

THEY FEARFUL SYMMETRY

On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hands dare seize the fire?

He was a hunter. The sloth, fat with the fruits of summer, had been no match for him. The spear stuck out straight and strong from the carcass. It had once been alive, that mass of moving flesh and ugly hair and little beady eyes. Now it was dead. And he was hungry for the feast that would follow his return. On the way back to the clan, dragging the dead sloth, he paused only now and then to look for jewels in the dry stream bed. There were none to be seen. That night, after the feast, he thought for a moment about the scarcity of jewels and then fell into the sound sleep of satiation. No one was awake when the first snow flakes fell outside the cave to warn of approaching storms.

Somehow he had foreknown that the winter would be bad. No food could be found; the animals had all gone south or back into the mountains. And despite the fires in the cave, it was always cold. He went out with the hunters into ceaseless storms, black clouds and swirling snow, and came back with them empty handed. It was good to return to the fire, stamping and warming his feet, but all he could give was an empty look to the lean and huddled clan. Days passed, and the snow fell deeper and deeper, and the wind swept it into great drifts higher than he had ever seen. And in the pure white, silent cold there came disease. First the old people began to die, and when they were dead and taken from

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the cave, then the children began to sicken. He had seen death many times before, but this time somehow it was closer and more terrible. One day, wandering in a cold corner of the cave, he came upon a dark-eyed woman trying to nurse the limp body of her child. It lay cold and hard in her trembling arms. He tried to turn away but could not. Instead he could only stare and stare feeding some fiery pain lost in the depths of memory. How long had the child been dead?

The days began to get longer, and the snow melted. Spring came down with the warm sunshine, and the leaves grew on the trees, and the grass grew up in the clearings between the remaining drifts of snow. Once more his hunt was successful, and he returned to the sounds of children at play in the sun. It was along the river one afternoon, seated in a circle of women amidst the play of their children, that he found her laughing, the woman with the dark eyes. She was pregnant. Suddenly he was back with her in the cave with the blackness and coldness and pain of death swirling down about them and the limp body in her arms. Now it was light and she was going to have another baby instead. Now it was spring and she was happy and laughing. She had forgotten, completely forgotten the one that was dead.. For the first time he saw the ways of the women, how hateful they could be. In the nights that followed he would get up and move away from them to sleep alone. He tried sleeping in an her cave, but could not stand the silence, so he returned and slept with the clan as far from the women as possible.

There was still some snow on the ground, and the buds were still unfolding on the trees that morning when he first came upon the tracks of the Animal. The mammoth herds had not come back since the winter, and this was the first sign anyone had seen of them. He had found the tracks of a single animal, larger than any he could remember. He rushed back excitedly, found the other hunters, and told them of the tracks. They scoured the countryside together but could find only the single pair which disappeared into the dense forest. Since the tracks were already several days old and obscured by rain, and since their stomachs were already full of the foods of spring, the hunters hung back, unwilling to chase the animal. They gradually drifted away and went back to the women and children. He was left alone and aggr; they would not hunt with him. His loneliness and anger grew and grew and began to take shape, drawing him towards the huge, mysterious tracks. He would leave the clan and follow the Animal into the wilderness alone.

So the hunt began. At first the trail was easy to follow, and he expected to catch up with the Animal quickly, but on the second day he lost the trail completely and almost had to turn back. At length, however, he found it again, leading him in a new direction towards the mountains. The sun had already set on the third day when he finally caught his first glimpse of the Animal like a shadow among the trees across a valley. He crept downwind and into the trees to stalk it. The sky was completely dark by the time he came to the clearing where it grazed. He had not been fully prepared by the tracks; it was far greater than he had imagined. It was huge, so huge he could hardly believe it, but only stare and stare and hold his breath from fear. Its tusks, its trunk, its head alone were gigantic. Its back arched against the sky, filling the night, blotting out sky and stars. Only the sound of its grazing and breathing, and his heart as he listened disturbed the night. Its presence filled him with strength. He was drawn to it, called by it, summoned by its majesty. Now there could be no turning back, but only the cry of the hunt. His fate was drawn to the fate of the animal; he knew no way but the way of the hunt.

The Animal must have sensed his presence that night for it would not rest, but resumed its journey instead. He followed it through the night ~~by~~ by its noise, crashing through the heavy undergrowth of the forest. By the next morning they

had gotten into more open, rocky country, and he followed its tracks instead, drawing near the mountains in pursuit. Several times he came within sight of the Animal, but he dared not get too close. One spear would not be enough; he would have to devise some other way to kill the Animal.

The sun beat down from straight above when he found the crystal lying among brown rocks along a gully. For a while he stood, forgetting the hunt in its fascination. Its facets broke the sun into pieces of light, violet and red and blue, flashing and turning in his hand. But he thought again of the Animal. It was already afternoon, and the Animal was far ahead. If he did not hurry it would escape him forever. He resumed the hunt with the crystal in one hand and the spear in the other. But his spear caught in the underbrush, and he fell further and further behind. He thought about throwing the crystal away, yet it was so beautiful, he dared not part with it. Perhaps he would never again find one so perfect. If he had been back at the cave, he could have put it away in the woodpecker nest where he kept all his beautiful stones. There they were safe and out of the way of the children. He would go there when no one was around and play games with them, placing them in various combinations, deciding the order of their beauty and the best way of arranging them. They were so wonderfully hard and permanent, as opposed to the soft and changing women.

But the woodpecker nest was far away, and now he had no place for the crystal. Perhaps he could hide it atop some hill and come back later to find it. But all the hills would look alike, and he would never be able to find it again. The question turned in his mind as if he had seen it before, as if it would carry him back to another time, back to the cave where he kept his stones. He was never satisfied with a hiding place. Time and again he would wake up in the night and know they must be moved to safety. So the next day, when no one was watching, he would go to them, gather them all together, and take them to a new hiding place. First there was the tree stump along the stream, the ledge on the hill, then a groundhog burrow, and finally the woodpecker nest. But even there he could not be satisfied. What if someone were to come along and find them? Perhaps even a tiger. Suddenly his heart fell. What good would it be to kill the animal? Where could he hide it from the tigers? He thought of the kill, the cry and the thrown spear, but then he saw the body and a tiger circling, drawn by its blood. He would build fires to drive it away, but still it would come day after day. He would build the fires and wait and wait with nothing to do with the animal, no place to put it away, no place to hide its body.

AS he came to the crest of a hill it occurred to him that he had not heard the animal for a long time. Perhaps it had escaped him. He climbed onto the highest rock and surveyed the little valley before him. There was no sign of the Animal. Beyond was open country where he would not be able to hear its passage, and where, perhaps, the rock would allow no footprints. Had it escaped? Had he come all the way for nothing? The thought shook him into action, and he hurried down the rocky slope, down and up the other side of a dry creek bed, grasping a root to swing himself up onto the bank. Then there it was. The Animal had stopped to look for food in a thicket along the gully, and hearing his approach, had turned to look at him. Its mighty limbs were relaxed, but heralded great strength. When it raised its head to look at him, it was like the rippling current of a river, like the rising cliffs of a mountain. This was no little meal of deer or pig, but an animal of endless strength and majesty. Its tusks and fur and meat were no cold and lifeless trophies of the hunt which all the women share, but were something whole and live and full of surging blood and strength. And he alone ^{must} ~~would~~ challenge it. His heart beat faster and faster; the power of the hunt rose in him.

His spear was so small. He looked from it to the great Animal. It would flick him aside like a fly. This was no time for strength and a spear, but a time for cunning and plans instead. He looked around and considered how the valley narrowed and grew steeper as it ran in the direction of the Animal which stood between a gathering cliff and the gully at its base. Beyond the Animal the ledge narrowed below sheer cliff.

He crept to the creek bed and looked back at the Animal. It took a long look after him and then went back to its feeding. Leaving it, he ran close to the ground along the gully, past the Animal and under the cliff. Then he found the pit. Turning a corner in the stream bed, he came upon a flood-gouged hole several times his height. and on the right, the side where he had left the Animal, the cliff jutted out and left only a little room on the ledge. All was perfect for the kill. The fall from the ledge to the floor of the creek bed would be too much for the weight of the Animal. But beyond the pit the creek bank was not so steep, and if the Animal could keep its balance, perhaps it could run down into the pit with enough momentum to continue up the other side. He would have to make it fall instead. So he tossed loose rocks out of the creek bed and onto the ledge along the pit. The footing would be treacherous, and the Animal would roll on the stones.

It was still grazing when he returned, and he rejoiced in

the perfection of his plans. To complete them, he turned back into the woods and stripped leafy branches from a thicket. Then leaving the spear and the crystal in a safe place along the creek bank he returned to a point in the gully above where the animal grazed, he listened. There was no sound. He was ready. There was no doubt now, but only the tenseness of muscle and the short breathing of anticipation. Now there was no decision, but only a smooth swing up and out of the creek bed and then the violent scream of the kill. He raised and shook the branches over his head and ran with them down the slope towards the startled animal. It ~~turned~~ its huge body towards him and for what seemed like minutes only stared at him without moving. Like a great green-winged bird he rushed down the slope, shouting and waving the branches. The animal loomed larger and larger before him like a mountain; he raced down into it just as it ~~turned~~ ^{him} and lunged heavily away from through the trees and along the creek bank and out of the trees and along the ledge. Racing, shouting up behind it, he picked up a rock and threw with all his force at the flank of the animal. It felt the sting and tried to turn its head while running, but stumbled instead on the loose rocks along the ledge and toppled off balance and slid down, down in a cloud of dust and thunder of rocks to the pit below.

Only then did the terror come. A great cry arose from the pit and filled the vibrant valley. It echoed from the cliffs and rose again from the pit to meet like thunder overhead. The animal was bellowing in desperate pain. Then it began to scream instead, and its screams rose higher and higher like the pitiful squeals of some monstrous baby. Could this be the sound of his animal, his own, wonderful, majestic, glorious animal? These pitiful squeals, those terrible, terrible screams? Dying like a baby, his great, mountainous, everlasting animal? What had he done? The horror of an unspeakable misarrriage burst within him and swept out through his limbs and back and forth with cold, terrible chills. He turned and ran away along the ledge and through the trees and up the slope and down again into the crack bed and beyond the spear and crystal, on up away from the screams of the dying animal. Finally he could run no further and sank down to the ground exhausted and bewildered by the distant screams which went on and on. What had he done?

For a long time he lay without thinking. Gradually the screams of the animal faded away. Perhaps it had died. Or perhaps he was just not listening well enough. He rose on his elbow and cupped his ear towards the creek bed. There was no sound. He thought about going back. But what would he do with the dead body? What good was the animal now? But perhaps it was alive and would escape from the pit. It would go off into the forest to lick its wounds and recover. Someday he would come upon its tracks, and the hunt would begin

all over again. It would be strong and majestic again. It would raise its trunk and trumpet to the night. It would blot out the stars with its presence and fill the valleys with strength. But no, he had left it dying in the pit. His stomach was sick at the thought. He felt like going away and forgetting everything. He would find a cave and build a fire to keep out the evening chill, and rest until it was time to return to the clan. And then he would go back. But he would make no sign to them of the hunt. It would be his secret. Perhaps they were looking for him now, calling for him in the forest. Would they think he had died? He rose with these thoughts and went back to get his spear and crystal. They were just where he had left them, waiting for him along the creek. They felt good to him now, familiar and comforting. They would give him company and sympathy on the way back, for they, too, had been a party to the kill and they, too, knew the call of the Animal. He looked at the spear and felt it calling him home again. There would be hunts and feasts and sleeping in the cave again. Winter and spring and summer again. And children. He stopped. He looked around from the top of the hill. The sun was setting like a ball of red fire on the mountains, and it shone in his crystal with an even deeper and more beautiful red. It called to him. Where are you going? He listened for the Animal, but there was only silence. He looked at the crystal again. You must stay. It was then that he knew he could never forsake them, the pit, the hunt, and the Animal.

The sun had already set by the time he passed the spot where he had cut the branches. The air was strangely still. Perhaps the animal was dead. As he approached the pit, the silence grew and made him more and more afraid. What had happened? He readied his spear and tensed his muscles. He came to the edge of the pit. He looked down. A tiger looked back. It was eating his animal, the animal he had stalked and hunted and killed with strategy and courage and love, his animal, his own animal, torn and bleeding, dead and violated, the Tiger chewing it slowly. It had stopped eating when he appeared above the pit, and now it eyed him malignantly, its tail twitching slowly back and forth. It was eating his animal! He almost retched with disgust and anger. Murderer! Violator! He raised his spear at the Tiger and narrowed his eyes and crouched above it. It jumped stealthily out of the pit and crouched facing him along the ledge, eyeing him with mistrust. He moved towards it. The Tiger backed away. Disgust and anger and hate and fear mounted and swept through him like a storm. He poised his spear and sprang and hurled it at the Tiger with all the power of his life rushing out his arm and down the revenging spear at his enemy. But the Tiger was ready, its back arched and its fangs bared. It jumped to the side, avoiding the spear, and raced at him. It sprang into the air and struck him high on the chest, its claws ripping his arms and its jaw reaching for

his neck. He fell under its weight and struggled to escape, but it was too late; the tiger crushed him in its huge jaws and jagged teeth and ripped him apart. His blood poured forth from great wounds and all his strength flowed away. Finally the Tiger drew back and eyed its attacker, motionless in a pool of blood. It shook its head at the curious thing and turned back to the Animal where it had begun eating.

Pain flared and ebbed and raced through his mutilated limbs. His neck was not broken; his head remained alive, but attached to a creeping stalk of death. One arm was dead and perhaps a leg also. Blood streamed from his sides. He could feel it settle warmly under him. Thoughts rose and mingled with the pain. Darkness fell across the valley. Blood congealed slowly over his wounds and closed off their flow. Sleep and pain mixed in endless patterns before him. At length the Tiger left his meal and passed him on the way back to its den. It stopped and sniffed over him for a while, then left him as dead and slid noiseless into the night. Later he was conscious of a pack of dogs descending from the hill and fighting over the animal. Several found him above the pit, but he brushed them away in horror and pulled his dragging limbs over the rocks and up to the base of the cliff while pain rose again and shifted under the crusts of his wounds. On the way he fumbled upon the branches he had dropped pursuing the animal. The chase seemed far away, a distant memory. He lay against the cliff and pulled the branches over himself to keep the dogs away. The very leaves on which his hopes had

soared were now his cloak of death. Beneath the pain he was aware.

Night drew on. He groaned with pain and fell towards sleep and then woke again to chase away the hungry dogs. His wounds had stopped bleeding, and night pressed in upon him. Finally he fell into fitful sleep. The vivid patterns of pain and fear subsided into a steady throb against which memory began to return. He dreamed of beautiful summer days, of happiness and love and light. Children played again in the warm sun. The Animal returned and the hunt began again, leading him towards the mountains. It haunted him again with dark and endless mystery. He felt the processes of life stirring inside himself, but it hurt to tense his bowels, for they lay exposed to the air and dirt.

Finally the sky began to lighten towards daybreak, and ~~he~~ still clung to life. Again he became aware of the dogs snarling and fighting over the carcass of the Animal, and he turned his head towards them. They were mutilating his Animal. They had torn it apart, stripping its fur and scattering its massive frame over the rocks. With all his strength he tried to shout and scare them away, but it was no use; he was too weak to do anything but die. Instinctively he reached out his live arm looking for a stone to throw at the dogs. But he was too weak to throw it. Instead he grasped another stone and set it next to the first. Then another.

One after another he struggled to put the stones upon each other, the very stones he had thrown onto the ledge, the very stones on which the Animal had fallen. Slowly he built up a little pyramid until he had to raise himself from the ground to place the top stones. But the effort weakened him, and he fell back in exhaustion. The across his darkening sky there flashed one last thought. Now he had found the place for his crystal. He tried to recall where he had left it and finally located it on the bank where the Tiger had struck him down. Life ebbing from his limbs, he dragged himself to the ledge and seized the stone. With one final struggle he crawled back to the pyramid of stones and reached with the jewel to the top. He placed it carefully and then collapsed, his arms around it.

The sun rose, and the Tiger came back to the carcass of the Animal, chasing away the dogs. The dogs came to him instead and tore his lifeless body apart. But the sun sparkled on the jewel, and the Tiger and dogs could not eat the stone.