

Snake

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Sweet is the swamp with its secrets,
Until we meet a snake;
'Tis then we sigh for houses,
And our departure take

At that enthralling gallop
That only childhood knows.
A snake is summer's treason,
And guile is where it goes

The Swamp, Emily Dickinson

The Chinese Year of the Snake

Snakes are deep thinkers and always mysterious, possessing the power to bewitch. Born under the sign of wisdom, they are intelligent and wise, though this intellect is restless. Snakes are graceful and softly spoken, calm by nature, but intense. Cautious and guarded, they tend to analyse a situation before jumping into it. They trust themselves above all others, and in that they are seldom wrong. They hate to fail at anything, so are fired with intense determination. Once they have made a mistake, they never repeat it. By nature, they are skeptical beings, but they keep their suspicions to themselves. They are very private, and idle gossip is not for them. Despite being seductive and alluring, they are frequently unlucky in love. One can never tell how far snakes will go to achieve their aims. They are relentless and they never stop plotting. When angered, one feels their icy hostility instead of hearing sharp words. They always appear docile and quiet, and they never betray their true feelings. Their moves are planned out well in advance, and they bide their time for revenge. They can be evasive, and just when they seem to be caught, they slip away and are gone. They are subtle workers, imperceptibly manoeuvring and manipulating until they are ready to get what they want. Whatever happens, snakes always strike out for themselves. They know how to use people and situations to their advantage.

The Ley

Earth. The body of land a curvaceous shape clothed with irregular fields. The seams of its dress thick hedges of earth, covered in bramble and sedge. The dress itself, a rainbow of green, windswept and raw, hugging the pregnant roll of the land, close-fitted around its arching shoulders, its ribs, the mould of its neck. The dress it wears is studded with jewels – a clutch of sheep, a gang of crows, the manoeuvrings of an aimless pheasant. And then, sprung from nothing and awkwardly clinging, the occasional lump of a house. Clumps of bush are huddled in valleys; elsewhere solitary trees stand hunchbacked, distorted and gnarled by the wind. The tails of the dress are frayed and unkempt, dissolving into bracken and gorse as it strives to hide the limbs of the cliff crudely poking beneath it. This is the land.

Water. Washing against the body of land, in ceaseless movement, a giddy mass, endless and formless and grey, melting into the liquid ether as it stretches out beyond sight. Shapeless, yet matching every shape. Forming itself into infinite beings for elusive fractions of time. Restless, resistless, colourless. Murmuring the smoothest caress, inducing eternal slumber. Then screaming nightmare, pounding the land, venting its unspoken fury. A rippling gloss which harbours life – a teeming world unseen beyond the splintered teeth of the rock. Dancing a bolero to the rhythm of the moon. This is the sea.

Wind. Fire. And here – couched in a valley of the body, earth, its head in the lap of its mother, the sea – is the ley. At its neck is a slow stream, brown and deep, which

wends through the bank of sand on the beach, becoming thinner and more transparent as it meets with the salt of the sea. At the base of its neck are two walls of dune, thick with startled grass. It reaches out a mile inland – an oily half-river covered in reed – dissolving to field as the valley flattens, as its brackish waters drain away. At its fringe, and tracing a rough-cut line, crouching bushes and scratches of sedge mark its boundary with the fields.

At dawn, a low mist blankets the ley, ghosting the squatting bushes grey and the reeds a damp cold silver. Breezes cut above its head, teasing the uppermost tassels. Within the quietness of its core, random birds bob careless flight, and cling to the shivering reeds. Tentative rays reach over the hill, stretching into the heart of the ley, defining it, giving it colour and shape. The reeds take form, green-silver and brown, and then are burnished to bloodied red as the mist burns off their brittle backs, as they stand in the glory of the sun. At its neck, the ley is alive with sound, singing a shivering lament with no words, dancing a trance in the wind. Further inland, the reeds are thin, swaying but slightly, in unison, murmuring a ceaseless rosary through tight, invisible lips. By day, the ley endures the light, absorbing it, blocking it out from its heart. The brackish waters never warm, nor laze in the gaze of the sun. At dusk, the ley shrugs off its shape. Yet still it breathes; and still it waits. Alive. Forever awake.

In winter months, the sea rears up, spewing its salt in the mouth of the ley, forcing it open to drink of it deep, till its sullen waters are stirred to life. Leaden skies empty their spiteful load as they meet with the barren land. Rain spins off the polished fields; it chases down the contoured slopes, till the reeds are choked and drowned.

Broad channels of brackish water emerge to furrow the face of the ley. A furious wind scratches its surface. The reeds crease in agony, bowing submissive, caught in an unrelenting slaughter, screaming a bitter wretchedness that severs their skin and chills to the soul.

In summer, the ley scarcely meets with the sea. The waters are brown and void of movement, receding into the base of the reeds, where shadows lie waiting to cool it. The reedbed thickens. Slender fresh shoots, ecstatically green, pierce through the mudbed, aimed at the sky. The sun scorches the tips of the sweltering reeds; it bronzes the curtains of the ley – the bushes and the tinder scrub – till the valley appears to catch fire. The ley grows pregnant with waiting life, sweating and sighing a warm embrace between the thighs of the field. Here, in the fulsome eye of the sun, the ley swoons, outwardly still.

Yet within its core there is constant motion: the pulse of a beating heart. The ley is life; it nurtures life. The markings of warrens are scratched on the slopes. The trace of a path is cut through the sedge, shaped by the tread of a badger. Otters and mink are hid in its depths. Voles and shrews befriend its banks. Adders and lizards sun on stones which bulge from the land like blisters. A grass snake swims in the stagnant water, dipping its head as it dives for food. Frogs, newts and speckled toads are buried alive within the sludge of the mudbed. Bats weave and circle over its head; butterflies wend haphazard routes; honeybees brood; dragonflies hover, pulsing the air with their fragile wings. And birds, everywhere. The sleek sand martin angling flight as it shimmies through the close-set reeds; the yellow wagtail courting mates with baffled feathers and shivering wings; the grasshopper

warbler, heard but not seen; the bearded reedling with her brown-streaked eggs in a nest of leaves lined with flowers. The meadow pipit, surfing through tiers of blue sky, singing while sliding to earth. A kingfisher, perched on a broken bulrush, nodding its head and flicking its tail before plunging into the water to feed. An imperious buzzard, high above all, surveying the commotion of life.

Man alone is the single creature unable to carve a living from this. This is no place for man. On either side of the ley are fences: fierce defences erected by those who consciously choose to be exiled. Houses overlook from a distance: watchful, respectful, but wary. A single dwelling, charred and in ruins, lies within the rim of the fence.

Free from the clutch of curious man, the ley is a turbulent wilderness. A prison, a paradise. A labyrinth of reed, where creatures search and stumble blind. A shock of sudden pools and potholes; of natural traps and snares. An isolation; an eternity. Thrashed by the wind, burned by the sun, mocked by the chattering reeds. A place of death, of things once drowned, of things that have decayed. Yet from decay is born new life. A cycle of renewal, rebirth. Ageless and timeless, and without end.

Not earth nor water. Somewhere between. This is a borderland. A land forged from the bowels of earth and sculpted into miraculous being. A micro world. A part of the real world, living apart. Bowing to seasons, to wind and to fire, to the shocks that nature thrusts upon it. Resistant to the will of man. Cold, uncomfortable, close, confined. A solitude. Host to a universe entire, which lives and thrives, survives and dies, feeding off its own.

This is the ley.

The Girl

Her hair was unruly and dark. It defied both brushes and combs. There were always things in it – things that were caught there. Things that were meant to be there, like bunches, and things that weren't meant to, like straw. How could she find straw in the city? And yet she did, for there it was, trapped in the snare of her locks. Her hair was thick. In an effort to tame it, they cut it short to her shoulders. They cut it every month. Then, for almost an hour perhaps, she would be the child that her parents wanted, before her hair returned to the wild, and she became the thing that she was – an innocent child, a child of nature, a child moulded of clay.

Her skin was weathered and tough, as though belonging to someone much older. Her face was unusually pale and cold. She had a flat brow, a sloping nose, a pointed chin. Her eyes were darkest green. They watched you, watched you, watched you always. Always wide and never blinking. Her lips were thin and dull.

She was sinewy and nimble. She could climb a tree using only her arms, pulling herself through the boughs. She could hang from bars by her hands. And, when she chose, she could hang from bars by only her feet, wrapping her arms round her chest like a bat. She was fast and fearless. She had balance and strength that gave her a freedom to go in directions beyond what was known. Beyond where others would think of going, beyond where they wanted or needed to go. Her toes were long, like little fingers. She wriggled and squirmed; she couldn't be held.

She wore bright-coloured dresses printed with flowers, prettily tied with laces and bows. And under her dress she wore jeans that were frayed, with earth in their pockets and mud on their knees. When outside, the dress was hitched in her belt so she could run and climb and be free. So she could ride on the back of the wind, so she could glide on the air.

She was ten years old, and born in the year of the snake.

Her parents were professional people. They had been drawn to London separately, in search of career and success. In London they had found their calling, in London they had found each other, in London they had got married. Now they were wed, they were rooted to London. It was where they belonged, it was all they required. It was where they had sunk all their hope. It was their singular promise, their future, their now. In London they lived, in a pleasant house which was bound by a garden six yards square.

They had started a family with the same careful planning as expressed in their salaried lives. They had thought to raise a couple of children, to apportion being a parent between them, to balance the ambition they held for their work with the time they invested in their upcoming offspring, in the hope of fulfilment in both.

That ambition had been tested early. The structure they sought to impose on the girl was challenged by the thing that she was. They continually had to adapt, to concede, when managing both of these worlds. Balance forever proved elusive, and in tending to this creature they nurtured, both felt the frustration of sacrifice.

Sitting at home, the mother knew there were projects at work she couldn't take on, meetings she couldn't attend. There were people she couldn't influence, promotion that went other ways. Sometimes, from somewhere deep inside, a disquiet would surface that she couldn't disguise. Having a child – for all its joy – had set her back by two years. The mother struggled to resist this fact. It grew on her as a reluctant resentment, a subversive truth, weaving through her fabric of life, tainting her bond with the girl.

For his part, the father showed willing to acquire the skills of nappy-changing, buggy-folding, bottle-warming, sick-removal. He had been through ante-natal class; he had been through post-natal depression; he had been through random panic attacks that left him holding the child in his arms in unwelcome places at unpleasant times. But for all he might involve himself, he became aware – as reality settled into routine – of how parenting lacks parity, and of his own subordinate role. Under the bitter truth of this knowledge he focused himself on his job, aware that he was also resented: resented for simply leaving the house, resented for simply going to work, which – no matter how arduous nor tedious it was – would be seen by his wife as a chance for himself, as an excuse to escape from the child.

If a child can bring a couple together, it can also tear them apart. The girl unwittingly sparked a discord, simply by coming into existence, simply by being and continuing to be. Buried in the unspeakable, the parents knew their daughter's birth had compromised both of their lives. However they sought to ignore or disguise it, from others and even sometimes from themselves, some of this implicit truth may have spilled its light on the girl.

As has to be, routine began to establish itself. It started to manage the scope of their days; it shifted its pattern to shape and fit their lives as they changed and evolved. The girl was ever an early riser, awakening with the sun. As an infant she would stand at her window watching the creep of the dawn; and, when old enough to go downstairs, she would open the doors and run onto the lawn.

She was independent from a very young age, as if she was conscious of the distance between them, as if she was conscious of their distance from her. Yet solitude was her sanctuary. At the break of each day, she would stand in the garden, watchful, acute to all that was in it, till her parents came down to the kitchen. Then they packed her bag and took her away – to a carer, to crèche, to school. She lived in these other worlds by day, returning only at dusk. To stand in the garden until it was supper, until she was called up to bed. On the weekends she fashioned a world of her own, living it mostly unseen. Her parents played with her sometimes then, but she seemed so content, so at ease with herself, they often let her alone.

As a child, the days and the nights were all hers. They were hers alone, and she spent them alone. While she was small, she felt this seclusion to be her salvation. But, as she grew, she grew resentful. Resentful to be where she was. Though her parents might have thrived in London, for her it became a constraint. A place where she was denied. With a garden too small to run or to hide in. Where she couldn't escape and be free.

This furious desire for freedom grew stronger the more that the parents strove to contain it. From seeds of frustration it bred like a canker, infecting all that she did.

Her pale white skin turned pallid and cold; her huge eyes stared from her listless face. She closed herself down, she closed off the world. Sometimes she seemed not to breathe. At last, as if life was being sucked from her, as if she had lost the spirit to live, she begged her parents for the space to draw air. Here she was trapped; here she was starving. She was drowning, dissolving away.

Her parents were scared. They had never witnessed such strength of being, such passion before in a child. They retreated from outright rejection to reason, and then they gave in to the girl. They agreed to go for a long weekend, to a cottage close to the sea. The parents hoped it would meet her desire, while the girl was possessed by the promise it gave. The wild, the untamed, the unknown.

A train ride and a hire car later, they found themselves in sobering darkness miles from the safety of home. Her father cut the engine. For a moment, no one stirred. The girl sat, restless, in the back of the car, holding her breath, unwilling to breathe. Unable to see beyond the window – beyond her pale, reflected face – into the void of night. Then she opened her door. She stepped onto the drive.

She could see nothing. Nothing but the frame of a garage lit by a dull light stamped on its forehead, and the shadow of hedges beyond. She could see nothing; but leaning back and closing her eyes, she felt moist drops of rain on her face, she felt a cool wind stinging her skin. She could smell the salt, she could sense there was life – life in the thicket, in the fields beyond, and, further still, in the sea. In the sea which turned and turned again, ceaselessly in the never distance. And, more acutely than ever before, she felt herself coming alive.