

Beasts

Mitchell T. Paglia

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The door to the Box opens and Big One calls to me from beyond. The room outside my Box is cold and dark, with many sounds bouncing between the plaster walls. Strips of sunlight slip through the shutters over two long windows and slash across the concrete floor. The big ones wait for me, leaning against the walls, counting Papers in their hands. I creep out of my Box and into the cacophony. The weight of the chains drops from my back, and Big One's hands slip under my chin and over my ears. I nip at his fingers, lean into his warmth. I am not sure if it is running time, hurt time, or hunting time. I hope I have been enough for it to be food time. I sniff the air, the smell of Others, of smoke, of blood.

A big one with fur on his lip reaches into the Box behind me. I turn and growl, but Big One's arms are around my chest. Fur Lip takes the bones of the Quick White for himself. I have had the bones of the Quick White since hunt time, a very long time ago. The smell reminds me of the kill, its long ears and white fur swishing low through the grass outside of my Cage. The bones are not the big one's to take. I bare my teeth, but I know I must be good. Big One leans his weight and his heat against me, rubbing my chest. *Good*, he whispers into my ear. He grabs my head and forces me to look into his eyes. Big One's eyes are like holes into dirt. Too close, his breath smells sour, of meat and smoke. I do not growl; I do not pull away. I have learned to be good, to return his gaze. He holds his hand before my nose, and I lick the salty skin. He stands, and the rope about my neck tightens until I choke and I'm pulled away from the Box. The smell of the Quick White's bones linger like a memory, and it is only when I smell the hot blood and hear the calls of the Others echoing through the dark that I forget the scent.

Many big ones stand about the low wall surrounding the Area. Smoke pours out of Big One's mouth as he grabs hands with Fat One, surrounded by big ones who look me over. I sense their fear as they appraise me, and I imagine what their blood would taste like. Already, Others thrash within the Area, their growls and whimpers bouncing through the cold room. Across the

room, an Other is pulled into my sight. He freezes when he sees me, hunched low, muscles bristling. He has short gray fur, a white chest, a torn ear, and a dark-stained snout. The big one holding the Other's leash is short and bald. I am unsure this big one will be able to hold the Other back for very long. Big One is behind me, feet sliding with my pulling, my collar digging into my throat, choking me.

Warm water pours over my back and splatters at my paws, and Big One rubs a towel over my body. I stare at the Other, fangs bared, hungry for what will come. He is what I must hunt to eat. He is what I kill so that I may live. Released from the Box, finally, I am a hunter again. He is large, but I will eat again. I know how this will end. I have hunted before, and I will hunt many times more.

Fat One steps beside me and holds a piece of the Paper in front of my nose. I sniff at it; it smells of paper and the grease of human hands, a history of countless hands told in its surface. The big ones laugh as the Fat One takes the Paper away, and a cheer comes up from around the walled Area. The smell of blood curls through the air. A big one carries a bloodied Other out of the Area, its head hanging limp in his arms, smearing hot blood over his arms. Behind them, a black Other limps out of the Area, led by a chain. A strip of flesh dangles from his hind leg, the thigh glistening in the dim light. He growls towards me, but there is no more fight in his eyes. He is led away by the throat, gratefully, blood dripping upon the floor in his wake.

Little Big One drags the Gray Other towards the ramp into the Area, and I follow. We thrash about at the end of our tethers, heaving our fury towards each other, equally savage, equally hungry. We face the Hunt for which we were born, for which we live, for which we are made to be good: two hunters, fighting against being hunted. The big ones pull us along the trail of the Black Other's blood into the Area, thick splotches spotting the concrete that clicks against our claws. Before I am pulled through the gate, I lick at the blood on the floor, leaving a smear on the concrete. In this moment, I am sure I have never tasted anything so delicious.