

## Foreword

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My favorite ginger cat has been missing for six days now. I have checked all of his hideouts: the crawl space in the basement, the rafters in the garage, the hayloft in the barn. Someone pulled him out of a rain pipe in town and brought him to me for safekeeping, and I named him Rosie because I thought he was a girl. After the vet said he was a boy, I changed his name to Roosevelt, but by then he answered to Rosie so the name stuck.

He is a quirky cat, who waggles his head like a bobblehead doll when I greet him in the morning. When I walk the quarter mile to the garden, he walks with me all the way. He still prefers to eat what he can catch instead of the kibble from the grocery store, which means that I never know what I will have to pry from the back-porch floor when I sweep on Saturdays: the hollow corpse of a blue-tailed skink, the severed head of a velvet-gray vole, the feet and wings of a baby wren. Rosie is not a barbarian. He just knows that he has to eat to live.

“How long since you saw Rosie?” I leave this note on a pad next to the stove for my husband Ed to find when he wakes up. When I come back later to make a second cup of tea, I see his response: “Two days. Coyote?”

In the last couple of weeks we have lost six chickens and a guinea hen to something that moves so fast we cannot tell if it is a gray fox or a coyote. This happens every year during whelping season. There are hungry babies in a burrow somewhere whose mother has grown bold to feed them. Ed wants to shoot her, whatever she is. I plead with him to wait a while. As sad as I am about losing the chickens, they are my tithe to the divine economy of the farm. Everything has to eat to live.

After Rosie goes missing I realize that my pledge is based on a one-sided bargain: you may have some of my chickens, but not my cat. You may advance this far, but no farther. The problem is that the coyote never agreed to my terms. We share a liminal space together: half wild, half tame. My

control over it is all in my head. If I want to hear the wild turkeys in the woods; if I want to see a great blue heron fishing in the spring pond; if I want to watch summer lightning break the night sky over Mount Yonah without a single house light on the horizon: my bargaining days are over. I can take it or leave it.

I cannot imagine leaving it.

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You are holding a wondrous book in your hands, full of startling stories about people who accept the risks of engaging liminal space. Plenty of them did not consent to go there. Some were catapulted there by war, illness, abuse, or natural disaster. Others found themselves there due to poverty, gender, apartheid, or immigration. The authors of the stories constitute an exception, since most of them chose to go places they did not have to. They willingly entered the passageway between here and there, between structure and chaos, both to serve as witnesses of transformation and to offer what aid they could to those still in its throes.

As different as their stories are, they share certain convictions. Being in community is better than being alone. Rites of passage help, even if you have to make them up. Things generally get darker before they get lighter. The only way through is through. There are no guarantees. This last truth is the one that separates this book from anything you will find on the self-help shelf. To engage liminal space is to live in faith, not certainty. Maybe you will come through with all your parts intact and maybe you will not. You may emerge with a shiny new name or with a painful lifelong limp. Who knows? Maybe you will come through with both.

The only thing missing from this book, as far as I can tell, is a testimony to the liminal passages of an ordinary day in the country. It just so happens that this is the only thing I can add, since I have never fought in a war, survived an earthquake, or been diagnosed with something that could kill me. I am a white, educated, cisgender woman who has never so much as broken a bone. I live in the country because I could afford to move here, though it meant leaving the city where all of my skills were honed and most of my friends still live.

The first night Ed and I spent in the singlewide trailer on our new farm, a pickup truck full of men with guns arrived after dark to ask whether they could hunt raccoons on our land. After they left, I went to the sink for a drink of water, but when I turned the handle, the faucet just sighed.

“We have to dig a well first,” Ed said. That was how much I had to learn.

For the purposes of this book, what I most had to learn was how to live in a place that is not quite wild and not quite tame, governed by elemental

realities that are easier to ignore inside the city limits. In the country, a week of heavy rain can rot an entire year's potato crop. A coyote can eat my favorite cat. At the same time, this is where I have learned that the difference between wild and tame is not as clear-cut as I once thought. Neither is the difference between night and day, light and dark, weal and woe. The "between" turns out to be more interesting than what is on either side of it. In most ways that matter, it is the truest part.

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I moved here because of something Ed said one night during a walk around our urban neighborhood. We lived at the corner of a busy street where the weight of city buses made our house jump on its foundations every time one passed. If we walked in one direction, we came to a city park named for a battle where more than 4,000 soldiers died during the Civil War. I tried not to think about their bones underfoot while Ed and I talked about all the things married people talk about: chores, children, work, vacation plans. We looked for the moon but could not find it in the light-polluted sky. Plus, neither of us knew what we were looking for. Was the moon waxing or waning? Was it coming up early or late?

"I'm going to die sooner than I have to if we don't leave this place," Ed said. So, we left that place, making an even trade of our quarter-acre city lot for ninety acres in the country. We lived in the singlewide while we built a house. We added two horses and a bunch of chickens. Ed tilled two acres of bottomland for an organic vegetable farm. We have been here for two and a half decades now and he is still alive.

But he can tell his own story. My story goes like this: when I lived in the city, I lived on a human scale. The buildings all around me were designed and built by humans. Humans lived and worked inside them. When we left one building, we got into cars or buses to go to other, sometimes wonderful, buildings, filling the roads with traffic that lasted for hours. When it got hot inside our cars or buildings, we turned on the air-conditioning. When it got cold, we turned up the heat. Torrential rain might slow us down on our ways from one kind of roof to another, but it did not rot anything. Light snow, on the other hand, could keep us inside for days. When we looked out of our windows, it was easy to decide whether it was light or dark outside. When it was light, we could see things. When it was dark, we could not. That was when we pulled down the shades in our place so no one could see inside. We turned on the lights so the darkness did not slow us down until we were good and ready to call it a night.

I worked in a downtown church where the human scale could get pretty intense, so the words "wild" and "tame" meant something to me even in the city. As did other paired opposites, such as "light" and "dark," though

in retrospect their meaning was entirely metaphorical. I did not run into them on a physical level until I moved to the country, which was how I discovered how much “between” there really was. My Jack Russell terrier was tame until she smelled something wild in the woods. Then she was gone like a shot, deaf to the sound of my voice, until she limped home hours later with a mud-caked muzzle and bloody tooth marks in one ear.

Then there was the difference between day and night. Since I had to feed the horses every night, I soon learned how deceptive the view from my kitchen window was. Standing under the five spotlights in the ceiling and the four in the oven hood, I would look outside and decide it was dark. Then I would walk outside and discover it was light. Determined to learn how long this transition really took, I hauled an air mattress out onto the front lawn one evening and resolved to stay put until three stars appeared in the night sky.

This required far more time than I had allotted.

According to the U.S. Naval Observatory, every day ends with three different twilights. Civil twilight begins a little before dark, when it is time to use the headlights on the car. Nautical twilight comes next, when a sailor can navigate by the brightest stars. Astronomical twilight arrives when even the faintest stars are visible overhead. By this time the warm grass under my air mattress has become wet with dew. I have not only gained a visceral understanding of how long it takes for light to become dark; I have also been walloped with an acute sense of my own size. The trees are alive with cicadas. The sky is alive with stars. The scale of what is going on all around me is so beyond-human that by the time astronomical twilight arrives I have already spent quite a while thinking about mortality, infinity, deity, and the origins of the universe.

I know this can happen in the city. It happened to me once on the roof of a tall building, with fireworks going off overhead. It happened more than once in different intensive care units, holding the hands of people I loved. It even happened in church, though not as often as I hoped. In all of those places and more, the human order opened to the more-than-human order in redeeming ways that reminded me of my true size. But here is a strange thing: when this happened in city places, my questions were mostly about justice: why this person and not that one? Why these people and not those?

After a few years in the county, I gave up on finding satisfying answers to such questions.

I learned that I could raise a chick from an egg, keeping it warm and fed until it was three months old, then watch a hawk take it away on the first day I let it loose in the yard. I could count the blossoms on the peach tree, looking forward to the first full harvest in years, then stare at the

thermometer as the temperature dropped below freezing during a late frost, so there was nothing left in the morning but dead buds. Of course, I also raised plenty of chicks that lived to lay eggs of their own and learned to make wild blackberry cobbler in place of the peach. I just gave up needing to know why things happened the way they did. My questions about justice became questions about agency instead: what good can I do here and what is beyond my control? When can I change things and when is there nothing to do but witness?

There is a story in the Bible about a man named Job. Even God agreed that he was without sin, but that did not prevent terrible things from happening to him. His livestock were stolen. His children were killed. His body erupted with sores. Job said all the right things at first. Then his grief overcame his reverence and he started yelling at God to tell him why. Why have you made me your target? Why did I not die at birth? Why do the wicked grow mighty in power? Why do you hide your face? This went on for a very long time without a single word from God. When God finally spoke to Job out of the whirlwind, it was not to give him any answers but to ask him a bunch of questions in return. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or loose the cords of Orion? Do you know when the mountain goats give birth? Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads its wings toward the south?

Make of that what you will, but I think God destabilizes Job's questions about divine justice with questions about human agency, especially in those liminal places where few humans go: the recesses of the deep, the waterskins of the heavens, the dens of young lions, the rocks where eagles make their nests. In one of the most acerbic verses of all, God reminds Job that rain falls even "on a land where no one lives, on the desert, which is empty of human life." Job is not at the center of God's universe, in other words. God has a lot on His plate. Counterintuitively, this revelation calms Job right down. God has taken the time to show him his place in the family of things, and while it is not as central a place as he had hoped — nor has God answered a single one of his questions — it is enough to turn Job's outrage to praise. He has heard of God before, but now he has survived a direct encounter. He has seen enough of God to remember his true size, which has turned out to be much more comforting than it may sound. It is a great help to know what you can manage and what you cannot. It is a great help to know that you are not God.

Thanks to Ed's long-ago premonition of doom, I live in a place rich with the liquid boundaries between death and life, dark and light, wild and tame. There is so much "between" in them that it is no longer possible to think

of them as opposed realities but as constant companions on a great wheel that keeps turning, giving as much as it takes. My community here includes cats and coyotes, chickens and hawks, raccoons and raccoon hunters. Our rites of passage include the ones from sunrise to sunset and winter to spring, along with the one from the nest to the grave. I can ignore these liminal gifts as easily as anyone but, like the other authors in this book, I am convinced that they deserve my best attention, both for myself and for the life of the world. In all the ways that matter, they are the truest parts.

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