

Research Space

Journal article

Green is the colour

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short story

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Green is the colour

by Sonia Overall

You cannot wait any longer. It is still light, but you are famished. There is a soft rain falling. You hear it through the earth, smell it in the soil. You pause at the tunnel's mouth, feeling the air for sound, for movement. Look out, through the fringes of root and leaf. It is still.

You edge forwards. Your brother clings to you, hooks himself under your arm.

Step out into the half-light, the green tunnel-light, the thick damp air of forest-light. Dusk. You narrow your eyes, squint into it.

Your brother gasps; sighs. Together you breathe hard, sucking it in, the cool thin air of outside: in and out, in and out. You sway a little, your lungs clearing out the bosky sludge of home, your head light with the shocking crispness of it. You laugh, giddy. He laughs. You pick a worm from his hair.

Look up, through the green lace of overhanging branches. The birds are sheltering, roosting close to the tree trunks. You come out, stand together in the clearing, stick out your tongues and drink.

Food. You have learned from the birds, those chattering, speckled ones, which berries are sweetest. There are still some left in the tangle of thicket, purple and squashy. When they are gone, what then? Before the berries you chewed the stems of feathery ground plants and, as they pushed out from their thorny twigs, pale green leaves from the tall bushes beyond the clearing. They filled your mouth with bitter juices.

It is getting harder. It will be winter soon. Within the tunnel, the earth is warm, moss-lined and loamy. But the nights will lengthen; the frosts will come. There will be snow. You have seen a squirrel making its larder. You should do the same, but there is not enough to save for later. You are always hungry.

Your brother tugs your skirt. His wrist is bone-narrow. Yours too.

The rain glazes everything, leaves it slick. You stand listening to the dripping of leaves. Years from now, it will be this moment you come back to, wonder at: how you stood there, the two of you, unseen and unseeing, that very last time.

The man has a cudgel, a knife. Over one shoulder is a rope. A pair of rabbits hang from it, long downy feet first, heads swinging together, blood at their mouths. Their eyes are glassy. You think, for a moment, that this is what will become of you. You freeze, as you have seen such rabbits do when surprised. If you do not move, do not breathe, he may overlook you. Your brother grips and twists and writhes and you hold out your hand to him. He may bolt, reveal you, run for the tunnel and the man will follow. But he does not move. In the end, it just takes the man to turn his head and it is all over.

He looks at you both, looks beyond you. He says something you cannot understand, but you know from that knife, from that cudgel, that it is useless to argue. You cannot run now. You tell him that you are hungry. He frowns. He holds out his hand and you follow him: out to the forest edge, across fields, towards the village. It is darkening now, the moon rising. The man leads you to a house, through a doorway, into his world.

There is a fire, a woman, a child. The woman points at you, speaks rapidly. Her words are strange, all long vowels and akk-akk-akk. The child is plump and white and pink and moist. Its mouth makes circles at you. The woman reaches for a light on a hook and brings it near you, holds it up to your face, makes you wince and recoil. She lets out a hissing noise, crosses herself. The man grabs at your wrist, rolls back your sleeve. In this room, in this strange light and heat, your skin seems greener than ever.

They try to feed you. Dishes of hot, pulpy matter, broken pieces of something moss-like and pale. It sickens you. Your brother cries. He crawls under the table. You join him there and, as the fire spits and the rain falls outside and the man and woman talk and argue low in their strange voices you huddle together and fall asleep.

In the morning they take you outside. There is a garden. You find some beans and strip the fat pods, stuffing your mouths. They watch you, muttering. Later, the woman shows you how to make the beans soft in a pot with water, over the fire. You eat them, blowing on each bean to cool it. She nods and smiles.

Days pass. Your brother will not eat. He dries out, bones shining through his green skin like the raised veins of a leaf. Brittle. He begs you with his eyes, but you cannot return. You have eaten their food now. You do not want to wither and waste and become another root in the tunnel, away from the light and air. You watch him die, the last of the green seeping away with him as your skin fades through ash to white to blush. His breath smells of earth. He will be happier there.

You learn to speak their words. You learn to make their bread. The woman makes you clothes, binds your hair, washes you with a wet cloth when you bleed.

The people of the village watch you, wary. Changeling, they call you. The women are mistrustful. The men are curious. As you grow, they measure you with their eyes. Some test you with their hands. They want to raise the green to your skin again. You disappoint them, your bruises blue-brown, your cries of pain or pleasure universal. After the first time, you go back to the forest, longing for the tunnel. You call out for your brother, but your mouth is stopped, like the entrance to your old home, bound by ivy and leaf litter. The words of your first tongue are choked, forgotten, lost.

You have tried so hard to blend in that you have become them. Stay, then. Choose a man that pleases you. Have his children. Know that the green runs through them as it does through you, buried deep. Tell those who will listen tales of how you came to be here. Change the story a little with each telling. Do not tell them, your husband, your children, that you are just passing the time, waiting it out until you can once more lie beneath the sweet green knots of grass.