

SAVANNAH
VISION

(i) r a i n f o r e s t

The rainforest was once a savannah.

Which is to say—

A place that now exists by way of continuous rainfall was once so dry any tree that took root had to ensure its canopy never closed. No matter how wide a tree spread or how voluminous it grew, it had to remain always at least partially porous.

Meaning, that in the absence of moisture, these trees had grown preternaturally dependent on light.

The trees and the soil beneath them and the roots therein knew they had to imbibe every nutrient it was possible to glean from the sun for as long as it sat hotly in the sky.

And so the branches spread like nets 'lest their trunks turn parched beneath them.

All the while: drinking the sun.

Swallowing like nectar.

Gulping like milk.

But you needn't remember all of this.

You need only remember *What is now lush was once dry.*

You need only find a way to live in the knowledge that more hot earth is coming.

You need only believe me when I tell you that while this land was still arid a figure came staggering through the brush with its arms outstretched, calling out again and again and again, trying to ascertain where its own body ended. Was ending.

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(ii) garden

We had believed the site to be fully excavated, hence the commotion when the totem was uncovered under ten feet of loose earth.

Well. Uncovered is not the right word, because no one had been looking for it. It had come to light of its own accord; had been rising for some time via a process that strikes the layman as magic but which in fact unfolds inside all decomposing matter.

Maybe this is where I should start;

by telling you what happens to a creature when it has finished dying.

The quick of it is that microbes rush to colonize the body, packing it with living debris. This was how the totem had nosed its way to the surface: squirming cellular activity created the illusion that a rough piece of matter had countered gravity.

At least, this is what we assumed until we arrived at the garden and saw the totem in situ.

Its polished surface, its static features.

Peeled-open eyes.

Gleaming mouth.

When we looked the totem in the face we understood that this totem had never been anything but a totem. Which is to say it had not become sacred slowly over time. It had come into the world fully formed and already replete with its strange magic. There had been no gradual alterations, no gestation. It had never been anything but itself, and this unprecedented phenomena caused a breach in our terminology.

Some of our party described the effect as such:

'My relationship with my body became manageable, and though I couldn't have said I "owned" it...it was at least bearable to live inside it.'

*I suddenly felt 'that although I wasn't autonomous, I could carry on existing in the world.'*¹

So you see, though we could not parse what we were seeing, we understood that we were standing where a ritual had taken place, and that the totem was not the end result but only a component.

¹ Hari Kunzru, *Red Pill*, Scribner, 247

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A component of a ritual with a highly specific result.
Namely, that a gardener came out of the garden.

But what made this place a garden?

It was not, after all, marked by any visible boundary: there were no striated fences, no buttressed walls of stone.

Maybe it was because the plants were growing with a controlled promiscuity; the meadowsweet and the lilac, the orchids and the spanish moss. Left to their own devices in the wild, weeds and flowers clump together in spurts of their own kind, so maybe this was how they knew: all this bright growth, overlapping.

Or maybe it was because when the moonlight hit the river it cut right through to the riverbed, the water being entirely devoid of silt.

Or maybe, *maybe*, it was because when we opened our mouths to the rain it didn't taste of lyme but of coarsely ground salt.

But more likely they knew how we knew, which was the thudding sound our knees made when they struck the tilled ground.

We knelt because this was all we could bring ourselves to do when we saw the gardener had once more come, wearing a mask of clay. She had come crying out, and each time her voice struck against the pillar of a tree she gathered echoey feedback that allowed her take another step. She had come with her hands thrust forward in an attempt to ascertain the distance between her body and a mosquito, a mouse, a mountain.

She had come out of the ferns speaking a series of finite clauses and each clause was a warning.

Or maybe not a warning; rather an omen.

Seeing as each of them left less and less room to reply.

Less room to offer any kind of speech.

Partly because what The Gardener said disavowed what we had come to think of as meaning, and partly because the air had turned so close.

Words snagged reluctant in the throat, and the garden's terrain began to alter.

I didn't know the density of my bones 'til the soil shook.

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I didn't know hearts rise high enough to leave a coppery tang at the back of the throat.

But then this is the cost of a body that is not only alive but sensate.

Or maybe not.

Maybe it has nothing to do with a body or the skin we slip behind when it comes time to take a sideways step into the world.

Maybe it is 'simply nature at its most ecstatic, matter at its most vibrant, the nonhuman at its most alive—so alive it annihilates not only a single human self but the category of human altogether.'²

If you sink a rod into the earth here—which is sand, as you will see, and likely to scald at the touch—you'll find a string of vibrations encoded in its granules.

Pulsations here and there which are her messages: still intact.

There's much you might yet transcribe, but do not be disappointed by what evades translation.

Much proves brittle on the tongue when you ask yourself *What am I looking at? What do I see?*

Much has fallen, is falling, is felled. Away.

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(iii) s a v a n n a h

That rocking weight in your lap; your own tired cranium at last unsheathed.

Your eye which craved the close frame of a microscope, the extraterrestrial gaze of a satellite.

Your palm glittering with fragments buoyed by an unknown fluid.

You can leave them all here, in this place of hedge and stone.

You can forget your body of milk and blood.

I will teach you how to do without it.

How to palpate a ripe abdomen and how to summon men made of stone.

I will teach you it is not only red things that burn, and not only burning things that turn to smoke.

² Elvia Wilk, *The Word Made Fresh: Mystical Encounter and the New Weird Divine*, e-flux #92 June 2018

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But first, you must pledge me a heart made of diamonds.
You must pound your chest until those four red chambers are
packed with shards and the shards must be shining.

I have heard the song of the bird that lives in your throat.
I know your ribs are packed with feathers.
And your lungs—oh: where to begin with your silken tents of
breath?

If you could see all the shapes your body has yet to make now
that your long-clipped wings are at last unfolding. Now that
your twin invitations to flight are at last spreading: a
puddle of white, the sum total of another constellation.
You are lifting—surely you feel the hot air rushing?
You are lifted, aloft.

You are the splotch that blights the sun: pinned there, an
eternal black dot unmoving.

The trees beneath you; their spare branches.

There is no water, only sun. Only the light hot at your back.
Always, you feel that the next moment is the moment you will
start burning.

But you are drinking so long as you are keeping still:
so long as you keep your wings—their trembling edges, their
thin-chalk bones—spread open.