

## The Hunter

Before dawn the hunter arose, troubled by a restless sleep. Quietly donning the familiar skins, girdling himself with a strip of leather, and lacing hard sandals to his feet, he quit the room of his slumbers and silently descended the steps leading to the outer door.

Once in the garden, thinking himself alone, the hunter sang his morning prayers, feeling on this day a certain urgency, an uneasy yearning, a sense of longing for something so vague and ineffable that for the first time he noticed a cleavage within himself between what he was and what he wished to be, between that which he already knew and that which he still longed to know. Yet, habit, if nothing else, guided him through his morning ritual. For a moment he lost himself in his old beliefs, a wave of imperceptible relief creeping over him as he sang:

Return, O my Soul, caught in morning's gray mist!  
Too long have I hunted the ways of destruction.  
Too long have I wandered pursuing my fate.  
Release me, O Life! Fill the well of my being  
With honey and sweetness, with stardust and mirth.  
Return me, O Winds, playing close at my birth!  
With vengeance and mourning, the eastern wind fleeing  
The season of longing born soon yet too late,  
Taught by nature the meaning of each reconstruction  
Wrought homelessly skyward on clouds I have kissed.

As the hunter neared the end of his song, his spirit was lifted. For a fleeting moment he was enamored with life. Soon, however, the gnawing anxiety he could not name returned, leaving the hunter feeling desolate and lost.

"Before the gods, there was only mud," he said.

He would taste the mud and swallow it. It would enter his stomach and travel through his veins till at last it reached his heart. From there it would permeate his entire body, then pass through his bowels and return to the earth.

Unnoticed, an old servant woman was hiding behind a tree in the orchard not far from the place where the hunter had sung his prayer. The fragrance of apple blossoms filled the air but the hunter was not tempted by their scent, nor was he yet aware of the hunger in his belly for a breakfast of the ripened fruit. The woman had gathered many of the apples into the fold of her long flowing skirt. With appropriate awkwardness, burdened by her care for the delicate gifts she carried, the old woman finally emerged from her secrecy and approached the hunter.

"Master," she called out to him. "Where are you going so early? The sun is still buried beneath the horizon, the birds have not yet begun their singing, and everyone sleeps. It is not the hour for people to be up and about, save for an old woman such as myself, who finds sleep uninviting and her dreams disturbing. But the young sleep long hours and as such should you sleep."

Startled, the hunter whirled about and, seeing the old woman, laughed. "I am becoming like you, dear woman. My body is still the body of youth, but my wisdom grows older each day."

"And what wisdom is this," asked the woman, "that forsakes the comforts of one's bed and the leisure of one's home to go hunting, to sweat in the heat of the day, when food and wine is set daily on your table, when every luxury is ready at hand for you? See here, Master! I have picked for you these apples. Eat and be satisfied. Thus allow time for the pursuit of your wisdom. Do not become like me, O Master. My wisdom has been paid for dearly, as I toil each day in your garden and labor each hour for your pleasure."

"And yet you do not despise me?" the hunter asked. "Have I not been a curse to your freedom and cursed my own freedom as well? For too long I have been fed and clothed by other hands. See how my body has weakened, see how my spirit has faltered. How long have you been in my service? For as long as I have lived. But today is the day of your emancipation. I shall look after myself and provide for my own needs. Today I shall hunt!"

"But master," she retorted. "How shall you hunt without your bow? And where is your knife? A

hunter must be equipped with the tools of his trade. But where, I pray, are yours?"

The hunter laughed again. "My bow is safely tucked away in my room and my knife still lies on the table. Today I shall not require them. Today I have only my two hands. I will rely solely on them. And my wits!"

"Then what is it that you hunt, my Master, which requires neither bow nor knife, and can be caught using only one's hands and one's wit?"

"A desperate hunter will kill whatever he finds, while a skillful hunter knows exactly what he is looking for. But today I shall not decide the object of my pursuit in advance. I will leave myself open to whatever comes along. Only when I have found something as strong and cunning as myself will I engage in battle."

The old woman smiled in her wisdom. "It is as you say, Master. The scavengers eat that which is already dead, refusing to kill their own food, and the rash will eat whatever they can kill with ease. Indeed, you are prouder than even the most skillful hunter who knows precisely what he is seeking. For you are a hunter who hunts without knowing what he is hunting. But aye, Master, I am afraid that you will be disappointed."

The hunter did not reply. Kissing the old woman on the forehead, he turned and slipped out through the garden gate.

The hunter stopped for a drink of water at the well just outside the gate, then proceeded to walk down the long dirt road that wound through his father's estate. Past the fields, where the grain was already ripening, the road narrowed into a path and finally disappeared altogether. He had reached the forest. He could only go now to places no path could take him.

The forest was dark. Soon he had lost his way in the entanglement of trees and hanging vines. The sky was becoming gray with morning light. He pressed on.

Eventually the hunter came to a low treeless hill. The sun was climbing the hill's shoulders and suddenly crested its top. The intensity of the light blinded the hunter. Shielding his eyes, he jerked his head sharply back toward the forest behind him. He saw the path he had made on the damp earth and wondered if he should return. After his eyes had adjusted to the light, however, the hunter turned and began climbing the hill in front of him.

When he had almost reached the summit, he looked up and saw a she-wolf blocking his course. The hunter read malice in her green flashing eyes.

He shouted in a loud voice, "I fear you not, O She-wolf. For your might I will return might. But you are not the prey I seek. Neither shall I be prey for your ravenous hunger. The fear of you has caused even the strongest hunters to despise your ways, but I have learned them thoroughly. I would not give you the honor of doing battle with your superior. Make way for me to continue my ascent."

The she-wolf tilted her head ever so slightly and then sprang at the hunter, falling on top of him and pushing him to the ground. The hunter could feel the panting of her breath on his face. Her fangs were barred and ready to bite. Throwing his arms around the she-wolf, the hunter rolled over her, pinning her beneath him. The she-wolf lay writhing in the dirt.

"She-wolf," the hunter hissed. "You do not intimidate me. It is not worth the trouble to kill you. Go back to the forest and do not bar my path again."

The hunter let go of his grip. The she-wolf clambered to its feet and stumbled back down the hill toward the forest. When she reached the edge, the she-wolf turned and said, "Hunter, you are brave and strong. But my strength is of a different kind. It would have been better if you had killed me instantly instead of letting me go, for I will conquer you in the end."

With that, the she-wolf disappeared into the entanglement of trees and vines. The hunter resumed his climb up the hill. The sun was fully up now. The hunter drank in its rays, relishing his victory.

By mid-day the hunter arrived at a stream that flowed down from the mountains. The water was so icy that no man could touch it. The hunter knew of this stream only from tales he had heard from his servants. The stories said that the stream flowed from a pool beneath a waterfall. If a person drank even one sip of water from this pool, he would become a madman. The eyesight of such a man would become acute. The shapes and patterns of the ordinary world would dissolve, freeing the mind to perceive with perfect lucidity the elemental nature of all things. And just as a river is constantly changing as it gushes toward the unknown, all things would appear to the madman as but flowing images of that which normal people perceive as permanent and fixed. According to the tales, though he be mad, the

man would be far wiser than the sages themselves, but he would also be frenzied and uncontrollable, not only by others but also by himself.

Determined to find the waterfall, the hunter followed the rivulet upstream. The water splashed irreverently over the protruding rocks. He knew that he should not drink from the stream since it flowed from the pool above.

After going some distance the hunter finally came to the waterfall. And there, at the bottom of the falls, far below the cascading torrents, was the pool. In it a young woman was bathing. Her hair was deep gold, her skin smooth and fair. The waters danced around her naked body. She in turn played frivolously with the ripples as they gently slapped against her shiny skin. Her beauty was of more a masculine than a feminine type, with sharp and hardened features. Yet, despite her firmness and vitality, the hunter could see that the woman had delicacies of her own.

The hunter watched as the maiden swam to the side of the pool and got out. Donning the loose-fitting garments she had hung from one of the myrtle trees nearby, she sat down quietly at the pool's edge, gazing at her reflection in the water. The hunter, ashamed at himself for having lingered so long in her naked presence, turned back towards the forest, hoping to slip away unnoticed, but as he took his first step his foot landed on a dry twig. The snapping sound aroused the woman's attention. Seeing the hunter, she uttered a cry of dismay and the hunter, fighting an urge to run swiftly back into the woods, turned to face the woman in his embarrassment.

"Forgive me, young maiden," he said. "It was not my intention to catch you unawares."

The woman laughed unashamed. "That concerns me little, O Wanderer. My surprise was that you could evade the she-wolf which protects me as I bathe. Come closer that I might discover the secret of your cunning."

The hunter walked slowly toward where she was sitting, never lifting his eyes from the beautiful maiden. As he approached her, it seemed to the hunter as if he had seen this woman before, although he did not know when and where. Nonetheless, there was something familiar about her.

"Have we met previously?" the hunter asked.

"No, we have never met," she answered.

"But it seems as if I know you."

"No, you do not know me," she said. "But I know you."

The hunter was perplexed. "How can that be?"

"You think you move through life unwatched, that your secrets are entirely your own. But I know everything there is to know about you."

"You must be a goddess."

"No, I am not a goddess."

"Then how do you know everything about me?"

"Because you and I are one and the same."

The hunter pondered her remark for a moment and then laughed. "That's impossible. For you are a woman and I man."

"No," the maiden replied. "Woman and man are not different. They are one and the same."

"So, you are not only a woman but also a man, and I am not only a man but also a woman?"

The maiden simply smiled.

"Then how is it that you and I are separate beings?" the hunter asked.

"The sages taught that long ago woman and man were one being. But after they became separated from each other, they longed to be together again. They would search the world to find their other half and only find happiness when they did."

"Yes, I have heard this story," the hunter said. "So is it you whom I have been looking for?"

The woman did not answer his question directly. "The sages were wrong," she said. "Woman and man were never separated. They have always remained together."

"And you and I?"

"We have never been apart."

"Then why was it necessary for me to search for you?"

"Only because you were too foolish to realize that I was always with you."

The hunter sat down perplexed. He looked into the pool and saw the reflection of his own face in

the water. He saw the reflection of the woman's face. The two reflections merged.

"I love you," the hunter said impulsively, not knowing where the words came from.

"Ha!" the maiden laughed. "You hardly know me."

"But I wish to know you."

"If you wish to know me, then you must first know yourself. If you do not know me, it is only because you do not know yourself."

"And what of love?"

"You have absolutely no understanding of love. It is impossible for you to love someone unless you first love yourself."

The hunter looked at the maiden and saw himself mirrored in her eyes. "Indeed, I do not understand. Please teach me."

"There is nothing to be taught," the woman said. "And nothing to be learned."

"Then it must be beyond reason," the hunter said.

"Indeed, it is not a matter of reason. It is not something that can be thought about and comprehended. The more you think, the further it recedes from you. To grasp it, you must have no thoughts about it. You must give up all reason and logic."

"But how might I give up reason?"

The woman cupped her hands and dipped them into the pool. Bringing the water to the hunter's mouth, she said, "Here, drink."

The hunter was overcome by an unbearable thirst. He longed to drink not just the water in the maiden's hands, but all the water in the pool. And more than water to quench his thirst, he wanted wisdom to quell his soul. Not knowledge and understanding, but enlightenment.

He looked into the woman's cupped hands. The branches of the myrtle trees swirled in the water, their images segueing into one another until all was a blur of color and light. Finally he was beginning to see the world not as he imagined it, but as it really was.

"Drink," the woman repeated. "Whoever drinks of this water shall have their eyes opened. You will encounter a reality you have never known before. You will intuit the true nature of things. Your creativity and imagination will be expanded beyond what you can envision. You will experience emotions that you never knew existed. You will have a new sensitivity toward both yourself and others. You will become one with the earth."

The woman paused and then added, "And at one with me."

The hunter opened his mouth and drew his lips close to the water. He longed for the mysteries of existence to be revealed to him. He yearned to drink the water and then to jump into the pool and plunge for eternity through its fathomless depths.

But then the hunter hesitated. Coming to his senses, he looked at the woman and said, "No, I shall not drink from this water. I shall keep myself wholesome and pure. I will not be tempted by the enchantments you offer."

The woman withdrew her hands and emptied the water back into the pool.

"The choice is yours," she said.

The hunter got up. He stood at the side of the pool and looked at the maiden.

"I am leaving," he said. "This is not what I have been seeking."

"Do you think you will ever find it?"

"Perhaps what I am looking for cannot be found."

"So, are you giving up the hunt?"

"Yes," he said. "I am returning home. I shall go back to the way things were, to the everyday world and my ordinary life."

He did not look back as he departed. The sound of the maiden's weeping faded with each step he took downstream.

The hunter returned the same way he had come. When he reached the knoll where he had fought with the she-wolf, he skirted around it. From the corner of his eye he could see the she-wolf standing on top of the hill, looking down at him with a vicious glare.

"You see," the she-wolf called after him. "I have won."

The hunter did not reply but kept walking. The she-wolf descended the hill and caught up with

the hunter.

“I will follow you all the days of your life,” the she-wolf said. “I will always be your companion.”

Night had fallen by the time the hunter returned to his house, the she-wolf still stalking behind. The old servant woman was in the garden cleaning up after the day’s chores. The hunter greeted her with a shrug. The woman looked down and pretended not to notice. Soon the gnawing anxiety which he could not name returned, leaving the hunter feeling desolate and lost.

Previously published in *The Mythic Circle* 44:68–72 (2022)