose, a collision of skins
wrung free of libido, the God-echo
that stamps the self like a ringing in the ears,
feigned smile amidst the phantom limbs,
is both erasure and the patina
that would snap me back together.

You lapse into these abridged sequels
progressively subliminal and remote until
deep as chemical wellsprings from which
The crude self bubbles;
I show you the faults where synapse
dons the flesh of thought, pre-syntactic,
the most basic of dumb recognition,
synaptic firing range with human outline
pre-lips, pre-stare, and numb as codeine.

You know my terror as I watch myself
stand on the shore and slip
into the gap between frames,
face held taut as I wait
for the gauziest of resurrections.

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The Goat

I sat outside Dad's vacant house and watched
lungfuls of schwag blur the straggly leafy sprawl
of a forest mending from a clear cut a few years back—
a next chapter scrawled in pulpy cursive—
when a goat moseyed up to sneakers I'd left on the grass.

"What the hell is a goat doing here?" I asked,
but no one was around to answer.
I wondered: did the question really materialize,
bloom from synapse to lips like ape unfurling from crouch
in nude time-lapse into modern Man?
Or did it merely echo inside my skull, an urgency
almost capable of begetting thought bubbles?

The goat turned its head, dissected me with human squint.
It seemed bewildered by the question.
I avoided eye contact, afraid it knew I thought it was crazy.

"I didn't actually intend for you to answer," I explained.
The goat lowered its head and began to gnaw
the soles of my shoes, its beard dragging the ground.
The bell around its neck jangled like a tambourine,
the lone sound in the unpacked woods.