

# EUTIERRIA

*Erica Vanacore* prose

Time melts away in the colors of dawn and dusk; the seasons wither and blossom each year, and for those years, I have not taken a single breath. The mystery of how the world reacted to my sudden disappearance will forever linger as I remain.

Slowly, disgustingly, beautifully, and solitarily, I have rotted away within this forest. At first the moisture from my body, half-decayed, invited mushrooms to peak their heads from the ground and germinate. They appeared in all kinds of colors; from ivory caps to golden cups, they multiplied, and spread their network of nutrients and information across the entire forest. Once there wasn't an ounce of flesh left, the moss came to visit. They decided to create a home from my bones, thriving within the small fractures and hallowed centers. Then the vines slithered down, coiled around my femur, weaved through my ribcage, and rested. Leaves died and withered next to me. With the abundance of foliage that created a city from my body--with their roots like roads and weeds residing in my carcass--an abundance of critters created a trough from which they ate.

It was common for deer lips to nuzzle me during winter. Sweet berries and nuts are scarce during the season, but it's easier to find fallen leaves and twigs on the frozen soil. The deer inevitably gets spooked, either by a sound or smell, and leap off in a hurry using and breaking my carcass in their running start. I didn't blame the deer; they were just scared. Scared like the rabbit that approached my body in spring, nose twitching, ears erect. Noticing the bounty of food in front of them, the cottontail bounded over and nibbled on the moss that sprouted atop the newly exposed bone. Then it ran off. Perhaps to find something tastier, like cabbage or dry hay. I didn't mind. I couldn't imagine how sour the moss must taste if its only source of nutrients comes from death.

In the summer of this year—after many years, rather—my skeleton turned to dust, consumed by terra. From the center of the Earth to the top of the highest branch, I now travel amongst the interconnected systems that expand for miles. I can feel rivers flow at my fingertips with hundreds of fish flapping and twisting across my

knuckles. I can taste the minerals the waterway provides, absorbed by the ground and allowing me to drink after death. I can smell the worms eat and excrete, squirming their thin bodies through the soil. I can hear the whisper of wind that dances through many tree branches, and twirling with each individual leaf that crosses its path. I can see the large pile of twigs and logs that carry a secret: an underground den where beavers raise their young. They do not notice me, for I no longer move against the Earth, but with it in total sync.