

The Wolves of Melampus

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Only crows call from the now wolfless woods. Safe for a moment
in the garden, my sharpened knife pressed against the silver stubble
of the foxglove's stem, I'm quivered by the word *devourance*;
those pink mouths gape from the stalk, more than a dozen

spotted throats open to take me in like lovers with the power
to regulate my fibrillating heart or to stop it. Those who lived
say the flower's taste is hot and bitter, that no one
would eat one intentionally for pleasure (oh, but they do

make assumptions). I wonder if our blood tasted bitter and too hot
on the tongues of the wolves who abandoned the woods
and became our dogs. Was it poison to their lupine hearts?
Was coming to heel and subsisting off scraps of hunted deer and elk bone

for thirty-thousand years simply safer than attempting to stomach
and transmute what flows within us into something that could nourish
and sustain a wild heart? Was it yet another impossible communion
between men and what might have been our true god?

If I were the soothsayer Melampus of Argos, whose ears were licked
by serpents and thus understood the language and wisdom of animals
(and so had no need of gods), I could make a sacrifice of my blood,
just enough to fill my finest bowl, and call to the wolves

who've refused the fire of our hearths and the limits of the leash.
And I would have them drink of me and say if there is any pleasure left
in me that is worth the hot bitterness of my domestication. I know
what beauty and sweet flavor I had in my youth that could compare

to the pull toward salvation or doom that this bloom in my hand conjures
in me as I cut it down for display is no longer worth the risk of devourance
by any civilized, sublunary man. But what might a wolf of Melampus,
or a man whose ears were once licked by serpents, still taste in me

before my blood speaks to him then slows or stills his heart?