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The Success of the Hunt

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The Success of the Hunt · *Pattiann Rogers*

There was a white hart that lived in that forest, and
if anyone killed it, he would be hanged . . .

My Antonia

He was sighted once in a clearing at dusk, the gold
Grass up to his shoulders and he standing like a pillar
Of salt staring back; seen again from a high ledge,
A motionless dot of white curled like a bloom
In the green below; surprised along a lake shore
At night, taken for an irregular reflection
Of the moon on the surf.

Some looked only for his red eyes, believing
The body could be too easily hidden
By the translucent green of lighted leaves,
That it could sink blue below the water
Or become boundless against the snow, almost invisible,
That it was not white at night.

Some who followed what was presumed to be his trail
Found the purple knobflax said to grow only
From his hoof marks, and some became engulfed
By celina moths thought to spring from his urine.
Others testified to the impassable white cliffs
Alleged to be an accumulated battery of his shadows.

Those who lost their way were forced to rediscover
The edible buds of the winter spruce, and to use
The fronds of the selamone for warmth, to repeat again
To themselves the directional details of moss,
And part the pampas grasses clear to the earth,
To smell their way east.

But those who followed furthest with the most detail,
Who actually saw the water rising in his hoof prints
And touched the trees still moist where their bark
Had been stripped, those who recognized at the last moment
The prongs of his antlers disappearing over the edge
Of their vision, they were the ones who learned to tell
By the imbalance of their feet on the earth where it was
He slept at night and by their own vertigo how it was he rose
To nip the dogwood twigs above his head. They learned to smell

His odor in their bedclothes and to waken suddenly at night
To the silence of his haunches rubbing on the ash.
Even now they can find the spot where he walked
From the water dripping and trace on their palms
The path of his winter migration. They can isolate
From any direction the eight lighted points
Of his antlers imprinted in the night sky.
And these, who were methodical with the most success,
Always meant to do more than murder.