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A SACRED PLACE

Christine Stephens

“When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter as a sacred place, the marrow of nature. In short, all good things are wild and free.”

—Henry David Thoreau, “Walking”

I'll never forget it. I was running the obstacle course of Grand Valley's nature trail, traversing rough-hewn log steps, roots, puddles and rocks, and had yet to reach the difficult makeshift bridge which elevates the walkway above swampy earth. I'd run the path so often that I knew each missing slat and handrail, memorized where to place each foot, my path deepening with each pass.

My roommate asked why I would choose this chaos rather than the uniform safety of the indoor track. The question seemed ridiculous. In autumn, goldenrod dotted the path, as buttery sunlight cut through the leaves, the sweet smell of decay permeating my clothes. Exercise may have been my motivation, but what I found was a sacred place, a silence punctuated only by bird calls.

I turned a corner into a small clearing. Before me grazed five deer, unterrified beside the wooden walkway, their presence lending a stillness to the air, rendering it other-worldly, as if I had stepped into a photograph. Then one turned to a fresh patch of grass; another twitched a velvet ear. I don't know why they didn't run, but for a full minute we inhabited the same space, as if I belonged in their wilderness, close enough to see their jaws work the grass side to side, their wet eyes dart behind long lashes.

I'm not sure what broke the silence, but when one raised her head, the rest scattered in impossible long-legged leaps. Had they been there at all? I walked the rest of the way, conjuring their image.

A month later, a sign in the dorm warned students to wear bright orange on the nature trail because it was hunting season. This puzzled and frightened me. Stomping in my cut-off sweats and Grand Valley sweatshirt, how could anyone mistake my clumsiness for a deer's grace? Besides, how could a poacher trespass on University grounds? Why was the nature trail not protected?

I'd come to accept my vision of the deer as a gift, but I suddenly recognized their ignorance in trusting me. Where I had felt a serene bond—each of us vulnerable, linked to the earth and thus to each other—I felt a new separation. I was dangerous to them; I could have been someone with a gun. But I was also like the deer, hunted, though I could wear bright orange. Hunted and hunter, I was neither and both, caught in the weighted balance of nature.

I may have ignored the posted warnings and jogged unhindered, but I didn't run the trail the rest of that season and quit each hunting season, choosing safety to a deer's danger in nature. By running the indoor track, I'm not sure what I lost—perhaps, as Thoreau said, the chance to recreate myself. Hunting may be part of life, but poaching and carelessness are unforgivable. If we seek the “wild and free,” must we count ourselves among the hunted?