

## 6. FOX

Anja finds the fox body far lighter than she'd expected. Light as a plush toy. Fur bristled and damp from morning frost and the pallor flood. Eyes only half shut. She stares into a translucent blue. Waves in the sunlight. Mischievous waves. Rigor Mortis starts with the eyelids before radiating across the face and down the body and out to paws and toes. The calcification of once fluid cells.

She'd hit the brakes without hesitation. A conspiracy between her eyes and feet. Stared long into the rearview, expecting to see it hop up and walk into the hedges. Gripping the wheel. Waiting for other cars to go on by.

There is no blood, no sign of injury. Instant death, she thinks, if such a thing exists. She remembers reading how the brain can continue running for up to ten minutes. Some end of life algorithm or simulation? Tunnels and white lights and faces extruding from darkening swaths of memory?

The eyes watch her as she slides a hand beneath shoulder and forelegs. Getting herself to touch and then peel it off the asphalt takes an infinite amount of time. Once lifted, it's twenty seconds transplanting it into the trunk of her car.

Now in the shed with a new carving knife from the shop, she takes a miserable shot at preserving the tail. Tears up a few inches of fur. Guts herself with the indignity of it all, and so she gives it up. Sionnach will enter the other world with bristles blushing red, she insists, and pictures him telling everyone about the dope who mangled his pride and joy.

What would she even have done with it...

And there's already a fresh hole, nearly the right size, in her garden. From the goat she'd found the year before. Shortly after moving in. After her mother. AM. After Mom. A new calendar. I am AM. I am. I am.

She shovels a bit more out of the base and around the edges to soften the soil. She lowers the fox, who, despite its stiffness, curls up in conformity with the earth. A tiny pink tongue tip extends from the side of its mouth. Licking its lips. Certainly starving by now. She picks two wild roses off a bush and nestles them between forepaws. A gesture. What she would liked to

have done but thought of too late. Hours only. Nearly called to dig her back up. Do it right. Even looked up the number. Stopped. Slept instead. Those blue eyes still shedding sparks. Anja stands, unable to throw the first shovel of earth as the sky darkens. A leaf falls at her feet. Still green. Put it back, she thinks. Back on the branch before...

Movement clips the thought. A flutter. Her eyes dart left of the grave. Finds a robin, fat and redbreasted with black pearly eyes. Cocks its head toward a pile of fresh earth. Pecks twice. Flutters up to settle on the shovel's blade. Hops the length of its handle, then down again for a few more pecks of soil. Now back into to the holly tree, watching her watch back.

"Hello, sweetheart," Anja says. Vessel this soul to the other side?

Not two days before, she'd been told that robins were messengers.

*Gramma visits me once a month as spideog. Straight into my kitchen, she'd come, from the day of her wake.*

For Anja it took six weeks and happened just the once. On a walk through farmers' fields south of the cottage, where this one sheep always let her scratch its head and jaw. Rest of the flock would scatter, but this one didn't seem at all concerned. Turned into the highlight of her day. She brought him clementines and called him Almond eyes.

One day she climbed into his pasture and though his flock scattered as normal, Almond wasn't there. She found him caught in a snarl of brambles, one long tendril of thorns spiralling from flank to shoulder. Took her nearly ten minutes to free him, at which point he went straight to grazing as if on the verge of starvation. She left him then and continues with her walk until she reached the grove of sacred oaks where she liked to rest and read. That's when robin came to call, hopping in a circle widdershins around her. From thorn branch to oak root to nob to post. It allowed Anja near enough that she could have snatched it up. A message from her mother? A word of thanks from the sheep, agented via woodland delivery network? A spirit from far off worlds? It was all of these things. All and none. And just a bird.

Might be the same, she supposes. Friar Tuckish and jolly and curious. Do they all look that way?

Then she notices something new. Though clearly circling the fox, the robin only ever lands on or near a clod of fresh dirt. As time flutters on, the bird falls into a rhythm of peck, hop, and fly. Hunting morsels... Tiny bugs? Fresh roots? Bits of fungi? Anja laughs. Is this where the

robin's association with death originated? A cross of courage, curiosity, and a hunger for freshly unearthed feasts? Had the robin been showing up at burials for centuries to nibble and watch and catch superstitious eyes with their bright orange breasts?

She pours a few shovelfuls of dirt over the fox. Robin hops over to the disturbed scoop in the pile and starts to peck. Her rational mind all full up on discovery, Anja feels her epiphany might wash away every last grain of folklore. But is that what she wants? Is it even necessary? Complex events are defined by the confluence of multiple causalities. Something in the default has always urged her to decide. Choose one and banish the other. Gnash ye in outer darkness. But she knows life is a multi-dimensioned thing. Even naturalistic accounts, hunger and opportunity, do not automatically rule out the parallel perchance that robins are in fact an integral component in otherworldly telecommunications. Suppose spiritual aspects catch their rides on physical impulse? Or mightn't impulses themselves be driven by the occasional immaterial nudge?

Light is electromagnetism in motion. A state of propagation, composed from two orthogonally entangled oscillations. Their perpendicularity yields simultaneous states of convergence and divergence. One full dimension between them, intersecting at an instant, and that instant is light. A magic weave too quick for time. Why couldn't the causal threads of mystic lore stitch their own intersections along divergent dimensions? Naturalism in symbiosis with the ineffable. Realities billed as incompatible, cultures in conflict, vying for devotees. But what if, all this time, they've been looped in partnership, converging/diverging in alternation along traces of consciousness, stitching inside one another's flow, each one creating itself out of the negative space carved along the edges of the other.

Like fungi and algae, virus and cell, wasp and orchid, mind and matter, opacity and shadow.

The winter before, Anja happened across the half eaten skeleton of a wild goat. It had been dangling from a tree, rear hoof caught in the crook of a branch. A gutted cavern of ribs and fur. She'd come back for it in spring and brought its bones home in garbage bags to bury within the same hungry earth where the fox would later follow.

Anja fills in the hole. She raises three small stones atop the grave. Not far from there a wire fence leans crooked. On the other side, a wooded hill climbs with ash, holly, and hawthorn to an ice age slab of limestone as big as a whale and shaped the same, where Goblinwoode

radiates in all directions along the limbs of three huddled willows covered in moss, lichen, shells, ribs, femurs and skulls. Her mother started the collection years ago. She's given the forest its evocative name. The goat was Anja's first contribution, and now, perhaps by midsummer, sionnach's flesh should be nibbled down to a new set of bones. Then Anja could dig them up to join others wedged into the cross of branches or strung from twigs or gathering mossy new skins or adorned in mushroom chandeliers. Mother's branches. Mother tree. The more she visited, the more she could sense aspects of the woman entangled. It was just a willow.

One of Anja's oldest remaining photos showed her and mother side-by-side propping up an anatomy coloring book. Three angles on the human skull. She couldn't have been more than six. They bore their teeth, mother and child, emulating the page between them.

"We were one with that photo," Anja says. "She is with me now. Forever gone away."

Two truths cleaved to an instant, as instants weave from word to word.

The first drops of rain come down. The sun sets. A bawdy breeze kicks up, heralding a cyclone that will push in from the North Atlantic delivering twenty hours of dizzy cries, creaking trees, rattled windows and pots and patio chairs scattered all around the garden. These are messages from the earth Anja lacks codes to translate. But she's read that Oskoreia, too, comes this week. Norway's wild hunt. A procession of ghosts, trolls, goblins, and gnomes tromping across the sky. Is that today? She isn't sure. Don't go outside, wisdom warns, or you might be swept up and carried off. Spirited away, is how they say it Japan, where the *hyakki yagyō*, night parade of a hundred demons, owns the streets but once a year and seals all sensible souls inside.

Tonight, the bay will flood over the main road and they'll close the bridge leading into town. Anja will remain warm enough inside with her projects and music and housework and television stories. Like sionnach in his den. Or robins, wherever they go for shelter... unless, perhaps, they embrace the storm. Anja pictures ruddy chests launching boldly into the fray, tangling tails in the parade and whirling toward distant shores to usher news to half closed ears in sentences composed from tiny grains of earth.