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Mantel: These Woods

JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL PRIZE
FINALIST

THESE WOODS

Tara Mantel

Hibernation

In these woods, trees sway in the wind like tentacles. They are new growth, they know how to begin from nothing. In time their roots reach far down into the claylike layers of the earth, unfurling stringlike root hairs that grope the raw dirt, hold on tightly for life.

Nadja stands amid the highbrush cranberry growing at the base of a young oak, its highest branch thrusting crookedly into the dawn. The wet leaves below her feet are inches thick, cushioning her step. In this season of transition, she feels her shape shift: she is bulkier in her heavy clothes, and her sluggish body craves breads and grains, the starch her cells will need throughout the winter.

Sister Sky, Nadja's older half-sister, is here too. All the way from the New Mexico side of the reservation. She is bulky all the time. She pushes through these North Dakota windchills like a snowplow clearing drifts. In the middle of a rock-weathering January, her hands are warm and pulsing. She eats fresh root vegetables as long as they are available, and red meat for breakfast. Sometimes she fixes a batch of *sopaipilla*, but she eats it with raw garlic, not honey. She says that garlic is a charm. Nadja, who knows that the caseworker would not approve of charms, adds, also an antioxidant.

Arrivals

How long had Nadja been in these woods? She and her husband purchased the drafty yellow farmhouse something like eight autumns ago, in 1979. They hadn't discussed having

children, but when, on the way back from Chief Looking's Village, Nadja found an abandoned baby girl in the Bismarck bus station, they believed they had received a sign.

The baby was carried off by security personnel—Nadja couldn't get the image out of her mind—and one night she breathed the name "Zola" into the bedroom air and wanted it to be the baby's name. But when, a week after her training had ended, Nadja called the department inquiring about the child, she discovered that the baby's heart, like that of her husband, was a pulsing flesh grenade quickly counting down to zero. In time, both failed.

The mourning chipped away at Nadja's bones, carved out in the sticky marrow a deep nesting place. She had to remember to move her body forward, preferably into physical labor of some kind, and so directed all her energy into unnecessary home improvement projects, beginning with the interior of the creaky farmhouse. She drove to the hardware store for cans of paint, rollers, angled nylon brushes, sandpaper, spackle. After a breakfast of banana and oatmeal, she would sand and wipe the walls, carefully paint the trim, roll on slabs of color—teal, magenta, gold. While the walls dried she went outside to weed or mulch or prune the rose bushes that hung over the stone wall.

But even the freshly painted walls held the energy of grief; they spoke in the night of their emptiness, and when Nadja pushed against them, she decided to believe in ghosts.

One day the department called Nadja with a possible placement: a young girl waiting, it seemed, especially for her. This stringy-haired girl with post-traumatic stress disorder arrived as planned, but Nadja barely had time to get to know her when another arrival came knocking. Nadja had not seen Sky in nine years. Her hair was still long and straight and raven-colored, her bangs still choppy—she must still use the kitchen knife to cut them, Nadja thought—her expression like an ink blob, her knotty fingers proof of her adolescent training as a potter. "Father said you did not sound so good on the phone," Sky said, and then pushed past Nadja to the stove to set a pot to boil.

Sky found a job at the grocery store in the older part of town, but her blood was that of a healer. The night she arrived at the farmhouse, she sat in front of the fire, her face glowing like melted amber. She closed her eyes and said, I remove myself from my flesh boundary and travel with the animal guardians to the otherworld. I fight among the supernatural in order to see into past and future.

When Sky opened her eyes, Nadja said, "You still practice."

"I have no choice in the matter," Sky said.

In time Nadja would see that those who believed in Sky came from miles, in rusted trucks with no windshield wipers or hubcaps. They came from as far away as the desert because they knew she'd give them what they needed, that she could sense their energies and their magnetic pulls and resistances, and give them advice they could use.

Nadja had grown up with pharmaceuticals and indoor plumbing and a different mother. She was not going to argue with Sky. She remembered how Sky healed the dying and convulsing snakebite boy, on that windless summer day in 1971, and held her tongue.

Inquiries

In these woods, saplings spring up strong and fast. They reach upward and downward, opposites stretching. Nadja breathes deeply in her garden. She can hear Sky banging around in the kitchen, setting out tea and fruit and oatmeal flavored with cinnamon and cream. In a few minutes Sky will emerge in her embroidered denim skirt and the quilt coat with the fuzzy trim along the edges, go to the end of the wraparound porch, the side facing east, and pay homage to the morning light, to *hayılka*. She will stand so still she could be a stamen reaching out from a sweet-liquid desert bloom.

Nadja bends to gather chamomile, thyme, rosemary. The light in this northern backcountry is lilac-colored. Lilac comes before pink, pink before yellow. The herbs, which Nadja puts in her basket, will dry over the fireplace and then be put into clay jars.

Nadja needs many plants, because she cooks for the millions. That is how she says it. At the moment she might need to cook only for two, but she will cook for anyone, for strangers and the estranged, for Sky's goddesses and visitors, for the delirious and the rabid.

Nadja's children, they come from all over. The women in the support group, which Nadja attends every other week, nod when she says that these kids are raindrops, they are pollen. They smile when she says she calls her latest girl Honey-Wheat because all she ate for two days was clover honey on slices of toasted wheat bread. Honey-Wheat's birth name is Julia, but Nadja likes to let the child believe that her new name is a special gift.

When Nadja goes inside, Sky is at the cutting board, silent, preparing the ingredients for chili, and Honey-Wheat is squirming up into her chair, which is pulled too close to the table. She is six years old and on four medications, which Sky glares at when Nadja sets them, in a multicolored pile, in front of the girl, so she can swallow them with some water crackers and juice.

Honey-Wheat is asking about where babies come from, and Nadja jumps in to say, motioning skyward, my little girl, babies come from above—that is why the clouds have many colors in them. She gets this out quickly because the truth will open the floodgate and then there will be questions she can never answer.

The Boy

About a year later, these woods do an amazing thing. It is a glazed, humid week, tornado warnings in all the counties. The sky is yellow-gray and the air so still your ears echo.

On the edge of the tree line appears a boy of about five. He is wild looking, with deep-set eyes, and he crouches in the brush. Nadja is putting down a fresh layer of mulch in the garden, and turns for the wheelbarrow when she spots him. She watches for movement, but he is as still as a boulder.

The boy is curious, not afraid. She goes inside and returns to

the garden with sunflower seeds and peaches.

"I wonder," Nadja says to the boy, "if you've ever tried a peach." She bites into it and lets the juice run down her chin. She holds the fruit out to him. "And I'll bet you don't know what sunflower seeds taste like."

The boy doesn't answer.

"Tienes hambre?" she says, but there is no sign of comprehension.

She thinks of calling the police but waits. The boy will come for food eventually.

The next day the boy is there again, but now he wanders to the porch and sits quietly with Nadja, and on the third day he comes inside. Nadja can't take her eyes off him. He looks as though he had sprung, fully formed, from the dank mud on the bank of a stream or from the depths of rotting compost.

Nadja talks to him about anything: her day, her garden, people who mean nothing to him or even to her. She tells him about Sky, how he will meet her soon. She puts out a plate of waffles and watches him closely. There are things—normal, everyday things—that the boy clearly has never seen. The waffle maker, for instance, might to him have been an alien spaceship. Is he interested in spaceships? She lets the silence grow.

She talks to him about a bath: has he had one lately? Maybe he would like one. Maybe he would like to be clean, wear soft pajamas.

She leaves him with his half-eaten waffle to run a bath, and when the waffle is gone the boy lets her rub him down with a cloth. He has cuts—old and nearly healed—and several bruises that are yellow in the middle. She checks for malnutrition and lice, then dries him and wraps him in a towel. When she runs a comb through his hair he looks down and picks at the chipped spot on the sink.

"You are a sweet fruit," Nadja says, "and you are discovered."

Beside the Water

Sky has firm ideas about what children need; she takes one

look at the boy and bangs her fist on the table and says, we must cleanse him.

Nadja had seen Sky's cleansing ritual several times and concluded that, at least, there's no harm in it. She tells Honey-Wheat and the boy that they are going down to the pond, and they will lie on a warm slab of rock, and they will listen to the beautiful songs of the meadowlark. She turns to the boy and says, Aunt Sky will clean your clothes and give you a special necklace to wear. She tells Honey-Wheat, come, show him yours, and Honey-Wheat pulls out from the top of her muddy pink t-shirt a silver chain with a turquoise medallion hanging from it.

Nadja says they will all go down and see what the frogs are up to. She says, what do you think they do down there all day?

When they get to the rock, Sky hands the boy a towel. "Go behind that tree and take off your clothes. Wrap up in this."

Honey-Wheat is excited about this ritual because she is allowed to be naked. She smiles, showing teeth stained with cherry Kool-Aid. She yanks at the sleeves of her t-shirt until her arms are free, and then pulls the shirt partly over her head. She lets it hang down past her neck like a nun's habit.

The boy comes back with the towel around his shoulders. Sky says to the boy, "Lie on that rock, on your back." Nadja steps down the muddy slope and onto the rock, to demonstrate. She smells the stale heat of baked earth. "Sky, don't force him," Nadja says, but Sky is already gathering the boy's clothes.

The boy sits beside Nadja. Honey-Wheat joins them and sits, hugging her knees. She scratches a pebble into the rock, brushes at the chalky outline.

Nadja says to the boy, "Do you know this place?" The boy looks at her. "It is a nice pond, don't you think?"

Sky does not like the chatting. "Lie back," she says, and at the pond's edge begins beating the boy's clothes with a baseball bat. "See," Nadja whispers, "she is getting out all the dirt and dust." The boy looks from Sky to Nadja, blinking.

Sky begins her chant, a low monotone from the gut, and the dust disappears over the water. Soon a giant cumulus cloud

opens enough for a wash of sun to spread over them. The rock heats again quickly, makes their legs prickle with goosebumps. "See?" Nadja says to the boy. "You pulled the sun's rays right out of the sky."

"Sunny sky," Honey-Wheat says to her knees, giggling.

Naming

Nadja calls the department and in fact one caseworker there knows of this boy. This one is called Cody, and he runs away, the woman says, he's been placed all over the area. She says that Nadja should hold tight. Someone will come by, she says, to take a history, but the days pass and no one shows up. Calls are not returned.

Nadja searches deep for explanations but there is nothing for a situation like this. She consults her training manual and talks with the support group, but there is nothing regarding a child who is spit out by a woods and does not speak. That the boy doesn't speak does not, on its own, concern Nadja. These kids, they have already tumbled down from strange mountains; they do not necessarily believe in the benefits of speech.

The boy receives his special name a week later: he helps Nadja with the yard cleanup, uprooting with his bare hands stunted bulbs and weeds with stems as thick as Nadja's thumb. And so he becomes Claw.

In the spring Claw digs additional rows for the garden and clears the area around the shed, which Sky wants to turn into a hut for her rituals. He pulls wormwood and foxtail for hours, even thistle, forms six piles circling the shed. Nadja goes to him with lemonade and apples and peanut butter bread. He eats while squatting beside a mass of bent white rudbeckia, the ground dug away and the roots half-exposed.

Honey-Wheat wanders over next to Claw. Her dandelion crown sits crooked on her head and her face is smeared with mud and the orange frost of lily stamens. Her ponytail hangs limp at the base of her neck.

Claw counts out half his apple slices and places them, one at

a time, in Honey-Wheat's hand. She bites into one and smacks noisily.

Chewing, and imperceptibly, surviving.

Deliverables

Nadja wants Claw to see life in the town, kids playing on the sidewalk, merchandise bought and sold, pigeons and hot tar.

We will take a trip to town, she says, to the store to get some yummy things. Claw looks at the floor, chewing on the nail of his index finger.

In the front seat of the truck, Honey-Wheat yammers on about where to get the best oranges; how Mr. Guslander, the store owner, sometimes gives you a lollipop and you don't have to pay for it; that there's a church with ladies sitting in front of it and sometimes the high bell is ringing but sometimes it isn't.

Up ahead is the racket they've heard for a mile: large machines, and then dust rising from the site of a future strip mall. The metal contraptions emerge from the cloud, folding and unfolding their grasshopper-like appendages, and Claw is pasted to the window. He turns to Nadja, his eyes ask seven questions. Nadja says they are making a very big building and so the workers have to get up in machines with high seats and lots of controls. Claw looks out. His fingers pick at the peel of an orange and finally get a grip, pulling it away. Tiny oil droplets spray into the air.

Nadja has never seen a child so silent. But she will lose him if she coaxes, if her mind is full of ideas of things she feels he must do. She will lay a finger on him lightly, give him a sentence or two, and wait.

When she pulls into the store parking lot, she says, "I will be just a few minutes." Honey-Wheat has questions about what, exactly, is going to be purchased, and climbs over Claw and out of the truck. She goes to shut the door but stops. Claw is moving to get out, and then he does, dropping himself onto the pavement. Even Honey-Wheat is frozen with surprise. Nadja winks at her, motions "shhh."

They go into the store and roam the aisles. Honey-Wheat

tosses boxes of cookies into the cart, and Nadja stops to remove them. Claw looks up and down the stacked shelves, but the fruit section stops him in his tracks. He wants a lime, so Nadja bags one and gives it to him to carry.

At the counter Mr. Guslander says, "Is this another one of yours," and Nadja says, "Yes, this is Claw." But Guslander hears "Claude" and says, "Well, Claude, how about a lollipop?" Honey-Wheat grins and jumps around. Guslander places two lollipops on the counter and Claw inspects both before curling his fingers around the red one.

On the way home they have to stop. A train is working its way along the freight line. Nadja stops at the flashing lights. The train rumbles ahead and blows its horn. Honey-Wheat squeals with delight.

The boxcars pass, shades of red and rust and gray flash by. She looks at the children, watches their eyes follow the cars, then flick back to their original position, only to follow again, as if quickly reading lines of text.

Nadja's eyes burn. One boxcar is open and empty; she thinks she sees a drunk man slouched in there, or a child in the corner covered with a burlap sack, breathing the dust of husks and wood chips. When the caboose passes, Nadja looks left at the snaky line of cars disappearing. The sun hits a piece of broken glass lying on the track, and as she pulls forward, it beams out a pupil-piercing glare.

Claw stacks his lime peels against the seat's back, one on top of the other, but Honey-Wheat bounces up and down on the seat and they fall over. He bites into the lime and makes a face. Irritated, he eyes the fruit, giving it a silent interrogation.

Ritual, with Jell-O

No sooner is the shed transformed into a healing hut when a pregnant woman rings the doorbell. She is tired and pale and says to Nadja, yeah, looking for the healer.

Sky takes the woman along the path leading to the shed, its roof covered with early fall leaves the color of candied apples and

cantaloupe. Nadja fixes an echinacea tea flavored with ginger and brings it out.

Healers need a lot of space, so the hut is sparsely decorated. There is a twin mattress covered with a quilt, which sits on a raised platform, and bunches of dried lavender hanging from nails.

Nadja enters with the tray of tea and sets it on a low table beside the platform. Sky has already lit the sage. The woman takes a cup and drinks. The three of them drink, silently. Then Sky claps her hands together. She says, good, we begin now. To the woman she says, clean up your hair, it is tangled. Sky hands her a comb, says get out all the knots.

The woman takes down her hair and combs it, then lies back. Sky spreads the woman's hair out on the pillow. Nadja crosses to the window, where she can see Claw and Honey-Wheat playing. Behind her, Sky rummages through boxes of beads.

"You are three months?" Sky says.

"Yes," the woman says. "I have had one child but this one already feels so different."

The stranger's truck is empty; the woman must have come alone. Sky rolls up her sleeves. She approaches the woman. Nadja watches Sky move her hands—they tremble at times, slow down, jerk back, move in closer—over the woman's body. They stop above the woman's womb. Sky says, "Is the father of this child a good-for-nothing weasel?"

The woman hesitates. Sky says, "Do not lie to me."

"Some would say that he is," the woman says.

"He is angry with this baby and his bad energy will hurt it. You must go live somewhere else until it is born."

Sky again passes her hands over the woman, moving them in small circles. She chants softly, then strings blue and green beads onto a thin cord, which she fastens around the woman's wrist. She goes to the miniature refrigerator and returns with a bowl of red shimmering globs. She sets it at the woman's feet.

"Jell-O," Sky says.

The woman's forehead wrinkles. Nadja leans in. "It symbolizes

your placenta.”

“Oh.” The woman smiles faintly.

Sky says, “What you get here is a little bit of *shimáasani*, a little bit of Western nurse, and a little bit of me. You get all flavors of Jell-O, see?”

Sky passes her hands over the woman yet again. This time she leans into the woman here and there, pushing into her aura. Sky moves toward the woman’s calves and, fifteen minutes later, stands at the woman’s feet. She stretches her arms outward, her head up, breathing a release into the air. Sky opens her eyes. “It is done.”

The woman gets up and writes a check. She is sobbing. Nadja says, “Do not worry. Your baby will be fine. Keep yourself calm.” Nadja gives her Valerian root and skullcap and chamomile, and says, do you know how to make a tea for when you cannot sleep, and the woman nods.

Nadja watches her walk to her truck and drive off. Nadja turns and says, “You could have been more sensitive.”

Sky begins sweeping. “I am sensitive in the way I am getting paid for. They do not come to me to hear kind words.”

“What if this woman cannot leave her home?”

“Then she risks loss. She will have to use all of her resources.”

Sky opens the shed door and sweeps out a pile of debris.

Nadja stares out the window. Outside, Claw builds up the dirt, bulldozes it with both hands, then pats it down with hard slaps.

These children are like pieces of frayed rope; they come with barely a beginning, with no story to anchor them. They might even be figments of her imagination.

Dreams

Nadja stirs from sleep with a vision of Claw running. In a few seconds the vision is gone and Nadja feels consciousness set in, feels the morning light against her closed eyelids.

But when she passes Claw’s room she notices that he is not in bed. He is not in the bathroom. And when she goes downstairs

she sees that the front door is unlatched.

Her heart races as she opens the door. In her near panic her eyes fly to the light blue smear passing behind the spindly trees. She makes her way to the woods, where she finds Claw in the brush, crawling around on top of a large mound of dirt. It is as high as Nadja's thigh and is oblong, coffin-shaped. How long has he been digging around in this dirt? And he is not so much piling and patting the dirt as he is sculpting: the mound has an entrance, and the back of it is wedged against the base of a tree. It is big enough to hold a small boy, and as she thinks this, she sees Claw disappear inside of it.

Philosophy

One Saturday night Sister Sky tells a story: there is a man who decides that schedules and clocks and calendars are overrated. The man wanders around the world, through the ancient cities of Israel and India, through fields with rounded stones marking out the vague, overgrown circles of ritual. Commerce has broken him and he needs to find something to make him whole. He is obsessive in his search. He checks along the sides of bluffs, wades through streams, and hunches over earthen pits, studying soggy wood. He is convinced that he will find an answer. He is so certain that he abandons even his books, relinquishes every single one of his material objects. He walks for days in a circle nearly three miles in diameter, looking, inspecting, searching. The man dies of starvation.

Nadja says, "What is that story?" They are all in the kitchen, where she and Honey-Wheat play Uno. It is Honey-Wheat's turn to deal but the cards get away from her and fall, coating the old linoleum. She goes to collect them, but Nadja says, never mind, it's time for bed.

Sky turns to Nadja. "You must not have been listening."

Honey-Wheat takes Claw's hand and pulls him toward the stairs.

"Did Dad tell that story?" Nadja says.

"You do not think these stories are important."

“That’s not true.”

“These kids are weighed down with bad energy,” Sky says. “Their pores are clogged with lead and they have mercury in their blood.”

Nadja does not disdain the ancient ways. Despite her secular upbringing, she feels that karma or kismet or nirvana or reincarnation are all compelling ways of framing relationships with forces we cannot see. But there are daily battles to be fought here on the ground; here, there is a rising sun to contend with, there are disorders to manage and administrators and officials to deflect.

Nadja says, “The children just need a stable environment.”

“And that’s what they’re getting.”

Nadja picks up toys, throws them into a large wooden bin.

Sky says, “You are still ignorant, then.”

“It’s just that I think the story is too abstract. They are not ready.”

“The story will stay with them. Your problem is that you want to understand everything right away.”

Nadja glares at Sky. “You have seen the scars on Honey-Wheat’s back. But your answer to all this is philosophy.”

“Nadja, your roots, they are smooth and shallow.”

Pronouncements

There are times, for instance when all of them are sitting down for dinner, eating silently because of some punishment doled out to the children, knives and forks clinking on emptying plates, when Nadja feels something important disappear: the sheer white curtains billow in an updraft, and she imagines that her purpose has blown under them and out and away. She thinks, who are these children? What are these woods and this house and this roaming half-sister? Where is the origin of the ivory sheen that spreads over this land at midnight?

The other foster mothers, they have strange memories that creep up on them in the middle of a session—memories of failed parents, betrayal, sometimes neglect. The stories differ only in the

tinest details. Nadja herself recalls a depressed father, a critical mother. Perhaps Sky is right about how stories come back to you and deliver messages. Nadja remembers one story in particular, a tale involving a melon that houses a protective spirit, and when the melon is split open the spirit is released.

Sometimes she gropes around for this melon spirit. What is it and how does it work? Will it protect her from the sand slipping beneath her feet and will it keep the wind from whisking up her sunwashed little beauties and carrying them off? Will it tell her that out of grief comes love even though you will feel as if you are drowning?

Nadja knows that the social worker does not think highly of her. She has spoken up about being left out of discussions concerning the children's futures. She has grown frustrated talking with other mothers, hearing about children being thrust back into a dangerous life for the sake of the nuclear family. She is tired of calling for late checks.

On these days and on the days when the social worker drops in unexpectedly to snoop around and formulate opinions, Nadja feels she has sold her body.

One night she announces a new rule. Everyone must knock before entering rooms. No barging in. Wherever you go, she says, if there is a closed door and you want to enter, you must knock first. We enter lives with no warning, she says, swing right on in and out of each other's spaces; knocking on a door is a sign of humanity. A sign of respect.

Sky and the children watch her. Honey-Wheat's brow is crinkled, Claw looks at Sky, Sky looks at Nadja and says, now look who is talking about spaces.

It is fall, again, in these woods, the short days descend upon them all. Nadja takes Claw for his first day of school, but he cannot manage it. In the classroom he is as tight as a metal clamp until Nadja touches his arm. After a week he can finally make it through a couple of hours, even do the projects with tissue paper and pipe cleaners.

But he is smitten with cave life, and when he comes home he

goes outside and invariably withdraws into his small dirt house pushed up against the base of the tree.

A Message

Honey-Wheat's papers are not coming through. The good news is that her mother successfully completed rehab, and this is enough to convince the department to reintroduce the girl into her family. Nadja gets the call well after lunch.

Nadja goes out to the field, where Honey-Wheat sits playing. Honey-Wheat looks up at her and into the low sun. She leans an elbow on her knee, squints her eyes, and says, "Howdy there," pushing the lid of her baseball cap back with her thumb.

Nadja's thighs give out but she steadies herself. "Howdy, pardner," Nadja says, sitting down with the girl in the dirt. The corners of Nadja's eyes tighten. "I reckon I got some news for ya."

Shapes

If the stories Nadja hears at the support group could swirl together and touch down from above, they would do so in the form of lightning, a rare kind, one that strikes in the same place over and over again.

Nadja and the other women watch for signs and clues, and as the months go by they note the tiny steps forward: tantrums of twelve minutes, not fourteen; a child no longer afraid of the bed or of night. Kids are young and elastic, they stretch and bounce back, relearn and unlearn, come and go. They go back to a grandmother's house, a mother's house, they go to group homes or to the apartment of a jobless sister who drinks too much, they walk into hailstorms of promises and fresh starts, to places that cannot support their weight, to ideologues and Jesus freaks, to those who want them for dangerous reasons. They visit prisons, are on speaking terms with adult dementia. They leave town on a midnight bus to New York City. They leave life altogether with a razor blade's slit.

The first snow of the season sifts down in granules and in the

noonday sun melts into Rorschach patterns: butterfly wings, profiles of grotesque human faces, crescent moons. The day Honey-Wheat is taken away in a navy blue sedan, Nadja stops cooking and, at night, waits vainly for sleep.

In these woods the mourning is constant and changing; it aches deeply into limbs. It is a monsoon that flows into every organ and washes away longings, addictions, wishes, intentions.

Sky simmers a chicken, soaks the bones and skin for stock. More marrow, more flooding.

Nadja tells Sky of her latest dream: there are bloody tracks in the snow and she is a girl, she is young, she knows that the tracks will lead her to something awful but then sees the fawn, spotted and still in the center of a field, she is close to it, she can see its breath in the chilly air, and knows that this fawn is not the one that left the tracks and that no matter what, she must find the other fawn, the dead fawn, the bloody carcass.

Sky says the dream's message is simple. "You have encountered fear but you have determination. You gain strength, even now." She says, eat the soup.

But Nadja cannot bring the spoon to her mouth.

Do not worry, sister, Sky says. I will dance for you, for your health, for all the miracles waiting just under our feet.

Meditation

Nadja lies on her back in her garden and looks at the tops of the trees through her fingers, which she has extended in front of her face. The sunlight eases around them, turning them a translucent orange. It is November, and winter is already chainsawing through the atmosphere. She has her snowsuit on because she wants to lie comfortably, let the downy thermal layer absorb her heat and distribute it. As the sun reddens her cheeks she sinks deep into her body, feels her chest rise and fall with the gusts swooping in from the north.

The bare branches of the tops of the highest trees sway into her line of vision; a few giant dead leaves of the maples refuse

to let go of the mother stem.

She cannot compare her idea of kinship to an oak, maple, or pine tree, nor to a protective forest canopy. It is, rather, like the young underbrush that starts from square-foot one, getting by on what it is offered.

A child can be flung ruthlessly back to a starting point to begin again, Sisyphus-like; but if that child is healthy and fed, then there is a foundation. Nadja has to believe that it is thicker than it seems.

Lost

Claw does not play well with others. The children instinctively avoid him. He has developed a problem with balance; he leans to the left, or when kneeling, for example, he falls over. The speech therapist mentions encephalitis but the caseworker finds nothing in the file. The caseworker says she's seen this happen after a child's head is hit particularly hard, but there is no documentation here, either.

In the special classes, Claw acts out by not participating. Nadja thinks that this is his way of protesting and goes to the teachers to talk. She is embarrassed when she cannot answer questions about his earlier years. One teacher is visibly burned out, stretched too thin, and cannot stop complaining about the lack of resources. She breathes exhaustion into Nadja's face when asked what else can be done.

Cabin Fever

It's the middle of winter now, the wind so frigid it welds your nostrils shut, waters your eyes, scrapes the pores off your face, blows dark depressions into your brain.

Sky adds two bags of sand to the truck bed, then rides off to Fargo to visit friends. To combat cabin fever Nadja gets an additional stack of books from the Salvation Army, a clay set, a book of instructions for fun indoor projects. Claw drifts to the clay. Nadja shows him how to flatten it on the newspaper cartoons to get the image to stick. She does this between trips

to the attic, where she is storing boxes of Honey-Wheat's things. Honey-Wheat took little with her when she left; the mother did not want to be reminded of her daughter's days with Nadja. Honey-Wheat has five boxes, which Nadja adds to the one box for Zola, bunks them together in this slant-roofed attic, this hollow place, this unlikely heaven.

Periphery

Claw's demons begin visiting him in the depths of February. At two in the morning Nadja is awakened by a shriek. She springs to her feet and runs to Claw's room, flicks the light on, sees the child running back and forth. Claw, honey, she says, Claw, what's wrong? He slows for a moment but there is primal fear behind his eyes.

Sky now stands in the doorway. The hallway light has been turned on. Claw goes to his toy chest, breathing heavily; he glares at it and then scrambles to the closet to hide from it.

Nadja knows he cannot respond to her, that something has taken him away. Is he sleepwalking? she asks Sky.

Night terrors, I think, says Sky. The snakebite boy used to have those, don't you remember? He'll come out of it.

And he does. In five minutes he crawls out of the closet and registers Nadja, the bright room, his surprising position in it.

Claw, Nadja says, you were having a bad dream. The shriek is still in her ears, though, and her heart still beats adrenaline into her cold hands. Claw collapses to the floor, stunned. Nadja goes to pick him up, set him on the bed. She says, try to be still. Take deep breaths. I'll wait with you.

Three weeks go by and still the terrors visit. Nadja fastens a gate across the top of the stairs in case she doesn't wake in time.

She consults the group and learns that the terrors will not hurt Claw, but their origin concerns her. The loss of Honey-Wheat might be responsible for them, but she cannot know for sure. One night, after a quiet streak, Nadja wakes. It is about time for Claw to scream but he doesn't. She goes downstairs for tea,

being careful to secure the gate behind her. When the water begins to rumble inside the kettle, she crosses in front of the window. She stops. At the edge of the woods is a fawn, already sensing Nadja's presence through the glass. It slips away. There are no leaves on the trees to hide it, but the infinite layers of trunks swallow the animal's sleek body.

The kettle's whistle jostles Nadja into motion. Tomorrow she will ask Sky to read Claw's energy. Yes, that might yield some information.

But why her eyes shift to the secured latch on the back door, she doesn't know.

Poof

Was there really any doubt that early one morning Nadja would find that the door was not latched? That she would go to the dirt mound and not find a boy anywhere in it, not find a hint of his presence? See for miles nothing but steam rising from the wet fields bordering these woods, nothing but evaporation?

Transformation

The police search yields nothing. Sky explains terrors to the young officer, says the boy couldn't have gotten far. They will keep looking, the officer says, but when Sky comes in she says, Claw's run away. I think he's run away yet again, because terrors don't work like this.

Nadja watches Sky pace, then pause, then leave for the shed.

Nadja's layers have been peeled away. She is nauseated in separate, aching waves.

Later, Sky calls the agency and in time someone comes to close the case. The boy's got to go back to somewhere, the caseworker says. He turned up for you, and he'll turn up for somebody else. Nadja wants to punch the caseworker in the face but below the sting of the comment are visions of her own girlhood, of a scrubby plot of land in the Southwest, of an eternity of orange ground, of resilience. The trick of the desert is its ability to turn

scarcity into abundance: inside the cactus is a small river, infinite and replenishing, as neverending as shadow.

In time, Claw's dirt mound flattens with the weather. Nadja watches new flora push through it, like a patch of rough skin sprouting hair.

In these woods is a past and future boy, an everyboy, rained on and tackled and pulled down into the mass of roots and rot, smiling, content, as he is coated with the cool, wet earth.