

The Ravine

Nona Caspers

*A hunting she will go,
A hunting she will go,
Hi-ho, the derry-o, a hunting she will go.*

1.

I woke up at six o'clock on Saturday and decided I would hunt. I pulled on my jeans, T-shirt and old brown shoes. My father had worn thick leather boots. I folded my hair under my red hunting hat and stuffed some peanuts and an apple into my coat pocket. The 56 bus took me over the Golden Gate Bridge, and when I saw some woods I got out.

The woods were immediately dark and quiet, though I could hear the faint whistle of traffic behind me. The darkness and quiet said *here we are, here we are, together again. What have you been doing with your time?* I felt accused. *I sit in my apartment and write my thesis*, I said. In my mind, I began trotting out the details that make a daily life, and then the larger accomplishments that accumulate over the years, and the things I had yet to do or planned someday to finish, but no matter how I added it up, my life looked small and unimpressive, though not without its excuses. Indeed, I thought. What have I been doing with my time?

I walked on, over the dried leaves and branches, and then over pine needles, deeper into the silence of the woods. My hunting hat made my scalp sweat and itch. I took the hat off and tucked it into my jeans—I was glad no one was there to witness the dirge of my pale forehead. A song came into my head:

*The worms crawl in
The worms crawl out
The worms play pinochle in my snout*

I hummed the child song over and over, and I walked and walked into the woods. I sat down and adjusted my shoe—a tiny rock had sneaked into the heel of my inner sock, and I had to sit and stare at that phenomenon for a while. The shoes came well past my ankles; they were almost boots. The outer sock was higher than the inner sock, and the elastic band at the top pressed dutifully into my calf, leaving a red ring. The rock had sneaked all the way down to my bare heel—I was impressed with its tenacity. I put the pebble in my pocket and took out the baggie of peanuts. I began shelling and eating the peanuts, though I wasn't really hungry and knew it was a bad idea not to wait; later I would have nothing but the apple.

A bird flew down through the tree line, and then flew back up out of sight. A few minutes later it dropped from a high branch onto a lower branch. It had been a long time since I'd thought about the life of a North American woods animal, or about the non-animals, the insects and bugs. A squirrel ran down a tree and sat at the base and watched me. *What have you been doing?* I asked the squirrel. *Today I am staring into the darkness, listening to the wind, cracking things open, scratching my hide. I also am looking for feathers and fur for the inner lining of my drey. What are you doing here?* *I'm hunting,* I said. *You don't have a gun,* the squirrel said.

I put on my hat, and I swung my rifle in its canvas sack around to the front. The squirrel leapt onto the tree and disappeared. The bird that had been perched on the low branch flew away. Nobody wants to talk about death, getting caught off guard by a predator, like me. I took the rifle out of its sack; it was time to get serious.

I walked another mile into the woods, not seeing any animals, which made me think the earlier ones had sent out a warning—only fair and good—and then I hit a ravine. I stood at the edge of the ravine and looked into the deep thicket and the darker air, and then I looked into an even denser darkness, balled like yarn, and I waited for my pupils to dilate. There was a clearing through the center of the brush, and I could see, at the bottom, about twenty yards down, or it could have been even further down, thirty yards, a deer. The deer was looking up at me, or rather looking up toward me with an uncertain expression, as if having doubts about its circumstances, and yet at the same time it looked like any other doubtless deer. The deer, a buck with no prongs yet, was standing on a piece of wood. I lifted my rifle and squared the butt on my shoulder, and then I looked through the scope. The head of the deer flew into my vision. I moved the sight to its white chest, and then I stiffened my shoulder and steadied my aim and pulled the trigger and stumbled back.

My body had not forgotten the force of the gun, but I had forgotten the smell of gunpowder, acrid and metallic, and the blue haze that lingers for a moment like a pungent spirit.

The deer was gone.

I put the gun back into its canvas sack and slung it behind me and hiked into the ravine, descending over fallen trees, stumps, brambles, vines and brush, all the things of a ravine. A bramble snagged my little finger and I cursed. The ravine said, *What are you doing here? I'm trying to get to the bottom of all this to see if I wounded the deer and to see that piece of wood. But a lot of things are in my way and I am not happy.* The ravine was silent, and rightly so. I hiked further down into it. When I was at the bottom, I saw that the piece of wood was a door, like an old kitchen door, the green paint chipped off entirely, except for a patch in the center. There was a black doorknob. The door looked like the one that led to a porch in the first house I lived in with my lover Michelle. One evening, when I was at work, she kicked a hole through one of the lower panels,

and her boot caught and she couldn't remove it and so she sat on the floor of the porch and waited for me to come home. I remember walking into the living room and seeing her leather boot dangling above the splintered wood; it looked like a trophy. I unlaced and removed the boot and then helped her slip her bare foot back through the hole. Michelle's foot—brown and slender with a silver ankle bracelet, the second toe strangely longer than the other toes, and wide at the bulb. The toe was an eye staring at me. The door was staring also.

You probably think I'm going to open it; you think the door is a portal to another world, like in fairy tales.

I sat down on the door and ate my apple, contemplating how objects when taken out of context gather meaning—like the door for example—how did it get there? On the edge of the door was a drop of the deer's blood. I thought about this for a long time as I ate my apple. The wind had crept into the ravine and was whirling leaves, and the quiet and the darkness were waiting for the hunter to make her next move.

2.

Although I would have been content to sit on the door longer, maybe for the rest of my life, my father had taught me what I had to do. I got up, and I made my way up the other side of the ravine, which still had nothing to say, stepping over its logs and brush and bramble, which were not as thick on this side as they had been on what was now the other other side. As I climbed, I could see that the ravine was steeper than I had imagined, or rather than I had experienced going down, and I noted, not for the first time, the relationship between effort and distance. It felt good to climb a ravine on a Saturday morning and to be in the company of the woods, and not in my apartment alone working on my thesis. A brown worm crawled out of a hole in a log. It was tunneling deeply into the soil and mixing subsoil with topsoil, secreting its slime to give the plants nitrogen and to aggregate soil particles. *Do you ever get lonely?* I asked. *I have air*, the worm said. *I have dirt, I have decay; inside this log where I live there is a dead squirrel. Someday I will have you*, the worm said. *Not yet*, I said. *I can wait*, the worm said.

I climbed up the ravine into the lighter air at the top, where the trees were thinner and taller, less concentrated, and they laid a sheet of golden leaves at my feet, the now later morning sun spotting them. The sun hummed a little song, several high notes followed by a few lower notes. I walked faster; my rifle in its canvas sack skipped and hopped and jogged against my hip. Here we are, I thought, together again. *Is this how you feel?* I asked the sun, trees, air, dirt and leaves. *Shhhhh. Shhhhh*, they said. And I respected their privacy.

I slowed my walk and tried to pay attention to the woods' floor, looking for details like deer blood, hoof prints, scat, a disheveled path. I wound my way through trees, which were becoming thicker and denser again, only a dribble of light here and there. *Goodbye*, the light said. *Au revoir*, I said. *You can always turn back*, the light said. *I would but I have to track the wounded deer and shoot it again, better this time, and then drag it out of the woods to butcher and freeze, perhaps give some meat to a shelter. You could leave it for us*, the air, the worms, and the magpie said. *Or me*, the bear said. I hadn't thought about bears; perhaps it was hiding behind some tree or boulder. Maybe the magpie was impersonating a bear so I would turn back. *You smell good*, the bear said. *I thought grizzlies had been driven out of California and most of the United States*, I said. But it didn't answer or speak again.

I walked on and on into the thicker woods, past a fallen naked tree, a huddle of gray-stemmed red-capped mushrooms, a hut-sized boulder that was covered in lichen, a silence that remained fertile and silent. About twenty yards to the left of the boulder I heard a sound, and then I saw the deer. It was leaning against the trunk of a tree. I unsheathed my gun again and lowered to one knee to brace the gun and myself and I shot and the pungent spirit appeared and the deer dropped.

The darkness and the quiet sighed.

You probably thought a woman like me didn't have it in her to bag the deer, but you don't know me.

The deer lay crumpled on its front legs, its muzzle to the ground. I turned the deer over, and then I pulled out from the bottom of the canvas sack my leather gloves and rope. At first, the front legs didn't want to wrap behind the head, but finally the leg joints loosened and I fastened the rope around the deer's neck and legs the way my father had shown me. I found a thick three-foot limb and attached the rope at both ends, and then I began dragging the deer, a small buck, about ninety pounds, in its first fall and now no winter, back toward the ravine. I felt a sense of accomplishment and said so to the deer. The deer said, *My eyes eyeless now*.

Resting and breathing deeply in ten-foot intervals, and smelling the hide and the stirred up ground, I dragged the dead body of the deer. The air entered the wound and the hide and flesh around it turned dank. I pulled and pulled until I hit the ravine and then I sat down with my legs over the edge and wondered what to do. I thought about dragging the deer into the ravine, which meant dragging the deer up the ravine; I also thought about dragging the deer around the ravine, but which way and how far? I asked a bird, no answer. I asked a squirrel, no answer. I took off my brown jacket and knotted the arms around my waist; the sharp smell of my sweat mingled with that of my dead skin. My heart said *pa pa pa*—and my lungs with their oxygen had to catch up. *Yes. Yes. Yes. Go.*

Go. Go—my body said. *We forget so easily*, I said. The next day, as I sat at my writing table and read my books, I started the forgetting.

I strapped the deer on a wide log, the way my father had shown me, and then I pushed the log and the deer down into the ravine. The door was still at the bottom. Now I had the feeling that I could open it and reveal if not an alternate world at least a tunnel to the other side, maybe all the way to the road where I could catch the bus; I needed a shortcut. But the door was still only a door, under it flattened dirt, plants, grass, tree roots, pebbles, and the cracks made by the worms. How would I get the deer out? *You won't*, said the ravine. *It's just another unfinished project*. I began to feel defensive again, and then I recognized the truth in the statement. I sat down on the door again and wished I had my apple or some peanuts. The deer's legs were stiffening and flies flew back and forth over its cloudy black eyes and its black lips had pulled back from its teeth so I could see its dark purple gums.

You forgot to gut me, the deer said.

I loosed the animal from the log and laid it belly up. From my canvas bag I pulled out my father's butcher knife and hatchet and I slit the deer down the middle. Out of the cavity rose a sheet of steam that said *hush, hush*, while blood warmed the ground silently, spattering my shoes. Inside the cavity lay the quiet, rubbery sacs of the heart, lungs, stomach and intestines; I cut and yanked out the entrails. I cut off the deer's legs and split its backbone; I cut off the head; I quartered the torso. The gutting and quartering took a long time. Part of me was happy *doing* but another part of me was worrying. I worried that the sun would set and leave me lost in the woods, that I would give up and the deer and the hunt would go to waste, that the meat was damaged because I had forgotten to remove the entrails right after shooting it, that I wouldn't have enough time to air the meat properly now and so it would taste gamy; that no one in the city including me would want to eat it. I also worried there was something more important I should have been doing with this day, and that perhaps I was often making the wrong decisions about how to spend my days, until my whole adult life was a series of failure and waste.

From the canvas rifle bag I unfurled another canvas bag. The quarters fit like puzzle pieces. I tied the top shut and said goodbye to the deer's head, legs, entrails and blood. I said goodbye to the worms and the beasts waiting for their own feast.

I put on my coat and hiked up the ravine, dragging the sack of meat in two-foot intervals. I thought several times about leaving the sack behind, and I thought a lot about sleeping. I lay down and shut my eyes several times, watching the black background with a string of blue coming in from the left while the flies supped on my blood-soaked arms, and sweat cooled my back, and the quiet and the darkness rushed in to soothe me. But then, I stood up. I stood up and I dragged the bag of meat behind

me over the pine needles and dirt. I went on. The woods grew darker and darker and I inched forward like the worm.

At the edge of the woods I stopped and wiped myself off with leaves and dirt. The traffic whistled.

Goodbye, the darkness and quiet said.

Goodbye, I said. *Goodbye ravine and door, bird and squirrel and grizzly if you were a grizzly, and worms and vulture and golden leaves and dappled light and foliated air.*

I walked back out of the woods. The air was cool and the earth was turning its back on the light from the day.

I got on the 56 Bus, and sat in the back row with my sack of meat on the seat in front of me, and then I moved the sack to the floor for a young man who got on at the next stop. The canvas bag was slowly beginning to turn the floor red. I looked out the window and suddenly my island appeared with its lacey blue edges and green hills, sinking under the weight of the white city.