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Standing Water

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Standing Water
A short story by Maia Nilsson

i. Expect poison from standing water.

She's standing in the orchard at the far end of the garden now, sharpened stick in hand. The flies are buzzing. The trees keep shuddering their dangling leaves. The night sky is thicketed out by sloping branches, and for a moment Eve feels a strange certainty—a tingle in some vestigial sense left over from when God touched the earth and coaxed man up from the sand—that her maker is not watching her now. The thought gives her a thrill of both exhilaration and dread, like some river crustacean shucked out of its shell with its skin bare to sun for the first time, although she doesn't yet have the words to describe this feeling.

She'll feel it again soon, worse before it gets better. For now, she is staring at the sharpened stick in her fist and the severed head of the serpent at her feet. The blood is bubbling up at its ragged neck, bits of delicate white bone poking out. It's funny—she would have never known how to do this if he hadn't put the fruit in her hand. She wouldn't have even known how to think it. Something acrid burns at the back of her throat.

Some knowledge she shouldn't have, but does anyway: if you sharpen a stick in the dead of night over a number of days, crouched away hiding so that God does not know where you are, and you stalk through the night searching and jumping at the sound of scales slithering through the underbrush, for the first time in your life you become something more than clay that breathes. You become a hunter. You begin to know grief. Your body may hunch with cold in your newfound nakedness, but it is not your shell that makes you ache from throat to belly, like you've been gutted open like a fish. It is not your body, born of red clay, that has yearned for answers. It's your soul, which is God, and as such could never not ache to know what's hidden from you, that is shaken now.

It takes more effort than you'd think to sever a snake's head from its body, but if you hit it hard enough the first time it sort of lies there, stunned, long enough for you to try again. And again. And suddenly all the nervous energy, the anxiety and grief of knowing, comes spilling out of its thick, scaly, neck.

(The stupid part is, she now knows, that the thing she's killed wasn't even the serpent who'd met her in this orchard all those nights ago. That serpent would have spoken to her, begged her for its life. Normal animals, here in this vast and timeless place, don't know how to talk. Don't know how to fear death.)

A slight wind lifts the hair at the nape of her neck and prickles over her skin, and Eve remembers that she can never be sure of how anything works here. She goes out walking at night, tries to map the paths in her mind because this place is endless and incomprehensible, but all she truly knows is that the days are long. The nights are lush and dark and humid. The sky lights gold before dying into a settling purple, hours pass, and the soil never stops singing. And always, underneath it all, there is whisper of God: an old and thrumming heartbeat deep beneath the earth.

There are places here that Adam doesn't know about. He's a proud curator of the ignorance that the maker made them with and prefers they both keep. He knows the great tree and fruits with heavy rind and solid pit, sweet nectar and river water. He talks with God and spends his days naming the animals: *lion, rabbit, fox, calf*, and in his spare moments he stands nervously with his back to the great oak under which he was born, chewing mustard seeds, and watches the slow darkness eat at the sky until their maker wills it away again. *Eagle, tiger, fish, crow*, and he is so scared of being alone. She isn't like him. Last week Eve went out walking while he was sleeping, to the great depths where the grass turns to bramble, and she found a pool of stagnant water at the edge of this orchard—green, fetid, reeking, and teeming with mosquitoes. She cupped the larvae in her hand and smiled at the existence of something not made especially for her.

Something else Adam doesn't know in this world which was made and tailored for him: the taste of pomegranate. The way the rind dimples beneath a snake's fangs. If you dig your fingernails over its hardened, ruddy shell, bits of wax will come curling up underneath your fingernails and stay there, stuck for the week it's been since you've eaten it. And every time you thrust your hands into the river, carved by God as all things are, you come closer to the realization that the sweetness of the water will never wash it away.

This is all to say that Eve could leave this place. Go in the night and leave him here in a hollow senseless paradise. Perhaps it's the right thing to do. And yet—

It's the existentialism of it all. That's what's chilling her, more than the wind at her back that she knows to be God's breath and the moon of God's great eye, peaking through the gaps of the orchard now. It's the knowledge that she orchestrated the end of a living thing's existence and as such has held creation in her hand. She's killed a serpent, the wrong serpent who did nothing to lead her astray, and yet she is glad of it.

Say what you will about betrayal and the fear of knowing your head may be severed from your body to let the life shudder out of it, Eve thinks. In her knowledge of death she has never loved Adam more. Every time she sees the sun caught in his dark curly hair she remembers how remarkable their existence together is. Every time she kisses the skin of his neck she feels his pulse beating beneath her lips and he is so alive and so warm that she feels as if she's full of sunlight. And it tears her apart inside to know that in order for him to feel this with her, he must shoulder the burden of knowing what the absence of it is like.

Is this her torment, for following where her body and soul took her?

Eve stares at the fruits hanging from the branches above her, each weighing heavy on the boughs like a dozen dark and waning moons. When Adam felt alone and scared, he cried to their maker and their maker pulled out his rib and made her. *Sheep, ox, serpent, Eve*. He is so terrified of being alone, the only way he sleeps comfortably at night is when they're lying so close together that her heart beats against the scar along his ribcage like a seam of dark, red clay. She snags a low-hanging fruit and cups it in her hands. Perhaps it would be a mercy for him to know.

And she thinks, blasphemously: *Perhaps if you had let me ask, Lord, I would never have dared.*

If Eve knows how to feel naked now, she surely knows how to feel seen. God comes like a rumble in the deep, and Eve gasps as if she has just been gutted. He is an eternity too vast for the eye to hold at once, the roaring of a great and terrible river. He says her name and she claps her hands over her ears, all the teeth in her mouth humming at a different frequency, and it is frightening because her maker—taciturn though He may be—has never been too great to behold before. And then the world goes quiet.

She is standing at the shore of that stagnant pond, the flies buzzing at her ears and open mouth. He speaks to her indirectly now, in the bubbling of standing water. She holds out the pomegranate, wordless in askance. He says: *And what will you do with it, my girl?*

And truly, Eve already knows.

Eve will press half a pomegranate into Adam's hand. The shell will be broken, rind anemic with the seeds half-spilling out. They will burst between her insistent palm and his shaking fingers, dribbling sanguine over their clasped hands. *Where did you get this?* he'll ask, and she'll scrape in a rattling breath before wiping her eyes. *Share it with me*, she'll tell him. And there is no pair of wild animals that know one another with the intimacy that he and Eve share; no staggered deer, no great clumsy ape, no lonely god who watches from above and below the earth with his mouth clamped shut and hands folded can compel Adam away from wondering what she knows that he doesn't. So when she kisses him, he'll taste its bitter wine on her tongue. And he will say, *I cannot believe you were alone with this.*

And that is the most gratifying thing.

ii. Dip him in the river, he who loves water.

Eve grows pomegranates and fig trees. The sun hits just to the east this time of day, and she touches her saplings with tender fingers, tugs the heavier fruit off of the green boughs so that the trunks don't bend, and walks home with the sun on her shoulders.

The years have treated them well, she and Adam. The barley in the field stretches upwards like delicate feathered fingers, brushing up at heaven in amber waves. The ground was once barren here, until Adam dug up the earth with his hands, tilled the soil, loved over the barren heath until it flowered. Now he sits at the ingress of a warm tent with a soft dirt floor eating bread and carving, and when he sees Eve coming he tosses his tools aside and pulls her in for a kiss all warm and familiar. She smiles, her forehead pressed to his. In the distance, a flock of sheep, and two little boys play-fighting in the brush with long sticks.

Once, Adam called her over when they were both working in the field. He had been turning the earth and had uncovered a skull unlike anything either of them could put a name to—yellowed and broken with age, stained with red clay. Eve had never seen anything like it—not when their first flock of sheep died and decayed in the fields that first cold winter, not when Adam killed his first lion, skinned it, and draped the pelt over her as a trophy. It looked almost like an ape's would, but for a slimmer jaw, a stronger nose. It fit squarely between Adam's hands, rounded with two gaping sockets about the width of his thumb. Eve brushed her hand over it and touched her own nose, her chin, sucked her cheeks to feel how they stretched over the bone of her face. Adam stared, and she knew that he was chilled by it, wondering whose rib he had sprung from. How many tries it had taken before a man such as himself walked these valleys and what piece of his soul, then, lay here.

She took his chin, kissed him gently. He let it fall from his hand, this souvenir of his Lord's scrapped project. It thudded in the red earth and let up a small cloud of rust-colored dust. Adam let himself stare at it for one moment longer, and then raised up his staff and clubbed it until it broke open like the shell of a pomegranate. His plow ground it into dust before long, and in the springtime, spindly green shoots sprung up like tiny hands up to heaven. He named it barley and cried, having forgotten that the language of creation tastes the same as joy does.

Eve remembers thinking of the bits of bone poking out of that snake's lifeless body, and then of her baby sons. Adam had put his ear against her belly every night for the months that they each grew, heard the low thrum of her heartbeat and told her that he imagined he could hear

theirs too. They were each born naked, squalling in rage, and in those moments she felt her heart split in two and all the love she had ever kept within herself came pouring out. She stared at their little faces, each a tiny mirror of her own, and wept with joy.

Now their sons are older and they run among the sheep, shrieking with little-boy laughter and startling the quail nestled in the sagebrush. They have not yet lost their milk teeth and know very little of anything beyond the tent, their beds, the chill at night. The sheep that must be herded. The fields that must be tilled. There is no death for them, not yet.

I'd like venison for dinner soon, she tells her husband offhandedly, turning over her shoulder. Perhaps not tonight, but in the coming days. She watches as his face breaks open into a wide grin.

Then we shall have it, he says.

The air east of Eden smells of frankincense. The sun is setting, lighting lovely and orange across Eve's sloping cheekbones, the dark curl of her hair, the curve of her shawled shoulders. She deftly runs a knife through the hardened shell of a ripe pomegranate, smiles with satisfaction when it splits and spills ruby seeds across her browned palms like so many vermilion jewels. Adam sits beside her on the sun-warmed earth, sanding a shepherd's crook with a scraper he fashioned from flattened stone. He will give this to his son one day. And Eve smiles thinking about how her sons will sire sons, children who run and laugh and strum lyres, craft lyrics and sing with raspy human throats, on and on in delight forever.

Eve turns her gaze to a huge and aching sky, and knows her maker hears it when she thinks, *God, I am a poet too.*