

## Without

What's happened to me?

Friends and family have mostly gone before me into that long good night. Those that remain are as entangled in their own mortality as I am in mine. We have nothing, and everything, in common. I can't bear to see them anymore, can't tolerate their searching eyes and their need to touch me to see if I am real.

Where I once solicited companions with whom to go to movies and walk in the park, now I do those things alone. Where I once sought lovers to lay with me and quell my fears, now I am quiet in the darkness. I seek only my own counsel. I talk only to my dog. I revel and worry and contemplate by myself.

These are the years of wisdom. I have earned them with many missteps and many false analyses. I don't need things anymore. I have purged my house of the detritus of a misspent life. I have dropped relationships by the wayside like so many neglected crumbs. I have ignored the dogmatic truths that once ruled me.

Only the essence remains, looks out at the world through wizened eyes. It is not without appreciation or humor that I see myself. Those things are there, under the heavy cloak of sheer astonishment. I can't believe what I have come to. It is neither good nor bad but is nonetheless a shock to my system. I have become a monument to my past, a husk deprived of the sap that once ran through me. Sometimes I think that I will wither and drift away like a winter leaf, no longer a part of the whole. Or that one day I will simply forget to breathe.

But I go on. And, in my way, I thrive. Like a Southwestern sunset or a giant redwood, I persevere against all odds. Not eaten away at by useless details or worried about the thin veneer of civilization, I can make my own way into the darkness. I have constructed a sense of time and place that no one else inhabits. Only myself. And there is a little bit of room for my memories and my dog. My dog smiles when she sees me. She knows things.

Have I withered into foolishness? Are none of these revelations real or relevant? Have I come to a sorry end where I am traipsing on beyond my rightful time? That can't be the case because here I am. Not eternal, but as close as anyone comes to it.

When I was fifty, I doubted myself. When I was sixty, I doubted everyone else. Then, at seventy and beyond, I knew things. My body had indeed become my temple, vine-covered and alone in the jungle, witness to the wind and the screeching of tropical birds overhead. It had become as precious as diamonds, and as hard. Without it I am nowhere and no one.

There was another time when I needed love and comfort. I can't remember how long past that was. Now I need only myself. Everything crucial is within me. Around me orbit superficial bits of the past, like colored confetti, distracting but in no way real. It peppers my thoughts but adds no value.

Now, when I gaze outside my own perimeter, I see other people living other lives. It is hard to imagine they will be me one day. It makes no sense to think they will come to the place where I have come. Our paths are different. Our destinations cannot be the same. They will always need their bible and their laws and their loved ones. They will never be free.

Then what of my own situation? Have I come to that sorry end? Am I the fool to know that none of what I say is true? Not at all, I tell myself. Nothing is true. Nothing is false. I am only a woman meandering by herself in the darkness, getting ready to do the one thing we all do alone.

But I'm not quite ready yet.