

Don't Make Eye Contact

Lupus is named after wolves because it devours.

The doctor tells me quietly. I have Undifferentiated Connective Tissue Disease, likely pre-lupus, a baby wolf. The snarling pup stalking me could stay neotenous, morph into an Alpha, or lose interest and hunt somebody else. Time will tell.

For months, I starve the wolf with vegetables and lace its water with bitter pills, but it still sits on my chest at night. It plays with me like a yearling, biting a leg so I can't get away. It turns three times and lays down in my womb so nothing else can den there. Even when it slumbers, it dreams of chasing me and my own restless limbs twitch.

In the summer, it gnaws my bones when thunderstorms shake the windows. It bristles in the heat and I shed, hair thinning around my full moon face. Sunlight burns my cheeks and singses my chest where the beast paces between my shoulders. It claws under my clavicles, pads and paws back and forth. I flush, feeling footfall syncopation, feral fibrillation. It startles a flock of heartbeats and an atrial flutter lifts. I float, head full of pink butterflies until one breaks through my face and pins itself to the bridge of my nose, wings red. I lean too close to the mirror and don't say what I see.

In the winter, the wolf pup crawls into the cave of my mouth and builds a fire in my throat. It scratches red and white sores on the walls of my cheeks. It fights me for my energy, and wins. I sip turmeric tea and steep myself in Epsom salts baths, but it suckles the blood from my fingers and leaves my chilled carcass blue. Sometimes, I don't recognize my hands. They belong to a dead woman. I can't find my own hands. The wolf has buried them, and dug up these for me. How can I carry on with these carrion hands that seize up and don't listen?

When family and friends see my wolf yanking me along by a leash, they shout after me that I could break free, even though they have never

been chained and dragged. They tell me to be more positive, to fast, to lift weights, and to build up my immune system, even though it's my own fierce and fanged antibodies circling to kill me. They tell me to pray.

Pray tell. Doctor, please, use telemetry and telepathy, read tea leaves and telomeres, listen for owls, watch the sky for voracious vultures. *Tell me when I'm going to die.* My heartbeat keeps me up at night. I hear the sheepskin slipping, the rapacious rhapsody, the fangs unfurled.