

Daniel Gregory

Deer

*Third Prize, Jennie Hackman Memorial Award
for Short Fiction*

I am a deer.

...

I wasn't born that way, but someone once told me how to live my life as a deer. I was about ten when that happened. My parents died before I can remember and my first memories were in a foster home. Two female parents adopted me, but I ran away once I found out how to live as a deer.

I consider myself self-educated, much like Dr. Frankenstein's monster, although I have never read *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch, or *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. I much prefer contemporary novels. I like to understand what is going on in the human world without having to see or experience it. To me, humans are illusory. The most honest and true things are the ones that exist beyond the human world and its man-made extensions. There is more truth in living as an animal than as a human.

That is why I indulge in Cheever, Ford, Carver, and Yates when I steal books from bookstores. I always get away because when someone sees a deer in a store, no one expects a deer to steal something. I've tried Updike, but his novels are too complicated. *Couples* looked smaller than it was and I almost got caught trying to get it out of the store.

Winters are never as cold as I once thought. I found one of my siblings dying on the road; his rear was hit by an eighteen-wheeler and he was losing blood fast. He asked me to take his skin to keep me warm during the night. I thanked him again and again as I pulled him into the woods to skin him. He was still alive so I snapped his neck, but his eyes still had a light within them. I rationalize by telling myself that I was putting him out of his misery, but that look still haunts me today. I see it in dreams, sometimes when I close my eyes, sometimes when I see a person or another deer and their eyes remind me of his, as if his eyes inhabited theirs to warn me of some impending wrongdoing.

...

A doctor has been asking me a lot of questions recently.

“Who are you?”

“A deer.”

“What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one. I’m a deer.”

“I understand that you are a deer. You said you used to be a child. What was your name then?”

“Frank Bascombe.”

“You and I both know that is not true.”

“Deer don’t have names. You know that?”

“Do you remember what I said about productive exploration?”

“Yes.”

“So why don’t we explore your past like that? Like we had talked about.”

He’s been asking me these questions the past week, every day. Except on weekends. I’m assuming he has a family and doesn’t want to deal with me on weekends. I wonder what all of their names are. I had been considering *The Sportswriter* recently, which is probably why I’ve been so unproductively exploring with Doctor Ramirez. Bascombe sees the past as death-dealing, a fallacy Americans use to find themselves in. Why consider the past when we only have the present and the future? Those are the only motions that are granted to us. “There is no steady untracing progress in this life,” Melville once wrote. But I guess to make sense of my story, I’ll have to talk of the events leading up to my capture. They are what they are and I am who I am. There is nothing more than that.

• • •

The world started to become vague after my eighteenth birthday. I had been living as a deer for eight years and I felt I crossed a dividing line when I passed into American adulthood. There was an internal physiological and mental change although I was in, actuality only a day older than I was the day before. It’s hard to describe. It was as if I was fated to unhinge. Let me explain.

I had been roaming around with packs of whitetails. Initially there was a feigned attachment, an expectation that I was supposed to perceive them as kin just because I was wearing the skin of a whitetail and living among them. I had supposedly already learned to become a deer, based on the instructions I had stumbled upon around my tenth birthday, but there was a disconnect between my old Human self and my then-present Deer self. Doctor Ramirez would probably want me to elaborate here on the instructions.

It came to me in a dream. I wish it was more complicated than that, but it wasn’t. Though I remember it like this: I was in the woods alone. A man wearing a flannel shirt came up to me holding a piece of paper. He told me this was what I needed to know in order to

live as a deer. Later in the dream, I was living as a deer. I still had my human form. There was only a skin draped over my back. I had opposable thumbs and I was living with a herd of deer. I called the largest doe Mother, and the largest buck Father, as if they had conceived me. We ate tulips from people's gardens. We sipped on the cool water from a stream. When I woke, I didn't remember what the man in the flannel shirt told me, but it was like a lesson learned in school. The skill set you've learned becomes intrinsic and its origin becomes superfluous. It felt like all of humanity had lost its foundation and they were all functioning based on unquestioned motions, reenacting programmed emotional responses. The only thing that made sense was life as a deer.

...

"How many fingers do you have?"

"Ten."

"How many fingers do deer have?"

"Hooves."

"Pardon me?"

"Hooves. Deer have hooves."

"Right. So, do you see yourself as a deer, if deer have no fingers and you have ten?"

"It's not physical. It's a feeling. It's inside."

"I see."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

...

From when I was ten to eighteen, I enjoyed living my life as a deer. There was my share of hardships. A hunter once, looking like the one in my dream, had shot at me. Though the hunter was not the one from my dream. The one in my dream was how I imagined my human father looked like.

"Hey. Kid. What the fuck are you doing?" the hunter said to me.

I looked at him, but I realized that it would be in our best interests if I pretended to be a feral child, like the one Jean Marc Gaspard Itard wrote about. I grunted and ran away as fast as I could with my front arms acting like another set of legs. He might have tried to chase after me, but he looked like he hadn't run in over a decade.

There lacked a felt connection between the deer and myself, as if my mind desired to hold onto my human form. When I was around sixteen, I felt like I was the Messiah of Deer, because I could understand human structures. I hoped the deer could become educated like myself. I accepted buildings, for example, as what they

were, but the continual production would cause the fall of man. I felt that deer could rise from this. But it was merely a fleeting dream and I could not make it into a tangible plan.

Once my eighteenth birthday came around, my human perceptions dissolved. I hesitate to call it a self-inflicted Stockholm syndrome, but that was how it can best be described. What I'm saying is that I became a deer when I turned eighteen. Deer found me and I found them. They became attracted to my urine. My gestures mimicked theirs and they understood them. I was "one" with them. What did I have to look forward to as a human, now that I was physically and numerically defined as an adult? There was nothing beyond that border and this is how I became assimilated into deer-hood.

My memory began to dissolve around this point in time. My mental capacities became intertwined with a deer's, finding the same fascination with oncoming headlights. It might be understood that my human self became merely reduced to base animal instincts, that it was a loss of self, but this was when I felt the most euphoric. It is hard to imagine this sensation unless it has been experienced for over eight years.

As a consequence, humans began to repulse me. Their structure of habitation seemed absurd, unenlightened. This was when trouble started happening. I went into a school one day and pulled the fire alarm. I retreated into the woods, yelling, "I've liberated you! Run free! Run free!" But no one heard me. They all walked back inside, shivering in their human skins.

I was shot by a BB gun late at night when a woman found me eating the bulbs in her tulip bed. I would rummage through garbage cans and be chased away with shovels and shotguns. I didn't want to make it seem like I was throwing a coup against the human race, but I was a deer. Don't many people interpret it that way? That the natural world is an enemy?

...

"Knowing what you know now, do you still consider yourself a deer?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel trapped now?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Humans."

"Why's that?"

I had to think about this, but then said, "I feel tied to the front of the hunter's car. Dead. The world that you say is real, doesn't make sense. It's a prison."

"Many people feel that way. You said you've read Yates?"

"Correct."

"Do you not feel a sense of liberation in knowing that you are a living, breathing, thinking human being?"

"I feel most alive when I am furthest away from humanity."

"Do you see any consequences in that?"

"None whatsoever."

"Any contradictions?"

"No."

...

Ramirez says because I value the words of the fiction I read, I am contradicting myself. This is an absurd notion. He tells me that because I value thought and the natural laws of being human, the opposite of living life as a deer, that I am by definition, human. I tell him he doesn't know what he's talking about, that he wouldn't understand.

He would only begin to understand if he indulged in the repressed fantasies that live in the back of his mind, if those fantasies became fact, and he felt the sensation of the constant joy connected to those desires as if it was his own life. But a repressed fantasy requires acknowledgment of its inconsistency with environment and self. Being a deer is something that is inherently felt.

I've stopped calling him Doctor Ramirez because I don't think he is a doctor anymore. He only values condescension to his patients and prides himself on knowing more than anyone else. He is trying to force me to a realization that does not exist. *Are you still a deer?* he asks me every day. Of course I am. What does he see in me that contradicts this?

...

"I'm going to call you Frank because you've given me no other name to call you by."

"That's fine."

"Are you aware of what you did?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you know why you're here?"

"Yes."

"Why's that?"

"Because I am a deer. I can get away with it."

...

It was close to midnight. I was walking with a pack of aunts and uncles, second cousins, and someone who it looked like I used to roam around with when I was eleven or twelve. He had a strange spot near his rear left leg. It looked like what I thought my human mother would have looked like. He had the eyes of the deer that

donated the first skin I owned. We got to a road. My heart always quickens when we arrive at a road. I feel like the mother who only knows what these stretches of pavement mean.

A car came swerving around the corner, high beams on. The deer in front of me wouldn't move, the one with my mother on his hind leg, his eyes frozen. I tried pushing him, but he became entranced by the lights. The car hit him square on. The side view mirror hit my ribs, breaking one of them. I fell and the car stopped immediately. A man walked out. He was about my age. I was on the ground, clutching my side, groaning.

"Hey man. Are you all right?" he said to me.

I just kept groaning, louder and louder. He started to reach down to me a few times, but he kept standing above me, looking up and down the road.

"What are you doing out here this time of night with these deer?"

He then squatted and leaned over me. I remember feeling infuriated by his ignorance, his lack of understanding of my race. The pain in my ribs ceased. I remember clutching my hands around his throat and I remember when he stopped lashing around, when his chest stopped heaving for air. And I stayed there, looking at my hands. There was nothing else in the world but my hands. I kept looking at them, looking at them when they became manacled with handcuffs, looking at them as I rode in the back of a car, wondering where those ten fingers had come from.