



scavenger

a novel by  
dennison smith

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## introduction

Scavenger was born to become a god, but, like so many saviours, at first was a slave. He survived on scraps from the table and the dung pile and the dog's lair and the stables, and so was called Scavenger, The-One-Who-Goes-About-Picking-Up-Discarded-Things. Sometimes he was called The-One-Who-Is-Rough because he was worked till he scarred. His masters sent him into terrible places. In a bucket strung by yucca rope and hooked over a juniper branch, they raised him up to the Cliffs of the Dead, there to steal the eagle's eggs and die at the eagle's talons.

But the wind loved him. Though this action of wind is unrecorded, yet the wind loved him as I love him, because he was beautiful. The wind said, Beg the eagle's mercy. And he did. The eagle mother pitied Scavenger. She wrapped him in her giant wings. He became as one of her own. She brought him water in bowls tied to her tail and talons. She brought him the flesh of mountain sheep, gored with her claws. She brought her beak to the wound and then to his mouth. She offered her mouth and Scavenger ate. Feeding on dead things delivered with love, Scavenger grew up deadly and beautiful.

He was raised in an eagle's nest, and brought to the sky as one born there. Time came for the eagles to rise through the hole in the world and live in the sky which is the crown of these worlds. There are many worlds, as you will see, each with its exit. The wind with all that it carries, and the gods that come and go like small stories, and everything that ever flies, all these move easily between the worlds. Because Scavenger did not move easily, the eagles prepared to carry him up. They painted his face with white clay and wrapped his body in blue cloud. They bound him with lightning bolts and rainbows strung around a hammock of clouds. They gave him a crystal for light and a reed for breath. They raised him up. But he was heavy. And when the eagles tired, their wings drenched with raindrops, they asked for help

of the snakes. They lent the snakes several feathers so the snakes wouldn't fall down to earth. This way the snakes flew. This way the eagles and the snakes together carried Scavenger through the sky hole. This way, Scavenger became holy, by that which flies and that which slithers, despite his birth.

blood, bonnets, and  
lightning-that-extends-away

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My mother was born in an abattoir. I believe it was an ugly scene. Slabs of cow hung like candelabra throwing black light; biting flies, a blue-green adornment on meat, sawdust floor of gut, leather boot, and the ladies wore white aprons. They bent over my grandmother's body like a dream of stars. She had fled hunger in Ireland, grown pregnant in New York. It was 1863. I have skipped at least one generation, but, in this history, which is mine, only the minutes between contractions are important.

In a chamber of torsos sliced lengthwise, amongst drippings and mutterings in obscure tongues, two women lifted my grandmother's weight, and plied her palms around an empty meat hook. A blood-drenched hand plunged scummed fingers into my grandmother's vulva and grabbed hold of the tight-sheathed head. My grandmother gave birth. Head, fist, neck, elbow, the baby came out punching, mealy and soaked in incubus sack. Shoulder, other elbow, blood, other fist, hot wet heart, lungs, blister over the nipple, stomach, limp umbilical that would fall away like a raisin in the cradle cord, rump, miniscule vagina, anus, urethra, fat white thighs streaming, knees, sickle calves, bath-toes, toenails. The women dragged it out. It was my mother. It had red hair.

What was her father's name? He could have been the devil. Or an angel, and my mother could not bear the brightness of his eyes and the holiness of his song and so she went mad, being frail. He could have been the wind itself, who struggles in her throat tonight. Soon you will hear her screaming from the family room. One day, I will try to understand these things.

But today I am six. I am swinging on a swingset. I am hanging from my family tree in the garden. Bird's nest in the cholla. I jump off. I play. I put a yellow paper beak over my hand, drop my paints in the dirt, and feed myself. I am Scavenger. It is time to ascend. I am the condor who taught all humans to fly, but humans have forgotten how to subdue the air.

When I find dead birds in the desert, I cut their wings off with my pocket knife. I have many colours of wings. They will suffice

to describe me. And in my bedroom, I have a dictionary, and a window over this garden I name **gethsemane** (from olive press): a place or occasion of great mental or spiritual suffering.

Subdued, I stand so still that the air cannot hear the wind in me. Then slowly, so slowly, I move my fingers with no rings, my palm with no lines, my wrists, no bracelet, motion through to my elbows and the soft behind my elbows, tremor of my biceps, my shoulders, and I begin to fly.

Age seven, I remake the moment by my own flashing light. Some say I am the child of the Devil. No seven-year-old thinks like this. It is nineteen-seventy, the suburbs, Phoenix, Arizona, America, land of amnesia, and I am a wide generation away from all true stories.

## history

Let me recount my lineage. I will count backwards from the Virgin Mary. Mary was the daughter of Anne, born without sin. The book tells me nothing else but to revere her and stop asking. But let me indulge in ancestor worship. Anne was the daughter of Peggy who dressed blithely as whomever she pleased. Let me unclothe her. She swapped clothes with a soldier to enliven a party. She would have swapped clothes with a rabbi if she could find one willing to swap. She kept time and beat and inverted whatever went solid. She was the pendulum. She made a room aware of itself. She made a room slip through doors, do limbo naked under the stars. The ugly stop longing for mirrors. She was the mirror. It warbled. And the deaf heard water with dripping lobes. The ceiling swung. She was the bell. Someone kissed her pinkie, she never caught his name. She was a prayer some said, but no one heard the words. Sometimes she muttered. Some said she was a witch. She had a bottomless cup given to her by a foreigner whose scent was bitter. She was thirsty, and she was never hungry. She hated the strings of meat. She hated

the flatness of sugar. She could never sleep, and she never dreamt, though she imagined there was no waking up from this dream, for she was to dream the world from the womb of her daughter.

Peggy was a butcher's wife which is not such an ugly thing in a necessary world. Peggy and her husband were happy with child and put handprints of lamb's blood on her corrugated belly. This was the mark of the future, every finger a limb of the apple tree of the past pointing upward toward the fallen Eve who had begun this solemn lineage downward. Let me model myself on Peggy.

Peggy was the daughter of Lucinda, and Lucinda cooked aubergines, standing straight in the spray of the grease, she mortified herself and fed her family. Lucinda's mother Gertrude lived with her daughter and son-in-law and made a nuisance of domestic advice that fortified all living creatures in the radius of explosion. Gertrude was born with no complications from the womb of Charlotte, who was a churning stew of stinking fish. Being that hot and rotten, Charlotte returned at the age of eighty into the Mediterranean after years of concentrated mutation. Charlotte was the daughter of Mohab and Serabel, exemplary peasantry who never rioted and spawned males furiously. Charlotte was their one daughter to survive ritual strangulation. Serabel was reared of Susie who grew lemons and was said to have been impregnated by a wasp. Susie was born to Alexandria who was a state. Alexandria descended after forty-two continuous hours of pushing, while gripping an olive stump, from her mother's exceptionally small vagina. Great cries were said to be heard across the empire. The mother's name was Doris. Doris had blonde hair like Doris Day and had come out of the woods followed by a herd of deer, all of whom she called by tender names. After this, she moved to town and lost her innocence. Doris' mother Gochef never married but was raped. Gochef was born of Matilda who was the origin of the dance and refused to pumice her feet. Matilda was the child of Esther who was a single mother and confined to a reed cell while her daughter was

given over to soldiers with helmets on their cocks. Esther was the daughter of a mother named Puba whose name was laughable until she martyred herself for the sake of an insect. Puba was born in a cave in which her mother, Isador, sucked stalactites because of overwhelming thirst during drought. The rest of her mother's village died. Puba and Isador survived eating grubs, and she would always feel she owed her life to grubs. Isador was the offspring of Saman the nomad who moved her long skirt like a sidewinder across the desert, leaving tracks beyond death. Saman sprung from the mouth of her mother, Liba, who was a great river and died only when she reached the sea. Liba's mother was Notek who was mud. Notek's mother was a queen whose name was taken away from her because she misused it. The Queen's mother was Gold, and Gold was so beautiful she raised two armies of four thousand and sang to them from her elevation among the foxtail cliffs, as the armies ran into each other's axes and died. In the night she would make love to the most beautiful corpse, and the most beautiful corpse would become an eternal statue in Gold's country. Gold's mother was very pure, hallmarked by huge grey eyes that looked with sadness as the ravens came to feast upon the younger generation, and she said, because of this atrocity I will make the night scream to cover all human weeping. Her name was O. O was the daughter of Dawn who could never be called a coward. Dawn was freckled and full of grace and, though she emerged in the nether regions, hearing the groaning of the substance that bore her, she did not blame the beginning for the bad rations. Dawn ran from one side of the world to the other, looking for her mother, The Night. The Night was called The Night because she was the only one of the jet-black women to open her mouth into a perfect circle and reveal her white teeth. When she smiled the moon waxed. She was the daughter of the hour before Eve. Who was said to have had no mother.

(my own mother was beautiful before she went mad)

## mother and liquid

I am in the garden and a red bird flies beyond my small hand, lands on the cholla, and the cholla blossoms. I see my mother through the sliding glass door at her desk. She is writing with red ink. Mother is beautiful. It is spring and the first monsoon. The sky is open with rain. The season floods, unable to absorb its whim. The worms rise and are thoroughly beaten, and the birds come down to feed and bruise themselves on raindrops. What are you doing inside, mommy? I am drenched in the yard, in my yellow rain boots. A cat springs out of the cat-hole. Where do creatures come from, mommy? It is scuffling its tight moist features over my loose rubber ankle. It purrs. Its spine moons, or like a fish tail, curls in an endless swim. Its body around my boot-feet, like a current conformed to the scattering of rocks. I am caressed at eight years old. There is a feeling of sex on my toes and a pulsing in my bladder. The cat's empty throat is full of hunger, small vocal cords trilling. Then, humping, claws in the rubber, pump pump. I shake the cat off as if it were a bird, and run in through the sliding glass doors. I knock over the red ink my mother is using for correction. My mother was a kindergarten teacher. She liked a fine nib fountain pen. She liked to draw the happy faces in the corner of the colouring project: Noah's ark, cows, horses, deer, bears, apes, man, no woman, no cat, no lizard, no condor, no eagles, no snakes, no ants, no tarantula hawk, no scorpions, nothing real-life. I didn't think it was a very good picture. But suddenly it was gone as if the sea rose up above it and drowned it, dead giraffes, bloated carcass, red ink everywhere. It was the monsoon season.

I say to mother, There was a cat and I need to pee. I pee. I should at this moment begin to menstruate if fiction were perfect, but I am much too young. The sunset ochres with black rain, my mother soaks in red ink, I have pissed on the floor. Everything seeming to work in a great coalition; cat, avatar, catalyst, monsoon and Noah. Painting, piss, and the deep plush carpet. Red ink, moth-

er's burnt hands; furrows of red, shooting veins, heading for the heart, and possible blood clot. Boom. Was that thunder? But my mother, for a moment, looked beautiful because she was exposed by colour.

**(when I begin to menstruate it will be like this:)**

I squat in my window, with my labia clanging, blood dripping down mortar, descending vertical like Virginia Creeper failing in the climate. My blood will be acid. Vermilion. Blood down the vine, wrapping itself like Saturn around the house. My blood cuts. Cleans. It is phosphorus. Phosphine. Forms salt. It is Basic Orange 15. It has tendrils. It coagulates and rolls. It is mercury, cinnabar, brilliant red crystal, roasted calomel. It is acid alizarin. Pigment Red 60. It is reddening litmus. It is boric. Sulphuric. It is brimstone. The stone walls of the yellow house corrode. Acetic acid made by fermentation of alcohol and the distillation of wood. It is acetic anhydride, a colourless mobile liquid with a pungent odour and lachrymatory action. It is ferment. It is colourless only when pure. Trichloroacetic, it is virtually complete. Nitric, it is colourless, and continues to pour through the glass, down the gutter head, evolving into hydrogen, spewing out the mouth, hydrated to hydronium ion, and into the rushing sewers to wash away everything.

Red ink ran across my mother's wrists as piss dripped down my thighs. I didn't know what to say to her. The little reindeer tried to kill the dragon with a gun, I said. This is a cloud, this is the dragon, and it's all red. I pointed to a stained picture, smiling. Then I pointed to a blank sheet on the other side of the desk, untouched by the ink spill. Look, mommy, it's the desert and it's white.

My mother looks out the sliding glass door, through the aluminium frame. No trees to spoil the desert view, no autumn leaves in the wind like ghosts cursing or sighing for someone they once loved. My mother says, Oh dear. In the afternoon she is unanimated. She gets a sponge from the kitchen. Then, bending to mop, she moves her hair from her face, and her hair turns auburn. The window rattles with a gust of wind, and her hair turns suddenly, uncontrollably, grey. Her dress is yellow. She sees her reflection in the sliding glass door imposed above an ant mound, ants move slowly along the dirt. She drops her face into her ink hands, descending.

The air is hot and laden in the desert suburb. There is no sense in representing the desert realistically when artificial water is everywhere, underground sprinklers hissing. The windows hallucinate in a wet mirage. Cement and hair spray dreaming, car wash, air conditioner, sweaty moon.

There is music from the speakers in the study, and this is the only indication of my father's presence. He loves opera and disappears inside it darkly. He loves tragedy. Mother's head is in her aging hands, two red thumb prints on her pulsing temples, touched, changing her brain waves locally, vodka, coyote, she screams in the kitchen banging sponges. Idiot-child! she curses me when her drunkenness has gotten mean. You peed on the carpet and the ink won't wash off! You are killing me, litttttle BAsstaAARD!

Monkey lady bangs pots all night, I whispered.

She was going mad. I would never know why. I could only conjecture her past. I was still so small I could not fly yet and I was frightened to death of my mother. I lay in bed, the white starched sheets still unwarmed by my flesh, my pelvis rose in the black, white thighs in my dreams. I will learn to fly, I say, folding my wings around me. Strait-jacket mutation, new life began with a collection of longings.

In the morning, I turn nine, a numerical complexity at last. I cut two masks out of construction paper, a mother mask and a daughter mask — similar faces, different sizes. Carefully slice the paper's edge into strips of hair that are separate from the cheek bones. Attach one mask to my own face, the other mask to my mother's face, allowing her lit cigarette to burn the only hole. Like the Greeks. Now do the vacuuming, I will do the sucking sound, I told her.

suck      MBret *sunaff* juice      Gk *hyei* it is raining      Lith *sunkti* ooze

The dictionary added:

**examples of:** sucked food particles from the tongue, sucked the membrane from the throat, using a tube (Fisbein) / the bee that sucks from mountain heath her honey (Wordsworth) / a vacuum pump sucks the steam out of the cloth (Von Bergen & Mauersberger) / was nearly sucked under by a bog (Brit. Bk News)/ the pull of gravity would suck the blood away from his head (Michener) / the sun sucked up the rain (Merillat) / thy valiantness was mine, thou suck'st it from me (Shakespeare) / sucked away their specie reserves (Morison and Commager) / the bemused spinster sucking culture from galleries (Canby) / sucking strength all round for the savage struggle (O'Flaherty) / suck me yes oh suck hard you bitch baby oh yes suck suck (John Holmes, Deep Throat) / all of us have been sucked out of our native soil and scattered in every unlikely corner of the world (Howard) / suck out the trachea (Koontz) / several centuries of essentialist thought have sucked dry reality (Modern Schoolman) / a child at suck.