

2014

City of Wolfmen

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Recommended Citation

Sims, Bennett. "City of Wolfmen." *The Iowa Review* 44.3 (2014): 3-6. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7506>

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City of Wolfmen

Directions
DThe city of wolfmen is the city of wolfmen only one night a month. For twenty-nine days of the month, it cannot be found on any map. Passing through a town of hirsute men, their forearms strong and calves thick, one may ask them where he could find the city of wolfmen: they will not know what he is talking about. If a gas station attendant spreads a county map across the hood of the man's car and points at the highway there, his finger will fall on emptiness. The city of wolfmen is illustrated in invisible ink. The ink is visible only in full moonlight. The dot of it rises out of the map's paper one night every month, then withdraws, like a fever blister.

Museums

There are no museums in the city of wolfmen because no one remembers the city of wolfmen the following morning. Its citizens wake up naked in zoos and in parks, in beds of forest leaves and of jacaranda petals, in each other's front lawns and in the middles of streets, and the city is governed for one day by stupefaction. —Do you remember last night? they ask each other, and none ever do. The tattered clothes and shed hair, unaccounted for, are destroyed, and cold creams are rubbed into the soreness of thighs. There is nothing left over for a museum, no artifacts and no history, because the city lacks a memory of itself. It is a zone of amnesia.

Transportation

All citizens lope in the city of wolfmen. If a man is on a bicycle when he transforms, he discards it, and if a man is within his automobile, he abandons it. The only movement is the movement of paw over earth. For this reason the city appears congested with traffic jams, though these are only streets of empty vehicles. In navigating the main roads, packs of wolfmen will run over car and bus roofs as over a frozen river. Sometimes a wolfman, still in his automobile, will find it difficult to unbuckle himself, and on hearing the thud of his brothers overhead, he will whimper helplessly and claw at his seat belt, unable to join them: this is the limit of sadness in the city of wolfmen.

Language

In the city of wolfmen all speech requires response. Howl from field is answered by howl from forest, which is answered by howl from lake bed, such that howl necessarily begets howl and dialogues are like great stretches of echoes. The law of communication is that to hear is to speak, and to speak is to pass the burden of speaking to whoever has heard you, as in a room of men who have been given the word “hello.” Some nights it even seems as though there are not multiple howls but only one howl, which passes from throat to throat, leaving one and burrowing in another, like a locust.

Dining

The morning after, a man will wake up with blood and its iron taste in his mouth. He will gargle with water until it is gone. When he goes to pick up the newspaper, he will find a neighborhood dog, perhaps a golden retriever, laid out and gutted in his front yard. There will be nothing peaceful about the death: the dog’s whiskers will not move in the morning breeze, neither will its hair, and this will unsettle the man; the only part of its body that will look asleep will be its feet, paws curled in at the ankle, except for one foot, crushed and bloody, which won’t look asleep at all. He and the dog’s owner will bury it. When the man becomes hungry later that day, he will be reminded of the dog—of the way that it leaped and yapped at streams of garden hose water—without knowing why.

Buildings

What are buildings for in the city of wolfmen? It is an everted city. When outdoors—joy of unrestrained movement and howling—the wolfmen cannot conceive of an inside: their houses seem to them like boxes of silence, as though four walls were erected around nothing, around nowhere, to contain it. The sight of their own houses makes them restless. When the wolfmen see the city from its outskirts, glowing through distance and dark like ghostliness, nothing seems more improbable to them than that they should ever return to it. But then dawn tires and weakens them, and they gather on hilltops, panting, to admire the city’s glistening buildings. Their same neighborhoods, built around nothing, around nowhere, seem finer now than forests or fields, and they trot home in exhausted packs. Under a sky pale as milk, thousands of wolfmen crouch outside front doors, whimpering to be let in.

Firearms

Few living wolfmen remember the village mobs that once hunted them. Only that the gunpowder of the rifle that fires the silver bullet is like the grains of nightmare, and the barrel smoke like a curl of nightmare, and the echoing report like the voice of nightmare, terrifying the very air.

Death

When a citizen dies in the city of wolfmen, his death bifurcates into two funerals. If a pack of wolfmen, prowling, finds a wolf's corpse prone in the forest one night, they will circle it twice before dispersing. And if a group of men, jogging the next morning, finds that same body—a man's now, nude and pale among the forest leaves—they will proceed to bury it. Even as a corpse the wolf metamorphoses: at dawn it reverts back to the man. Daylight depilates the body, shrinks its teeth. Coaxes the claws back into the hand. By the time the men find it, it is a man again and must be mourned anew. In this way the same death comes to inhabit two bodies. It moves, like a hermit crab, soft and white between its shells.

Love and Procreation

There are no women in the city of wolfmen. The population increases only in relation to the number of tourists who, passing through the city of wolfmen, suffer nonfatal attacks and stay on as citizens. Sometimes the men take lovers among themselves, though this is neither here nor there. Sometimes the wolves take lovers among themselves, meeting every full moon, though who can say whether a man transforms into the same wolf every month: perhaps the wolf is born at the first light of the moon, and grows old in ascendance with the moon, and dies at the moon's dissolution; perhaps a man has an inexhaustible number of wolves within himself and offers each month a new wolf; perhaps the love between two wolves is like the love of a man who falls in love in a dream, and if the wolves of the same two men should fall in love again the next month, then one might say that, as a coincidence, this is only like the dream that recurs, not that the two wolves remember one another, or the sweet smell of the other's urine, or the beautiful feeling of jaws against the nape of the neck.

Ghosts

The city of wolfmen haunts itself, though it is not otherwise conventionally haunted. If a wolfman breaks into his own house one night and sees a photograph of his human shape on the mantel—smiling at a friend's

wedding, wearing a tuxedo and no beard—he will growl at it, as at an intruder. Conversely, if a man detects the odor of wet fur lingering in his hallways, he will shiver, as at the presence of dead parents in dreams. In this way there are no haunted houses in the city of wolfmen, yet every house is haunted by something that the house remembers and the tenant forgets.

Astrology and Religion

Because the moon is the only influence and the only thing, the city of wolfmen considers the ocean its brother and considers itself an ocean of wolf. The wolfmen think of their city as a magnet that attracts moon: if a city of wolfmen were erected on the moon, the moon would close in on it, snapping shut like a rattrap. Or else they think of the moon as a magnet that attracts the city of wolfmen: if the moon were placed closer to Earth, the city, its buildings and streets, would detach and float airily toward it. Beautiful moon—howling is a form of prayer; dilated pupils are a form of prayer. During eclipses, the men are like dreams of themselves, and nothing anyone says makes sense.