Green Animals

by Sandra Rouse

An unseen gaze, a feeling familiar but unnamed, causes Dewey Borden to look up from his newspaper. A man stands, unsmiling. He wants to buy a book. The Reading Cat is stocked with used books and old jazz LPs. It's late and past closing time. Dewey locks the door after the man to prevent anyone else from coming in. Outside his storefront window, a stranger shifts his eyes from the window display to Dewey. Dewey frowns and circulates the aisles to check the alcoves for anyone left inside. As usual, a straggler sits sleeping in a soft chair to avoid the cold night. With the toe of his shoe, Dewey prods the fellow's shabby boot. He wakes startled with wide, unblinking eyes. “Come back tomorrow if you want a book, or buy one now.” Dewey knows his words are foolish, but they get the job done. At the end of the day, at this late hour, his customers' gawking looks disturb him. It's time to move on, he mumbles, and retire to a cabin upstate on some lake overlooking the mountains, like the one advertised in the newspaper that he leaves lying on the counter. Outside, he walks in a deafness, a fog, and blends with the night crowd along the street.

He is angular with a face drawn by lines more than flesh. Once a tall man, he now stoops under the weight of his shoulders. Manhattan's towering buildings, indomitable with tensile strength, hover above this maze of streets, these tunnels burrowed in shadowed height. Dewey does not have the word to capture this diminishing space where he lives, this loop of streets and storefronts with dark windows and doors that have shrunken from their frames. With a measured sense of pleasant anticipation (for he is a man of unexpressed emotion and few expectations) his thoughts linger over the newspaper photo charged with nostalgia, and the possibility of a cabin on a lake.

On the west side of Manhattan along the sidewalk of the low one hundred blocks where he lives, not far from his shop, late hour shadows dance with rapid-fire lights under bright signs. A silver

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fringe of hair and white chin stubble highlight his face. He feels the threatening brush of the younger crowd. Tough boys with loose pants come out at this hour; their long chains swing from low pockets, their virile scent bites like steel in the cold night. They dart so close to him that their steaming breath lays soft and wet upon the back of his neck. He too was once a boy who delighted in his own sheer strength. But lately, this city and these boys with whom he dares not lock eyes, stir something like fear in him. Gargoyles perch on high ledges and cast their gaze with stone eyes.

Around the corner in the refuge of the restaurant, he orders his takeout of peppered tofu in peanut sauce with rice. At the bar, he tips his imaginary hat to the gleaming red and pink Ganesh, his coy elephant head with almond shaped eyes teasing Dewey to play, the four arms splayed around his rotund belly. He likes this place for its warm exotic smells of sweet mango and chili pepper, its soft golden light. The barmaid recognizes him and pours his shot of scotch. She is Asian, the real thing, straight from Malaysia. Her likes to size up the girls and see how quickly he can identify the new ones arriving every few months, a pleasurable distraction from the routine of his bookshop. He orders a second tumbler but knows he shouldn't. He stares into the amber drink. He was married once but not long. It didn't work out. When she turns her back to him, he lets his gaze rest on her small frame and thin ankles. He used to have women time and again, but no more. She turns around and he feels the excitement of the drive upstate to look at the cabin.

At home, over dinner, he listens to the original sounds of Stan Getz from his turntable. The white wine that he pours complements the delightful explosion of Thai spices. Leafing through his mail, mostly junk, he feels a mixture of boredom and sleepiness. The bottle of wine works its magic. Sleep is not peaceful. He dreams an old friend of a dream, fighting strange and gargantuan animals. He cannot settle into deep sleep and, yet, he cannot rouse himself to put an end to the turmoil deep inside this

snare of a dream. As usual, the animals overcome him and he is trapped. He wakes in a sweat with his arms and legs tangled in the sheets.

He cannot return to sleep. His gaze rests on the silver light at his window, the color of stardust. Dozing between sleep and waking, the screeching brakes of a truck on the street below stir an echo of memory. The piercing sound recalls the shrill, two-finger whistle of Manny Silvera. Manny had arrived in the middle of fifth grade, landing on the dead end street where Dewey lived, doubling the number of kids in the neighborhood. He'd moved in with his grandfather, Joe, who lived on the grounds of the topiary garden that he maintained.

Following the sound of the sharp whistle at the garden gate, Dewey had caught sight of a feral tom. His leaf green eyes glinted with light from garden shadows as he streaked by trailing a tail as fat and ringed as a raccoon's. Then a sharp blow to his back by Manny's fist knocked Dewey off balance. They wrestled on the hard ground. Dewey was tall whereas Manny was broad and compact, dark skinned with the color of the Azores. He could move quickly. The more Dewey tried to get the upper hand, the quicker Manny threw his arm like a whip and pinned him to the ground. When they broke apart, Manny fell into laughing and Dewey was surprised by the black spec he saw in the golden iris of Manny's left eye, like a fly caught in amber. To wrestle on the school playground was forbidden. But in the garden no one would know. They were two boys without fathers. In school, they couldn't gain the respect of the 5th grade herd that roamed baseball fields and scout meetings with their beefy dads. So they gave it to themselves in the topiary garden with hard blows to the chest or a kick behind the ankles, ignoring how their shoes nipped at the precise edges of privet.

Manny was cunning. Sometimes he'd escape from Dewey disappearing and singing in a taunting voice hidden within a boxwood maze, behind a thick elephant leg, or under a giant green toadstool. It was Dewey's challenge to find Manny. Standing alone

before the green animals, he felt small and freakish even though he kept telling himself they were not real; *they* were the freaks. The standing bear's flat visage, the prancing horse's silent neigh, and the ambling box turtle's frozen gait stirred in him a questioning possibility. Were they alive, their silent breath pulsing through pixilated green petals? He didn't dare ask Manny because he knew the punches would be harder.

Only when he was alone in the garden did Dewey dare the topiary to break free from the green and gold shadows caught in the leafed webbing of animal forms. He'd stare at the face of the bear and imagine the slow rise and fall of his chest as if he were breathing. Or, from the horse's open mouth, he imagined the sound of a bray. Each day was full of jostling, running with Manny, and chasing feral cats. But always, Dewey anticipated the brief moment when he'd lose Manny so that he could stand alone before one of them, waiting for their gaze from unseeing eyes, or the sound from a voiceless mouth, or a nearly imperceptible movement from a sculpted leg. It was a feeling he couldn't describe.

The door of the Reading Cat swings open when Dewey turns the key in the morning, so loose have the hinges become from this routine. Inside, night shadows have taken root across his bookshelves and so he rolls the blinds high to dispel the odd feel of dank woodland that permeates this smell of old ink that bleeds on crumbling pages. A smile barely breaks across his face when he recognizes yesterday's newspaper on the counter with the photo of the cabin. He resolves to drive up there on Sunday, a pleasant excursion in the country before winter settles in. His boyhood countryside sticks with him as relentless as the dream last night, that rural place where he collided with Manny. A postcard of the topiary garden that he keeps under the cash register, he occasionally uses as a bookmark. His mother wrote it some years ago. He'd written to her only once when he'd bought the shop. He fingers the edges, no longer crisp and hard, but curled and brown. In this card, she writes that Joe Tavares, Manny's grandfather, broke

his hip and died in a nursing home, the place where she worked and ended up.

Joe Tavares was as bronze as a Japanese beetle, and Dewey's clear memory pictures him standing on a ladder wearing khaki pants and shirt, and always a khaki cap. He wielded the pruning shears with stubby fingers, *snip-snip-snip*, in the branches of boxwoods and privets that he sculpted into animals. The boys would fetch tools that he'd leave scattered on the ground; cutting shears of various sizes and fishing wire. He cut small metal plates to insert like skeleton bones inside the plants, and forced them to grow like animals.

While Joe worked, the boys played amid twisted shadows cast by the late summer sun. They would chase each other in mock fear of the towering bear, eight-feet tall, who stood blind and mute without eyes and mouth. Sometimes they hid from one another under the legs of a giraffe who appeared to stand in quiet shame at its unnaturally short neck. They cavorted in front of a unicorn with its cone-shaped horn slightly off center, looking tortured for its missing wings. In spite of the bright colors of the rose garden, there was a twisted warning there, too. The velvet petals of red, orange, pink and yellow sat stiff above thorns as sharp as the claws of the feral cats who ruled the main shed, those wild demons with bristling fur and gleaming teeth.

“Clean out this shed, and I'll give you a soda,” Joe had told the boys, handing a shovel to remove the pigeon guano and a Red Ryder BB gun to get rid of the ‘pigs,' as he called the birds.

Before Manny came to town, Dewey had spent afternoons along the shore skipping rocks. His mother never asked where he went. He seldom told her how he spent his time. Once, he hit a seagull sending him spiraling to the water. But the bird stretched his crooked wing and took off again. With the BB gun, he never seemed to get the hang of it. The feral cats were clever and dodged his pellets. Manny was the sharpshooter, plucking off the pigeons that strutted on the roof beams inside the shed. If the fallen birds were only stunned, he'd knock them out with the end of his gun.

And the dirty jobs fell to Dewey, shoveling guano and picking up dead pigeons by their legs as thin and red as pipe cleaners. He'd toss them into garbage cans that they took to the end of the driveway on Wednesday nights before pickup. Joe was pleased and the boys got their colas.

It doesn't often happen but shards of memory that scatter in night dreams have begun to show their splinters in daylight. This morning, Dewey's swallowed coffee reverses and takes a turn at the back of his throat. The burn of acid leaves his head dull with vague confusion and memories return with knife-sharp vengeance.

Nothing was confessed when they killed the cat. They'd heard Joe curse the howling felines, threatening to drown the next litter in the ocean. So when Manny whispered to Dewey, “Let's get the fuckin' tom,” it was Dewey this time who proved to be the quickest. Lunging past the bear and slipping on a pile of trimmings, he'd pinned the tom cat under his own strength, stretching him from limb to limb. But not without first enduring the pain inflicted by dirt-filled talons that tore into his wrists and arms.

“I got him,” Dewey shouted, seeing the same amber color of Manny's eyes in those of the cat. “I got him,” Dewey said, thrilled with himself each time the old cat's nerves and muscles surged against his own boy-strength. Without warning but for the glint of a blade that seemed to grow from Manny's hand, the hooked pruning shears were thrust into the cat's mid-section. The cat went limp under Dewey's strength as vermillion smeared his hands. While Manny shouted a cry of victory, Dewey watched in silence as the wild demon shrank from his sight and seemed to vanish without voice or breath.

It is the lake cabin that he thinks will break this monotony of sameness, this ebb and swell of patrons from high-rise steel and glass towers, this collection of worn books and music that he sells, and prunes, and restocks. Lately, the break he needs is from this dream where animals torture him and the feeling of being silenced,

as if his mouth were sealed with an invisible band. That night with his mother, it became impossible to eat. He'd gone to bed early without explanation, but a question burned deeply in his thoughts, did he kill the cat?

The following morning, after she left, he stayed in bed skipping school, sucking the hem of his bed sheet. When he returned to school the next day, Manny was not there. That afternoon he ran to the garden. Two large blackbirds, spotting him, abandoned the rim of the open barrel left standing at the end of the driveway. Dewey could not stop himself from staring inside. The cat was turned on itself at an odd angle as if chasing that once fleeing black-ringed tail. Dark blood and spilled guts spiked and matted the fur on his torso. And the eye sockets showed signs of withering below the prominence of skull. The smell of rancid decay wafted toward Dewey as the hum of blue-black flies buzzed in his ear. His stomach heaved against the impossible tightness of his throat. Manny's gone, Joe had shouted from a ladder at the edge of the garden. Dewey breathed so hard all the way home that when he sat down he was panting, breathless, with a shiver that beat its rhythm of alarm from his stomach to his feet.

At the cash register, he shakes a shiver from his back and turns to the newspaper sparking his interest, once again, about the drive on Sunday. The shop is quiet and well lit and the panes of glass shine black against the night. It's closing time and one straggler, a gray-haired man, sits napping in the soft chair. It's not the same guy from last night. But something strange about him is familiar. The smooth tan-colored skin, the stubby fingers folded on his lap, his thick thighs revealed under the contour of his pants, the khaki cap.

“Manny?” Dewey whispers. Could it possibly be? It's been years.

“Hi, Dewey. You didn't see me come in,” says he, as if he had not been sleeping after all.

They share a brief moment of surprise. Manny works in Jersey City. He says that he is a security guard for an oil refinery but will soon retire.

“Jersey City, so close,” Dewey says, incredulously. “How did you find me?”

“Your mother, years ago. I saw her at the nursing home,” Manny says laughing with delight. Dewey suggests he take Manny to dinner at his favorite place around the corner.

The street gangs are out now. They buzz past the old men, each with a different gait. Dewey and Manny walk in silence, intent on the goal, while a couple of times Manny seems to stumble. “How do you stand this, so many lights and people,” he comments above the contorted sounds that occasionally separate them. Dewey smiles and shrugs his shoulders. But then he feels the impatient press of someone trailing them. He grabs Manny by the arm pulling him closer to make way.

“Asshole,” hurls the fellow on rollerblades skimming Manny's shoulder.

“Punk,” Manny shouts back without flinching. Dewey cringes from the exchange but keeps them walking together, although by now Manny has released himself from Dewey's hold.

“Awh, Manny, we were boys once, right?” With his old friend, the bravado of companionship returns to Dewey.

“Right. But real boys, not hoodlums like you got here,” Manny says.

“Youth and age,” Dewey continues trying to mollify Manny's quick trigger. “We've known both. Give ‘em a chance.” Dewey enjoys this stroll with his old friend in the city in October. He walks briskly as if a weight has been lifted.

Stepping inside the entrance of Thai Top Spice, Dewey smiles at the barmaid. He orders for them both. He warms to the comfort of conversation.

“I'm closing shop after the holidays,” he tells Manny. “Sunday, I'm driving upstate to look for a cabin.”

“It's time for me to retire, too,” Manny says. He scoffs at marriage and his sons. “We're moving next month near Miami, my wife and me. Thought I'd track you down before I went south.”

Then Dewey wonders how memory has served, or haunted, Manny. “Too bad that Joe was taken by a broken hip,” he casually remarks while refilling his wine glass. He wants to know if any guilt from the topiary garden is lodged in Manny's heart.

“I went back for the burial. That's all. That's when your mother gave me your address,” Manny says between bites of food.

Dewey cannot stop himself. He needs to tell his story to Manny. They were only boys, wild without malice, caught in the maze of victory and defeat, as most boys find themselves. They'd meant no harm. “After you left, I wanted to tell Joe something, but I never figured out how to say it.” Dewey tries to make eye contact, but Manny's head is tipped back to drain the wine from his upturned glass. Then with his broad square hand, he reaches for the open bottle.

Dewey decides to press Manny for more. “Remember the feral tom?”

“Which one?” His friend's focus concentrates on pouring wine for both of them.

“Just before you left,” Dewey says. With the prongs of his fork, he prods thin carrot strips and peapods on his plate.

“I guess. You have a better memory than I do,” Manny says, draining his tall glass of water.

“I wanted to tell him that we killed the cat. That we did it together, and that if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have killed it.”

“I don't know about that,” Manny says, sounding blustery as if in defense. Dewey regrets that his words have suggested some inadequacy of Manny's. “I do remember going after the pigeons and feral cats. We had fun. But I didn't live there long. My mother was in Tucson and called Joe to send me home. I had to go. She needed me to make some money. She was always on hard times. Joe couldn't stand her. His own daughter.”

Dewey returns to his food and drink. He finds pleasure in the way the tiny vermillion flecks of hot pepper sting his mouth and cause saliva to flow from the walls of his cheeks. He swills the white wine to appease this culinary excitement. This rise and fall of pleasure repeats again and again. Repetition is what he remembers about jostling around in the topiary garden: Manny, chasing cats, shooting pigeons, and the rise and fall of pleasure and pain. But he suspects what Manny remembers of that day is a regret no larger than the spec in his eye.

For him, there was something else. He knows that for all the wild freedom he and Manny experienced, there was something dark. Not long ago, Dewey had come across a phrase in a book that struck a note within him. The world of topiary animals tamed and shaped by fishing wire, metal plates, cutting tools of various blade sizes, was a ‘sport of nature.' When Dewey dug deeper into the meaning of that phrase he found that it referred to an unexpected turn in nature, an unnatural twist in the development of a living thing.

At the subway entrance, Dewey offers a hand to his friend and wraps his other arm around Manny's shoulder. The heft of Manny's squat frame does not lean into his offer of recalled friendship. He breaks from Dewey's hold and recedes into the sub-terrain as if he is not solid enough to be seen or heard. Dewey rubs the thin white scars that circle his wrist. They are seen and felt for the guilt in killing an innocent, wild thing whose prowess buckled under the wily strength of two green boys who did not know the men they would become.