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Seeing in the Dark

This morning, my partner says, "I think you should see a sleep therapist." He's imagining a kind-eyed specialist listening to me explain my fits of wakefulness. Last night after I lay awake for what felt like hours, coaxing sleep like it was a timid dog, I pushed away the comforter and paced our warped wooden floors. On many nights like last, I have given my questions to Google, learning over again that I must change location, move to a place I don't associate with being awake. It was that simple, the internet said, retrain your brain. *Biohacking!* In our guest bedroom, I pulled the potted plants from the sill and reached to tug the blinds closed. As I did, a fawn just free of her spots, barely a deer, sauntered out of the shadows and into the road.

My partner, awake from the sound of my gasp or the moaning floorboards, appeared in the doorway of the guest room where he knows to find me when he wakes up alone. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"A deer," I said, pointing to a then empty street.

This morning, he asks again, "Is anything wrong?"

There's nothing wrong, not in the way he means. I reassure him with this truth: I have such a deep well of love for him, it steals my breath with its upswell. But I am thinking of that deer, how I was so startled by her, amazed and shaken by my good luck. Startled because I had not seen one since moving to this neighborhood, and I hadn't realized this until I saw the fawn shining like a dropped penny, almost an apparition at the hour of damp clover and early leaf lettuce.

Since moving, I've had trouble sleeping. This neighborhood is not like where I grew up, where my body learned in rural woods everything it knows: nothing of street lights or headlights. I was a tired child only once a month from a full moon swollen like a second sun. There, each early-morning and each twilight, so many deer came from somewhere and arranged themselves in the yard like long rays of light. My memory of it is sacred, surely tainted by nostalgia. But at the time, it was mundane, as fixed as the seasons: the knowledge of snakes safe in the ground, the sure-return of Canada geese calling into a half-risen sun. Fixed too were the nights, the thick black of them falling like a wash over the end of each day.

That darkness, that pre-dawn back-of-dusk, is a kind of alarm in this neighborhood. When the sky goes navy, just as the sun sinks behind the shadow-cast mountains, street lamps stutter and spark along the sidewalks. Electricity hums into the roads. Porch lights come on one by one in orange cones as if to say, *Caution! Here comes the dark!*

Of course, I understand the impulse. As a child, I was terrified of the dark. I watched too many horror movies, and, when night fell on the lampless patch of woods where I grew up, I called for my mother from my bed. It was a twenty-minute fright that eventually gave way to deep rest. But it was frightening nonetheless. It was a condition brought on by movies, novels, religion, culture. Fear of the dark side, dark forces, dark desires. The dangerous dark—evil, even. I had learned, as most of us do, to prefer light. If my family arrived home late, if I had to cross the length of our lawn with only a slice of crescent moon and some blinking fireflies to light the way, I took off in a sprint. The image of demons skulking in the walnut grove turned me chalk-pale. I think of it now . . . the Milky Way so thick its edges frayed like white gauze laid over a wound. I think of it looking at the nearly starless orange night sky above the new neighborhood where I live. I think of it when the two lamps outfront our apartment, right next to my bedroom window, flicker on, crumbling the dark.

The dark's alarm seems to sound for me in reverse now. When the lamps turn on, a feeling comes to me like a record player gone awry, spinning a familiar song backward. My heart races at the oncoming sleepless night like it threatens my survival.

Like so many developments during industrialization, electric lights first touted as advancement have circled around and now nip at our heels. Like a herdless cattle dog, the lighted night surrounds, directing me to stay awake inside a dim bedroom. With our nights shining a thousand times brighter than they did two hundred years ago, my melatonin, that dark-made sleep-inducing hormone, has depleted in ways I can't imagine. The nocturnal breeding rituals of amphibians have gone haywire. Night-migrating birds circle endlessly over artificial lights until they fall dead from exhaustion. Fireflies don't know when to spark—bioluminescence is nothing without the dark.

Whenever I find myself under an unusually dark sky—a West Texas road trip, backpacking in southern Utah—it is like a recollection of self: a memory lodged deep in the marrow. The dependable rhythm of bright days and dark nights is coded into our DNA through six million years of evolution, just as it is for spring peepers, mockingbirds, fireflies and glowworms: all our nights' textures. But the self I recall is even more recent. Twenty years ago, I was a night-terrified child in my parents' front yard surrounded by a riot of darkness enlivened with sets of animal eyes, glimmering bugs, a tapestry of sound and life. When I visit my parents now, I can't sleep in my old bedroom because its window faces their new neighbor's flood lights securely shining all night. Under other, truly dark skies I recall, too, something my father taught me when I was young. A hunter and trapper, he knew the best time to track animals was under a new moon.

On the darkest night of every month, nocturnal prey animals roam more freely, sheltered and unseen. Remembering this, I have begun to unlearn that dark-fearing acculturation. Darkness is no longer a symbol of evil. It is my body's indicator for safety and rest, especially sacred now that deep rest is uncertain and often inaccessible to me.

Through all of insomnia's discomfort, it has reintroduced me to a sheltering dark—a nighttime we animals need—by sounding an alarm for what darkness we have lost and what is at stake because of it.

This morning, I have a memory of the fawn, an image of a half-lit empty sidewalk, and a void of hope into which I strain for a story, information, something to make it all make sense. After my partner went back to bed and the fawn seemed gone for good, I Googled it. White tail deer are often crepuscular, venturing out of their bedding areas at dusk and dawn. But scientists have observed environmental pressures forcing them into nocturnal habits. My search led me to an online forum in which hunters swapped tales of deer caught on trail cameras. They've gone to great lengths to understand the animals, just as my father did while I was growing up. A few of their observations: Extreme heat coerces the deer to come out later, in search of cooler temperatures; When the deer are in an over-hunted area, the middle-night becomes the most hospitable time for them to eat, breed, and carry on their lives. One hunter wrote in the forum with a familiar story. At the edge of the hunter's property line, a new subdivision was constructed. Streetlights came in. Porch lights turned on: high-security and ultra-bright. The deer turned up later and later. "They're all going over there between 2 or 3 am," the hunter wrote. "I don't know why." In another tab, I learned artificial light is disorienting deer, attracting them to urban areas at night, luring them into busy roads, yards made green with harmful chemicals, and a fury of neighborhood annoyance at the eaten azaleas.

These hunters were not necessarily ecologists. The forum was likely full of imperfect science, but as I read on, it was evident they all observed the deer, wondered about them, and noted something changed in their familiar behavior. Together in the late-night forum, we were witnessing some kind of adaptation. All of us, confused, like those birds ever-circling a neon city. We, behind our blue-lit screens, were following the animals into a state of bewilderment—ironic that this is the word that comes to me as it literally means "to be led astray into the wild." The wild, once pitch black and the source of so much of night-fear, is not what it used to be.

Still straining for that sense-making story, over breakfast I joke that the fawn was out late like a teenager defying the herd grazing down a garden up the street. I say, "I hope I see her again tonight." My partner looks at me, concerned, observing a behavior he doesn't

recognize.

He suggests again a sleep therapist. A silk eye-mask. Blackout curtains. Most mornings after a night where I've relocated to the guest room, he tells me it makes him sad to wake up alone. When he says it again this morning over our half-full coffee cups, I feel that upswell of love, wounding me like a birdless morning. If I saw a sleep therapist, I wonder, would I ever see the fawn again? It had been the two of us, moving through the night that is more like a dusk these days—a night lightening and warming. She and I, adapting, biohacking. I resist the blackout curtains, and my partner doesn't understand. While I can't sleep, at least my eyes will remain open. I will watch the windows like my own trail camera because last night was the first time in so long that I remember being startled, almost scared, by a creature's footsteps in the dark. It was the first time in so long that I didn't mind waiting for sleep to come.