

The Crazy Dog Lady Sees a Rat Snake in the Compost Bin

RENÉE ASHLEY

She has nowhere to go and no one to see and way too much time to think, so she's taking the compost out—though she hasn't turned it since, not very long ago (and it took a while for her eyes to make it out), there was a black snake coiled, partly camouflaged in the dark, rich filth (for the warmth of the rot, she supposed). If she'd been in a hurry, she would have missed him altogether or even pierced him with the compost crank—that frightens her. What she could see of him (she assumed it was a *he*) was damn near as thick as a Coke can is round, and it moved only slightly, as if adjusting to the light, but she knew for sure he'd seen her too—the fright of her face in a black snake's eyes! The kind of fear to make her stare, then run. She'd started shaking and she shook for far too long. She knows what her fears are (the list is longer than she'd like, and snakes are on it somewhere), but death by drowning, death by fire, those two top it—and it's less the death than the struggling, it's less the struggling than the endless lightning-strike of panic when you're trying to stay alive. And, so, the snake's fired up a wondering in her—what else in her long life has she passed by without thinking: *There, it's there, I see it.* Too much, she's sure. Is this what age is? Perseveration on the mortal and the nonsense—what's that worth? Her life's on the right margin now—she's constantly aware of this—she's slow to rise and quick to not quite fall or fall. She's blaming evolution for her senseless fear. She's aware she's never been this old before—what from hell will come up next? There's a veil over everything (it's always been there), and, now, one more thing to worry on. She keeps watching for some sign, a word, some thing that might seem answer-like (though she knows there is no answer; she's barely found the question). So, to keep her on top of ground not under it, she's keeping track of smaller things: the water level in the reservoir, how much blue she can see in the sky, and even better: Will she grow tomatoes? Is her rocky soil ready for her seeds? A clematis? More moonflowers? Another day, she'll start another compost dump but farther down: First she'll lift the hollow-bottomed bin and watch the compost take its angle of repose. The snake, if it's still there can make its way elsewhere. Then

she'll scoop it all up again and toss it in. No harm done. Silly gesture, but it'll make her feel better. She reiterates what she's always known in one form or another: We're just another animal, unreliable, feckless, weak, and way too grabby. Is that what she's been saying all these years? There're so many people to be angry at (that's why she doesn't keep a gun); there's so much news, so many men with guns who are crazier than her. Oprah says, *What we dwell on we become*. It could be true; she hopes it's not, and throws her scraps into the bin; she doesn't look. There's rain predicted for the evening, so she leaves the cover off and goes back in. But the sky is blue, her house stands relatively firm, she's appreciative of that. For now, the universe inside her's nearly still. She'll do what just comes naturally: She'll feed the dogs their usual repast (she'll wash their dishes, put all that away, draw the blinds, and think: *There, it's there, I can see it*). Then she'll eat hers.