

1

Rea is definitely changing. She had always been so up front, so there – ragged and fast. Now she moves different, looks different, dresses different. She’s holding back – pulls back and listens – when before she was all head down and charge. This made it harder to know her, be with her, make conversation – before she would hoop, holler and laugh at whatever you said. Not now. Now she listens. That’s strange.

And she’s telling stories. Odd and ouch stories: not the normal ones she used to tell. New hair on her cheek – white and soft as milkweed silk: eyes blue as the back of your brain. Now when she shoots her long bow she’s all flowing grace like a big cat: she whispers the arrow away and brings the bow up like a smoking gun. She hits most often: Kerr-thud, thwaack into the Merrill ETERNITY target. That’s what it says on the target: ETERNITY target. Eternity nigh.

Listen to this, here’s the last story she told. No explanation, she just tells it while we sit there by the abandoned mill, our place, Savage Mill Camp, we call it, on account of how it is off Savage road, where the old mill was – two hundred and some years back: now just the stones. Head sized boulders, boulders big as a VW bug all stacked by giants to make the mill that cut the maples that made these houses. Now through the stones the shot of whitewater – the works all gone: this is where we make our camp. The way its been for a while now, we all meet at the camp, after evening. We sit about the fire and tell tales as did in days of old. Peter Fox is there, down on his haunches, bouncing, listening, laughing, always laughing, everything’s a laugh for him.

So Rea takes up the telling stick, comes up to the fire and tells this, loud and flat out, then she just sits down when she's done, kerrplunk. This is her in her horse-whispery voice:

– They say the children came to the river.

They say they saw their mother there... and a man. They say she chased him, caught him, beat – killed him, with ease. The way a farmer might kill a Fox. Then the mother came back with the man's head under her arm. The children ran back into the woods all like frightened Turkeys: eyes all about looking everywhere for what's not there. Then the woman, still with the head under her arm, changed into a Jaguar and ran straight up the Rand Brook – just a shadow in the woods.

The children were all freaked out and ran to tell the people, the one's used to be back in the other time, in the villages up over Rose mountain, where the Foxlands are, and the Quarterhawks, and all the others up there. Well they say, they knew right away that it was Jaguar Woman.

So they dug pits along the banks of the Rand Brook and covered them with saplings – they wanted to catch her. But they never did. She's still around. She's here now you know, all about you, she's Jaguar Woman, and she won't forget you too. Knows all about you – knows what you do and what you don't do too. Jaguar Woman – Oh what a Jag you are...

That's it.

She said it so simply that it just sounded like truth, like a *just so* story: a how Crow got burned black, how Leopard got his spots, how Elephant got his wrinkles, how Hippo got his iron flanks. Just so stories. And why not? As Peter Fox says: *people have their language and animals have their language. No need to be surprised by anything up above or down below.*

Later he would add that above as below is all the law. He and Jules would argue that ragged. But that's a long way ahead, when we are on the journey north, leaving Homvert.

So after Rea told her story I went back to her place. The others split up and broke off: they went their way home and we went our way.

She cooked that night getting me to chop leeks and garlick. Lucky I'm good at that. Her mother was there, upstairs, somewhere. The house smelled good: years of rising dough and baking bread, leek and potato soup.

She showed me where she had written the Jaguar Woman story out as a poem. It was different than the story, but the same, only different. Here it is, I saved it in my moleskin walkers' book. More moles than we know what to do with now, all the cats fed up with them, wouldn't eat 'em dipped in Chocolate, they are all Molefat those country cats. So now its mole skin books, hats, vests, spats.

So here is how she had it as the poem, she made me a copy by hand.

A man goes fishing with his wife
He climbs a tree to catch Parrots
He throws them down to his woman
She devours them, he says
Why are you eating the Parrots!
As soon as he comes down
She kills him, right there
She breaks his neck with her teeth

When she comes home
Her children all come running
She shows them their father's head
She says, it's an Armadillo
In the night she eats the children too

She disappears into the jungle
She has changed herself into Jaguar
She is Jaguar

Rea laughs at what she's done. Laughs when I read it again and again and then see how she has made it into a Savage Mill Camp story, so we'd be there, in the story. Then she talks a lot about poetry. She talks about archery. She talks about Peter Fox and the Savage Road Camp.

Peter Fox is the strangest person, human, that I have ever met. Half there, but not really, then gone and here again. Mostly he's in the woods. He said when the twisters hit

that they strip the bark right off the trees. Peter Fox. Rea is in awe of him, we all are, but he's not one of us. He looks like the setting sun: ginger red hair, Fox-eyes, he's all wiry and gristly bone, zero at the bone that boy... he wears old sweaters that look like gorse on fire, and old school mountain gear from before. We talk about the way he is and why we don't know anything about him, or where he's really from – beyond Rose Mountain – or anything about his people.

When I leave Rea's place it has passed between us what won't pass between us but hangs in the air like smoke from a pine fire. What we have instead is a secret, a bond, a finger to the nose, an exhortation to be more: to make the journey. We don't know what it means but it sounds wonderful and the words thrill us: voyage, journey, adventure, excursion, foray, trip, Dao-toes on the path, the Red Road. And we laugh more and more at the audacity of it, at our secret, and the Savage Mill Camp.

You know... for all its misery, I like it here – high on the hill above Homvert. You see all these Moose back hills, ranges of them, that make this upland here. High hills and strong rivers – rivers that run north: a million ponds, as many as stars in the sky. Ice-cold ponds beloved by Bear, Lynx, Wolf and Coyote (those two jokers) and then all the others who we avoid, keep a respectful distance, live and let live.

The houses round here are two or three hundred feet below the rim of the bowl in the mountains – a thousand feet above the flatlands that spread south and down towards the great bog hole below.

This bowl up here has its own weather. Cold air settles into it and hangs there – minus twenty in the dark months – hangs there until warm air from the south comes sliding into the bowl and pushes the cold air out. Clumps of snow left in May. Endure the elements, we say; but the elements are harsher everyday.

I like Rea's house. Built in the before time. Built strong and real: hard timbers and wagon wheel big granite blocks hand split and placed. Heartwood crossbeams – built forever: proof is how its still here.

So I wrote a poem for Rea. Had to after that. I fretted and wailed, whinged and whined until Peter Fox agreed to show me how. I knew he could – language to him is like any other thing, a substance, like wool, or wood, or skin: something to be worked and shaped.

I annoyed the hell out of him on the trail because he just wanted to do his woods running where he moves like wind through the trees and I try to keep up with him, I'm fast, but no one can run like that man can. So I keep stopping and he'd have to circle round, find me lying by Easter stream, moaning about Rea. I'm in love, I think, but I'm not in love, that way, maybe... and I don't won't know what love is and anyway, friend and secret is good. Touch is good too.

So Peter Fox said if I wanted to make Rea's company I better take up archery and poetry. He said poetry is simple as sand: the more odd, weird, different... the better the poem; the more interested she'd be. I told him about the Jaguar Woman poem: he laughed and laughed – laughed himself right off a log and into the Rand Brooke he did. Came up sputtering and saying, Okay look, this is how you make a poem. Just the pictures. That's it. Nothing that explains it like you're a wanker deluding yourself... no. just the pictures. Show me that Jaguar poem again, and he took the one Rea copied for me in his wet hand and held it up by his ginger wispy beard and read it and as he did his face lights up with a laugh. Look, he says, see the way she does it here, he points at the poem, just make word pictures that go, or don't go, together. Never explain. Cut anything that makes sense or... anything you like. If you like it it's not good. Pictures.

So I wrote this:

Down by the shadow Rand brook
Life along there is a slow left hook
Brook trout in a twist of dead wood
Brookies bite my feathers on a hook

Shoot arrows into the setting sun
Red hawk feathers on the shaft
Breathe it in and blow it home
Wind river arrow run

Big buck on the red road
Looks back and is gone
Water runs the wheel around
Sun bakes what you done

Don't know where that comes from. Same place as Peter Fox no doubt.

2

Rea is changing and Anna is changing: changelings. They spend more and more time on their own – less in the woods with us. Except whenever Peter is about, then they're sure to turn up.

Anna comes from down the other side of Homvert, over the main road, down the track bed, just past what once was the PO: Post Office, post orifice, Rea's Ma calls it.

To get here Anna has to walk all along that old strip of town, lots boarded up, then up the hill to Rea's, and then up the hill to me to drop down into the gulley of Rand brook and the Savage Mill Camp. Anna has always had a look like a blade. Flat, reflecting, fine as hair and just as sharp. That mascara black under the eyes, purple eyes, is too much. Sometimes she lets her mask slide and then you really go into those eyes, she lets you in, but as soon as you look about, she closes up again. She has that jangle laugh, jangle of silver and copper bangs on her arm, bit of a smirk, tough guy she is, but utterly her own. That's why she and Rea are so strong together. Of course they bond as gals of an age, but those two are inseparable and talk as one even though they think different. And look out the poor girl or woman who attempts to enter that circle of those two: they have a million and one ways to ridicule, laugh, scoff anyone away. Never know if they are laughing at you, with you, or just taking the piss.

Anna always looks at ease: she drapes herself on things. Never seen her frightened. Always knows what she's doing. Always has balance, poise...poised, like a Jaguar.

Odd thing about the animals around here: moose, deer, bear, coyote, fox, turkey, hawk, owl: is that they are never there when you look for them, but turn up out of nowhere – sudden, like a vision, then gone. Same thing with Peter Fox: here like he was always here, then gone again.

Peter says unless you work at it you will turn into who and what people think you are.

He says life is a trap and you are like a bear with its leg in the iron jaw: gnaw it off just to be free.

Rea is very serious about her archery. She set the Merrill ETERNITY target up behind her house. Said she is a virgin warrior goddess: Isis, Ishtar, Artemis, Athena. Makes us all repeat that shouting the names out loud. We don't mind: its fun. Just shout them out real loud and drag out the sounds on A-three-naaaa... Isis... Ish-tar... Artemis, A-the-na!

Rea carries her little book, *Zen in the Art of Archery* everywhere.

– Not Zen and, she says, ...Zen in...

She hands me the book heavily underlined to passages like this:

The unified process of shooting is divided into sections: grasping the bow, nocking the arrow, raising the bow, drawing and remaining at the point of highest tension, loosing the bow.

It's all about breathing: inhale on the draw, hold ... release. Just breathe: let go. Breathe: let go...

Thought I was anyway. But this way works for everything. Just breathe. When I feel that wave of anger or weird come rising up from my gut into my chest: the wave makes me madder than mad, then I breathe. Works for: shit at school, shit at home, not having whatever it is, Rea and Anna, needing Tin. Rin tin tin... tiny tin; get them tins.

What we use as money now: tins. How many tins you got in your pocket? Some people are tin rich but me and mine are always tin poor. Tin pan alley poor. That's us.

The school is still there and we still go. We all know it doesn't mean anything. But it makes people feel good, normal. And then the authority people get to play their games and boss people about and make decisions that are the opposite of what they should be, but everybody will pretend it's the right thing to do when you know all along it's the most stupid bass ackwards thing. There are always those small minded petty shits who want power. Want to boss their betters about. But they get the power because they are like magpies or weasels: won't let go, always after the next bright thing. We go, and we put up with it. We avoid the others, just us Our real world us with Peter Fox down at the Savage Mill Camp.

But it is at school that Rea and Anna now see how other boys look at them. This year was different. Long enough after Twelve to be seeing that this is the way it is going to be, no going back to then, before twelve. So now we are all just into fourteen, thirteen and some a little older, and looking around and saying. Oh this... is who my generation is, lets see who is who amongst the boys and girls: who can kill and who can breed. So the homeboys from the other towns check out the homegirls and our girls are like warrior swans. They have a look, a look the others don't know what to make of – they'd laugh if they could, but who can laugh at those two!

So the next time I see Rea at school, at lunch, I breathe and walk up being casual as can be with a finger sliding up the side of my nose, but it goes in my nose and I'm stuck with finger in nostril trying to be suave. Hope nothing neon comes out with that finger.

– Hey Rea, shooting arrows today?
– Gold mining? Never mind. Yes. Nock and breathe... Loose the arrow...
Come on by. We'll shoot some.
– Sure... when?
– Whenever. Two hairs past a freckle... Noon and a half. Whenever is the right time will be the right time, is time, on time, make time to take...

She sings, loading food on her tray, fruit and salad, slapping things on, looking about at everything else... smiling that smile. Now I know we are not going to be a

couple like that but, the way she looks just knocks the breath out of me – that anyone could look like that: like a range of mountains at dawn; like a waterfall, like Rea.

– Scatt, Scatt, Scatt... see you after three...

– Grasp the bow, nock the arrow.

I said, trying to have the same lazy way about something I wanted to be so clear about.

– Whenever.

Just when the hell is whenever?

Just arrive, I suppose, like Peter. Whatever time will be the right time. It will be then: nOOOn time. It will be in a moment. Oh for one moment to be timeless. If time is a river then there are moments, like rapids. Big moments are a number 5 rapid and so on down to just minor moments. A minor moment could be bumping elbows in line and laughing. I think I know what the big moment will be, but don't know if it will be a word... or a touch, or a weapon. There will be a signal: a falling star, a Moose in the river, a book open to just that page.

Rea's father is where she gets the stories. He has strange books. She's shown me. Anthropology – he used to teach up at state, before the end of all that, the breakdown. He has three bows and she has her own. Her bow is a Buckeye 45 pound built in Italy. A re-curve with the two outer arms of the bow joined to a lighter wooden center. Beautiful bow to shoot: strong but also smooth and gentle. Released tension: loosed arrow. Her father's bows are long and strong: the Ben-Pearson is sweet, built in the 60s, 45 pounds, smooth and even. A re-curve with a black shellac with white bone at both tips and center hold where there is a bowl of wood that fits in the palm of your hand when you shoot: feels so good. You hook one curve over your right ankle, then step though with your left foot and bend the bow back against your left calf and hook the string on with your left hand. Hard to get it right, fluid.

Her father's favorite bow is a Vanderveer, made of English Yew, 48 pounds – strong, a little jerky and not really to shoot – too precious: its a break down bow, two halves that slip together in a tightly tooled bronze joint. Not allowed to touch that, just

look. Then the big bow – a fifty-five pound long bow with bamboo on the front and red-Osage on the back: a bear to shoot and could kill a bear.

Rea, being scurrilous (Anna's word for her) gave me the big Bamboo and Osage bow to shoot first. Always testing. She offered me the leather forearm protector and the leather-shooting glove. I waved them away. Tough guy. I'd shot some bows years before and didn't see the need.

I could not believe how hard it was to pull that bow – the pain in my fingers, trying to hold the moment of highest tension, and release. Breathe. Right! My arrow flew all right – right over the target as I buckled in pain. The string ripped down my inner forearm. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Ow.

It hurt. The cold made it hurt more. The pain was like a high note that stays high. You keep thinking I can handle that, then it goes to the next level and takes what's left of your breath away. Next shot I took the leather guard. It felt good, like armor, and the glove a soft worked leather that felt right. These then are the stages to shooting – putting on the regalia: a uniform, armor, archery. Breathe, watch Anna, watch Rea.

I breathed as I took the bow, nocked the arrow, pulled back till my right fingers touched the right side of my mouth, felt the full tension at my face, then released: yes!

This time the arrow flew true and a sweet Kerrthunk into ETERNITY.

Yes!

Shouts Rea, as she pumps her fist in the air.

Oh yes, I breathed, thrilled:... hell yes, I'll be a student of bow and poetry now Zen and all. Whatever it takes to stay with Rea in this crackling cold air high in the hills.

