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Doe Dose

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Doe Dose

Abstract

A plastic fawn, palm-sized, lives on my office desk. He gazes at my open office door. His right front hoof is raised, poised for haste.

The deer of my Mississippi childhood were the Virginia whitetail, *Odocoileus virginianus virginianus*. As a child ten years or so, fresh from reading Felix Salten's *Bambi*, I rested my forehead against backseat car windows and took in miles and miles of Mississippi forest. Commutes between school and our isolated house were long. I imagined myself a whitetailed doe, keeping up with the car through those woods, a blur of velvet hide and muscle.

I now walk to campus in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The *odocoileus virginianus virginianus*, the Virginia whitetail, emerge from the battlefields, animal grace among memorials and hardwoods. My round-eyed dog and I greet all deer with silence when we exercise in the morning light. *[excerpt]*

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Creative writing, non-fiction, deer, radiation, nature

Disciplines

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By Sharon Stephenson

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My toy fawn is a whitetail. On the job in my office, he has my back while I peck at my computer, even though he cannot know that I hear the student or the fellow professor before he sees them. Sometimes I reward him for his diligence. He holidays with a toy brontosaurus in my desktop terrarium.

"Winter garden" my student from New Zealand calls it, a name I find lovely.

As a child of ten years or so I had a Disney Bambi bedspread, a modest covering for any young girl's bed furnishing a bedroom in a one story rancher,

a house on a mowed lawn, a residence that in a cropped picture could be part of an established a cul-de-sac. But if the photographer panned out, she would reveal barbed wire fencing and overgrown thorny bushes in sunbaked pastures. And if the photographer zoomed in on the cut green grass, she would see mosquitoes swarming, fire ants presiding, weeds encroaching. Inside that rural house in the depths of Mississippi a child of ten years or so could walk barefoot into her bedroom and find her stepfather sprawled on her bed, nude, his privates mashed into Bambi's face.

No safe territory exists for the Virginia whitetail. From alligators down south to wolves up north, the whitetail deer is prey. We humans hunt deer for sport and for food. We humans do not possess the necessary reflexes to avoid running our cars and trucks right into a deer on a dark country road.

The first time a doe found me, a girl of six or so years old, sitting on my haunches in an old roadbed, my red knee socks quite a pop of color against the autumn leaves covering the ground, she stared deep and she stared true. Regal, she scanned my soul. She weighed my goodness. Perhaps she saw that I wanted, more than anything, to be different from the man who held the title to the land on which we found ourselves, the man my mother had married. Perhaps the doe in her eternal gaze could foresee that I would flee Mississippi and eventually find refuge in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Maybe she saw the future, me laughing during dinner in a two-story home with my husband, two children, and a round-eyed dog, a home with no secrets except at Christmastime.

In most US states, deer hunting is illegal on Christmas Day, including Pennsylvania. For the first time in almost one hundred years, no Pennsylvania hunter accidentally killed a fellow hunter during hunting season. Upon finding

a dead hunter in the woods Bambi's stag mentor says that the human is "just the same as we are. He has the same fears, the same needs, and suffers in the same way."

As my father was dying of cancer he requested that his body donated to science. His Agent Orange induced cancer had stalked his liver, his kidneys, his lungs, and finally his brain. My father envisioned others studying his corpse, a failed battle map, finding some small secret, a way to undermine the hunter. No medical school honored his request. Perhaps his body had been too damaged to be of use.

Even though the deer has natural predators, they nevertheless can overpopulate. At a nuclear physics laboratory in the hills of Tennessee, as in other places around the country, annual hunts keep the deer numbers in check. But in Tennessee, hunters go through an extra procedure. Back when the laboratory had, as its first priority, a mission to develop a fission bomb before the Nazis did, before the Russians did, mistakes were made in terms of environmental waste. As a result, the woods around this nuclear physics laboratory in the green hills of Tennessee have water and soil that has been activated, contaminated, by radiation. Deer eating the foliage, drinking the pond water, may become activated too. Strontium, like Marie Curie's radium, is a bone seeker. If the dead buck or doe has a dose higher than one and a half times the background radiation levels, the deer carcass is retained by the laboratory, too damaged to be of use.

A girl, six or ten or thirteen years old, squats on her haunches in an old Mississippi roadbed, her socks a pop of color against the autumn leaves. If the child is patient, the whitetail will seem to welcome the company. That doe, that sylvan queen, will over many visits show the child a hidden light and high

beauty forever beyond the reach of man. The child will learn that any injustice, any hurt at the hands of another is only a small and passing thing. And in times of darkness, the child imagines a future where she, like the whitetail, could sprint at thirty miles per hour, leap over an adult's head, and disappear.

<http://shenandoahliterary.org/632/2014/02/10/doe-dose/>