

Vulpes

ISABEL PÉREZ-ALBUERNE

The poem begins with a song—
A quiet one, thrumming low under the tone of the wind
so the ear strained to catch it. A collection of notes on the mountainside
bundled together like children in the cold.
She handled the lyre with motherly affection,
each strum a rock of the cradle.
Wildflowers danced palm-to-palm with swaying nettles
(whose sting had softened with the music)
until the whole meadow seemed to move in time.

Her limbs were long, deer-like, and stretched down often 10
to pull the hem of her skirt towards her ankles.
The hair that hung down her back was woven into braids
mathematical in their complexity,
and shining in midday light.
The air around her seemed alive, though more condensed,
and it settled against her skin with a gentle touch.

He was watching from beyond a line of strong oak trees,
eyes darkened by the shade of branches
and by his hunger. 20
A jealous flash ran through him as he watched that heavy air
dance across her neck and criss-crossed through her fingers.
The need grew, coiling like a serpent in his stomach,
until it willed his feet into motion.

The violation was frantic and brutal.
Feet trampled over soft grass and snapped bundles of betony at the stem,
hands grabbed with greedy intention at frozen limbs
caught unmoving in a stony fear.

There was no music.
The absence of it stark against anxious groaning.
Where the grass once danced, it now stood still, 30
watching with resigned and ancient sadness.
And then it was done.
For three nights she wandered through grassy fields into foreign groves,
each organ of her body dragging
as if filled with sand.
Bearing the weight of Rage,
whose icy tendrils crawled up into chambers of the heart
and sank into pumping blood.

Shards of anger pressing themselves like shrapnel grew so sharp 40
that she collapsed near the stump of a birch tree.
The sting pierced into her stomach,
and once there, just as wine and pure water are joined,
mixed with acid
and grew two times larger.

The night had dragged a curtain across the deepening sky
before she fell into restless sleep.
But even in unconsciousness, pained whines escaped her lips
and chilled fingers gripped her hair into disarray.

In sleep, the rageful tempest did not quiet. 50
It travelled from the stomach back up towards the heart,
dipping through walls of membrane before bursting into the lungs.
It is here that shivering Rage surged,
the force of it waking the girl,
who wheezed in small bursts at the sudden intrusion.

Gasps interspersed with violent coughs shook her long body
as the filaments condensed,

wrapping tightly around each other,
before shooting through the throat and out
onto the soft blanket of dirt and grass. 60

Heaving in pants of sweet air,
she examined the pile of white and grey strands,
which seemed to pulse in the faint moonlight.
Each section of the clump made of vein-like pieces tangled
like woolen yarn, unraveled and tossed.

But look—they *were* veins!
Increasing in size as the body
(because it was a body)
formed flesh and bone out of sleet and ice.

The heart clenched and eased, 70
nestled behind emerging ribs,
and a strong spine curved into the base of the skull.
Soon, patches of fur the color of burnt embers
sprouted out of newborn flesh.
Two pointed ears formed atop the head,
and a long winding tail swept the ground.

The creature twitched softly, as if it were asleep,
then uncovered its dark pearly eyes to stare
at the pain-tousled girl who struggled still to coax air into her lungs.
Then, the animal stretched out its four black legs, 80
engaging each muscle down to the toes,
and stood for the first time.

Black slivers of pupil grew full in the darkness,
watching silently as wind blew leaves across the forest floor,
examining a new world.

The girl was the first to move.
Her hand invaded the air between two bodies, hesitant,
but with the impossible understanding that no harm would come
to either of them. And when the two creatures first touched

all four eyes softened. 90

She caressed soft fur
like the strings of a lyre, and smoothed fingers
over a delicate stomach. The creature let out a faint rumble,
innocent and vulnerable,
but vibrated with a dangerous hum that betrayed its origins.

She named the creature *Vulpes*, the two of them
now wanderers in tandem.
And by the time that relentless sun rose again
the girl and the animal had begun to walk.

For two days they marched across a blanket of grass 100
until the landscape gave way to a sparkling brook
where they drank quickly, gulping down freshwater
which soothed their cracked throats.

The girl began to undress
but was frightened to bathe her long body
lest she catch a glimpse of what had been done.
A piece of bruised skin or a slice through her flesh
would be enough proof
to send tingling panic rushing through her blood.

Pulling her dress by the skirt, 110
she focused her eyes on the stretch of sky
just visible through leaves. A sky so impossibly blue and a sun
so offensively pleasing that it filled her with shame,
as if she denied nature in her sorrow.

A high-pitched chatter drew her eyes down to the familiar earth
Where the creature had locked its eyes onto distant trees.
Brown ears pinned back to the skull,
the animal made a series of clicking sounds from the bank,
before beginning to pace down the shoreline.

Feeling discomfort scratching at her skin, 120
the girl hurriedly recovered her clothing and dressed herself
while her eyes traced the forest,
gaze catching on a set of eyes
which glowed and set her brain on fire with recognition,
and he emerged from the shelter of foliage.

A grin split open his face like a dark fissure
that turns one stone into two,
and legs carried him with a stroll that betrayed no sign of
hesitation or restraint.

Like a wolf in the wild, freshly nourished by deer flesh, 130
pauses in delight at a rabbit's corpse,
even more ripe for the taking, the man rolled his shoulders lazily
and closed in on his victim
who stood shivering on the sand.

The air shifted violently.
In a breath, viciously pointed teeth had sunk
into the soft surface of the man's cheek—
tearing at skin
while claws like daggers tore into his shoulder.

The creature ripped down his delicate throat, 140
gore spilling wet onto the shore.
His hands flailed desperately, crying like a child,
hoping to grab at his attacker who had already doomed him.
It was too late. Life faded from the man's limbs,
and his heart gave a final weak pulse.

The girl willed herself to look, thinking the moment an illusion,
but found no signs of trickery. She watched
as the creature licked at a puddle of blood, unease taking hold
for the first time, gazing at this wild, unfamiliar thing.

It was then that the body, motionless and unmourned, 150
began to dissolve into thin liquid

which sank into the dirt until the very ground seemed to swell,
leaving behind a stale scent
and a clump of wide green leaves dotted with small flowers,
each displaying only two petals
and a shock of yellow tendrils at the center.
They are called *Begonia*
in warning and in gratitude.



Isabel Pérez-Albuerne, *Barnard College*

isabel.perez_1@me.com