Barbara Kingsolver

A Novel

Prodigal Summer

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Perennial

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Information about the poetry, translations, and literary criticism of Aaron Kramer (published 1938–1998) is available on the website www.aaronkramer.com. Aaron Kramer's personal papers are archived at the Special Collections Library of the University of Michigan.

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Prodigal Summer

By the Same Author

FICTION

The Bean Trees

Pigs in Heaven

Animal Dreams

Homeland and Other Stories

The Poisonwood Bible

NONFICTION

High Tide in Tucson: Essays from Now or Never Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983

POETRY

Another America

—for Steven, Camille, and Lily, and for wildness, where it lives

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Prothalamium

Come, all you who are not satisfied as ruler in a lone, wallpapered room full of mute birds, and flowers that falsely bloom, and closets choked with dreams that long ago died!

Come, let us sweep the old streets—like a bride: sweep out dead leaves with a relentless broom, prepare for Spring, as though he were our groom for whose light footstep eagerly we bide.

We'll sweep out shadows, where the rats long fed; sweep out our shame—and in its place we'll make a bower for love, a splendid marriage-bed fragrant with flowers aquiver for the Spring.

And when he comes, our murdered dreams shall wake; and when he comes, all the mute birds shall sing.

—Aaron Kramer

Predators

er body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed.

If someone in this forest had been watching her—a man with a gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees—he would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path and how direly she scowled at the ground ahead of her feet. He would have judged her an angry woman on the trail of something hateful.

He would have been wrong. She was frustrated, it's true, to be following tracks in the mud she couldn't identify. She was used to being sure. But if she'd troubled to inspect her own mind on this humid, sunlit morning, she would have declared herself happy. She loved the air after a hard rain, and the way a forest of dripping leaves fills itself with a sibilant percussion that empties your head of

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words. Her body was free to follow its own rules: a long-legged gait too fast for companionship, unself-conscious squats in the path where she needed to touch broken foliage, a braid of hair nearly as thick as her forearm falling over her shoulder to sweep the ground whenever she bent down. Her limbs rejoiced to be outdoors again, out of her tiny cabin whose log walls had grown furry and overbearing during the long spring rains. The frown was pure concentration, nothing more. Two years alone had given her a blind person's indifference to the look on her own face.

All morning the animal trail had led her uphill, ascending the mountain, skirting a rhododendron slick, and now climbing into an old-growth forest whose steepness had spared it from ever being logged. But even here, where a good oak-hickory canopy sheltered the ridge top, last night's rain had pounded through hard enough to obscure the tracks. She knew the animal's size from the path it had left through the glossy undergrowth of mayapples, and that was enough to speed up her heart. It could be what she'd been looking for these two years and more. This lifetime. But to know for sure she needed details, especially the faint claw mark beyond the toe pad that distinguishes canid from feline. That would be the first thing to vanish in a hard rain, so it wasn't going to appear to her now, however hard she looked. Now it would take more than tracks, and on this sweet, damp morning at the beginning of the world, that was fine with her. She could be a patient tracker. Eventually the animal would give itself away with a mound of scat (which might have dissolved in the rain, too) or something else, some sign particular to its species. A bear will leave claw marks on trees and even bite the bark sometimes, though this was no bear. It was the size of a German shepherd, but no house pet, either. The dog that had laid this trail, if dog it was, would have to be a wild and hungry one to be out in such a rain.

She found a spot where it had circled a chestnut stump, probably for scent marking. She studied the stump: an old giant, raggedly rotting its way backward into the ground since its death by ax or blight.

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Toadstools dotted the humus at its base, tiny ones, brilliant orange, with delicately ridged caps like open parasols. The downpour would have obliterated such fragile things; these must have popped up in the few hours since the rain stopped—after the animal was here, then. Inspired by its ammonia. She studied the ground for a long time, unconscious of the elegant length of her nose and chin in profile, unaware of her left hand moving near her face to disperse a cloud of gnats and push stray hair out of her eyes. She squatted, steadied herself by placing her fingertips in the moss at the foot of the stump, and pressed her face to the musky old wood. Inhaled.

"Cat," she said softly, to nobody. Not what she'd hoped for, but a good surprise to find evidence of a territorial bobcat on this ridge. The mix of forests and wetlands in these mountains could be excellent core habitat for cats, but she knew they mostly kept to the limestone river cliffs along the Virginia-Kentucky border. And yet here one was. It explained the cries she'd heard two nights ago, icy shrieks in the rain, like a woman's screaming. She'd been sure it was a bobcat but still lost sleep over it. No human could fail to be moved by such human-sounding anguish. Remembering it now gave her a shiver as she balanced her weight on her toes and pushed herself back upright to her feet.

And there he stood, looking straight at her. He was dressed in boots and camouflage and carried a pack larger than hers. His rifle was no joke—a thirty-thirty, it looked like. Surprise must have stormed all over her face before she thought to arrange it for human inspection. It happened, that she ran into hunters up here. But she always saw them first. This one had stolen her advantage—he'd seen inside her.

"Eddie Bondo," is what he'd said, touching his hat brim, though it took her a moment to work this out.

"What?"

"That's my name."

"Good Lord," she said, able to breathe out finally. "I didn't ask your name."

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"You needed to know it, though."

Cocky, she thought. Or cocked, rather. Like a rifle, ready to go off. "What would I need your name for? You fixing to give me a story I'll want to tell later?" she asked quietly. It was a tactic learned from her father, and the way of mountain people in general—to be quiet when most agitated.

"That I can't say. But I won't bite." He grinned—apologetically, it seemed. He was very much younger than she. His left hand reached up to his shoulder, fingertips just brushing the barrel of the rifle strapped to his shoulder. "And I don't shoot girls."

"Well. Wonderful news."

Bite, he'd said, with the northerner's clipped i. An outsider, intruding on this place like kudzu vines. He was not very tall but deeply muscular in the way that shows up through a man's clothing, in his wrists and neck and posture: a build so accustomed to work that it seems tensed even when at ease. He said, "You sniff stumps, I see."

"I do."

"You got a good reason for that?"

"Yep."

"You going to tell me what it is?"

"Nope."

Another pause. She watched his hands, but what pulled on her was the dark green glint of his eyes. He observed her acutely, seeming to evaluate her hill-inflected vowels for the secrets behind her "yep" and "nope." His grin turned down on the corners instead of up, asking a curved parenthetical question above his right-angled chin. She could not remember a more compelling combination of features on any man she'd ever seen.

"You're not much of a talker," he said. "Most girls I know, they'll yap half the day about something they haven't done yet and might not get around to."

"Well, then. I'm not most girls you know."

She wondered if she was antagonizing him. She didn't have a

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gun, and he did, though he'd promised not to shoot. Or bite, for that matter. They stood without speaking. She measured the silence by the cloud that crossed the sun, and by the two full wood-thrush songs that rang suddenly through the leaves and hung in the air between herself and this man, her—prey? No, her trespasser. *Predator* was a strong presumption.

"All right if I just follow you for a while?" he asked politely. "No," she snapped. "That wouldn't suit me."

Man or boy, what was he? His grin dissolved, and he seemed suddenly wounded by her curtness, like a scolded son. She wondered about the proper tone, how to do that. She knew how to run off a hunter who'd forgotten when deer season ended—that was her job. But usually by this point in the conversation, it was over. And manners had not been her long suit to begin with, even a lifetime ago when she lived in a brick house, neatly pressed between a husband and neighbors. She pushed four fingers into her hair, the long brown bolt of it threaded with silver, and ran them backward from her hairline to tuck the unraveled threads back into the braid at her nape.

"I'm tracking," she said quietly. "Two people make more than double the noise of one. If you're a hunter I expect you'd know that already."

"I don't see your gun."

"I don't believe I'm carrying one. I believe we're on National Forest land, inside of a game-protection area where there's no hunting."

"Well, then," said Eddie Bondo. "That would explain it."

"Yes, it would."

He stood his ground, looking her up and down for the longest while. Long enough for her to understand suddenly that Eddie Bondo—man, not child—had taken off all her layers and put them back on again in the right order. The dark-green nylon and Gore-Tex were regulation Forest Service, the cotton flannel was hers, likewise the silk thermal long johns, and what a man might find of

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interest underneath all that she had no idea. No one had been there in quite a while.

Then he was gone. Birdsong clattered in the space between trees, hollow air that seemed vast now and suddenly empty. He had ducked headfirst into the rhododendrons, leaving behind no reason to think he'd ever been there at all.

A hot blush was what he left her, burning on the skin of her neck.

She went to bed with Eddie Bondo all over her mind and got up with a government-issue pistol tucked in her belt. The pistol was something she was supposed to carry for bear, for self-defense, and she told herself that was half right.

For two days she saw him everywhere—ahead of her on the path at dusk; in her cabin with the moonlit window behind him. In dreams. On the first evening she tried to distract or deceive her mind with books, and on the second she carefully bathed with her teakettle and cloth and the soap she normally eschewed because it assaulted the noses of deer and other animals with the only human smell they knew, that of hunters—the scent of a predator. Both nights she awoke in a sweat, disturbed by the fierce, muffled sounds of bats mating in the shadows under her porch eaves, aggressive copulations that seemed to be collisions of strangers.

And now, here, in the flesh in broad daylight beside this chestnut stump. For when he showed up again, it was in the same spot. This time he carried his pack but no rifle. Her pistol was inside her jacket, loaded, with the safety on.

Once again she'd been squatting by the stump looking for sign, very sure this time that she was on the trail of what she wanted. No question, these tracks were canine: the female, probably, whose den she'd located fourteen days ago. Male or female, it had paused by this stump to notice the bobcat's mark, which might have intrigued

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or offended or maybe meant nothing at all to it. Hard for a human ever to know that mind.

And once again—as if her rising up from that stump had conjured Eddie Bondo, as if he had derived from the rush of blood from her head—he stood smiling at her.

"There you are," he said. "Not most girls I know."

Her heart beat hard enough to dim her hearing in pulses.

"I'm the *only* one you know, looks like, if you'd be hanging around the Zebulon National Forest. Which you seem to be."

He was hatless this time, black-haired and just a little shaggy like a crow in the misty rain. His hair had the thick, glossy texture she envied slightly, for it was perfectly straight and easy and never would tangle. He spread his hands. "Look, ranger lady. No gun. Behold a decent man abiding by the law."

"So I see."

"More than I can say for you," he added. "Sniffing stumps."

"No, I couldn't lay any claim on being decent. Or a man."

His grin grew a shade darker. "That I can see."

I have a gun. He can't hurt me, but she knew as she thought these words that some other tables had turned. He'd come back. She had willed him back to this spot. And she would wait him out this time. He didn't speak for a minute or more. Then gave in. "I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?"

"For pestering you. But I'm determined to follow you up this trail today, for just a little while. If you don't mind."

"What is it you're so determined to find out?"

"What a nice girl like you is sniffing for in this big old woods. It's been keeping me up nights."

He'd thought of her, then. At night.

"I'm not Little Red Riding Hood, if that's what's worrying you. I'm twice as old as you are." *Twiced as old*, she'd said, a long-extinguished hillbilly habit tunneling into her unpracticed talk.