Natural Law

SOLOMONICA DE WINTER

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2022 Prometheus Amsterdam

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Cover design Uitgeverij Prometheus after a design by Diogenes Verlag
Cover illustration Andrew Keola, *Tranquil River*
Photo author Maarten Delobel
Illustrations and maps Solomonica de Winter
Lithography illustrations and maps BFC, Bert van der Horst, Amersfoort
Graphic design Mat-Zet bv, Huizen
www.uitgeverijprometheus.nl
ISBN 978 90 446 5239 0

‘And now, go write it before them on a tablet and inscribe
it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a
witness forever.’

(Isaiah 30:8)

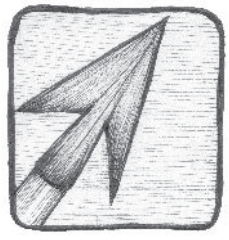
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THE CAPTIVE ERA



1

Now here is the first era, before the beginning of the world; listen now, here is the first era, lest you wish to forget.

And all that began, began in the wild, lest you wish to never know; the resting weapons, the trembling breaths taken to bear the silent wait.

Firm hands grip the handles keeping the cold protectors upright.

The sun hardly awakening, disrupted by the hushed voices, three of them, the only human ones to be heard for distances long and uninhabited on the outer edges of the woodlands, of the sharp-eyed Hunter, the gaunt Teacher, and the mutant who would be the one to endure the wilderness.

She sat between them, listening to their remarks on what one must know about the living and the dying, alert for any possible snapping of a twig nearby.

One is always the butcher, the Hunter told her, and one is always the fallen.

The way of man and animal, a law unwritten: remember it now not to succumb to the wild. The sun floating for hours until burning orange to black and sinking into ash at the end of day was the purest fact: between life and death there was light, in the air and on this ground.

Fire with which to see, to kill, to outlive, not to succumb to the darkness.

Nature tells no lie.

Moving between the trees was proof of nature's truth. The deer far ahead of them was grazing through the forest, living prey now, soon the fallen. The men abruptly rose. She followed, slowly. She was the pupil still.

This performance was hers, yet she was the pupil still.

The graceful protector she put upon her shoulder, her own crossbow carved from oak, her time to perform. She lowered the forepart onto the ground with care. Laced her foot into the cocking stirrup, pulled the bowstring back over the latch, looked up to find the animal between the green.

She reached for her shoulder bag, her gloved hand grazing the bolts.

She pulled one out and placed it in the barrel groove, gently, gently, for this performance required grace.

Positioning the ensemble back upon her shoulder, forming her proper hunting stance, aiming between the pine trees.

The hushed coaxing of the Hunter and the Teacher behind her, the joy of seeing one of her spoils fall to the ground, but she was interrupted before she could.

The pains in her stomach! Sharp, silent, unseen. She dropped to one knee.

A gasp escaping her throat, the surprise at her own faltering.

Remember it; such pains were to last in times to come.

She lowered the crossbow, clutching her aching stomach. She rose back onto her feet. Still lingering between the trees, her spoils. The warning glare of the Hunter behind her, rushing her performance. She acted swiftly, the bolt landing in the nearest tree. The deer ran out of sight.

A deep silence followed.

She was not one to fail: she was hunter-raised.

'A misfire,' the Hunter commented.

'Unusual,' said the Teacher. 'You look strangely pale today.'

Two pairs of eyes set upon her. The early morning light catching the shadows of the Teacher's face. He wore a brown woolen tunic underneath his woolen cloak, his pants of the same color, rabbit's hide around his neck. His upper lips a distinct cupid's bow half-concealed by his facial hair. His large eyes set closely under his brows. Eyes she knew, eyes of trust.

The Teacher glanced at the Hunter, the elder of the two.

At a quick glance one would consider them brothers, but where the Teacher's nose was broad, the Hunter's was pointy and thin. His small eyes were hooded, his skin was worn. One believed in righteousness and one in revenge, one to obey honor, one to obey clamor. Both wore daggers on their hips though only one enjoyed using it. Bound together to these mountains but their comradeship as fickle as the Hunter's temperament. An alliance born in tragedy, the need to survive. Not were they brothers; not even the threat of death would make them so.

The three of them carried out the silent wait until the second deer appeared. The Hunter stuck out his hand and gently gave the girl a nudge in the back. And so the mutant raised her weapon. The ache had gone and she was given the chance to redeem herself.

She positioned her body, located her target.

The swift sailing of the bolt, the thud of the carcass. Her spoils were hers to declare.

'We thank you, earth,' she mumbled, 'for granting us one of your creations.'

They carried the fallen deer back to the butchering shed next to the cabin. She watched it being passed over onto the table, the animal with large sentimental eyes still gleaming with moisture, dirt still on its shiny nose through which air had rushed only moments earlier. This was the fallen. A carcass of hope. A death from which she could live. More to come.

The Teacher washed his knives with water from the well outside before starting to skin it delicately. Unwrapping the hide to prepare it for leather-making, the flesh to be taken to the kitchen. As he cut, he avoided her gaze. By now he would have spoken to her. Something he knew, something he had dreamed. What kept him silent was worry. The ramifications of her hindered hunting performance. The repeated training the Hunter would submit her to, the tedious repetitions until blood was drawn.

She would obey, for she feared him.

Now the Teacher spoke. 'Young one,' said he. 'Go on and collect the wood.'

She nodded. She obeyed, for she honored him.

The mutant had a name. Her name was Gaia Marinos. The mutant was a young woman, not yet old enough to be fully grown. She walked across the clearing and entered the cabin, the place to call home, where to dream, from which to hide and from which to flee. She placed the crossbow in the hunting cabinet where all the weapons were held: two wooden swords – used for training – and two steel swords – used for sport – three crossbows; dozens of arrows; three bows; and six throwing knives.

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Twelve outlaws roaming this remote area, attempting to thieve, had been killed with these weapons. A cabin, lived in and warm, so far from all things civil, spoils great and plentiful. A gift to take in a place so wild, to plunder a place where most laws could not hold strong.

Twelve human bodies she had seen succumbing, perished, bloodied. Outlaws, most wild of humans. No home and no wish to have, having long lost any value of humankind.

2

She approached from afar, the mutant who would endure the wilderness. She watched him now, the Hunter, and his ferociousness. No greater fear. He pulled the axe up in the air and vigorously threw it down, a loud spectacle of flying splinters, so loud in a place too silent, too distant to fear that humans would hear.

She would always be safest in the wild.

Outlaws roamed this remote area too rarely to concern herself with. They came and went as any predator.

The nearest civilized nation lay far to the east, villages built from wood and stone, true homes with chambers and wells outside to pull water from. And the villages led to the towns, and the towns to the great cities whose honor was protected by armies of warriors. Their citizens were honorable men, and their women bore children for the future, always growing.

The self-proclaimed nations of this land. Territory continuously gained, wars were fought, outlaws were slain. The places where Natural Law reigned, slowly built word by word after The Day came.

Ah, but what was law for them was death for Gaia Marinos!

Her gloved hands reached for the butchered wood.

She heard him behind her as she stacked the blocks, felt the Hunter's gloom. His boots crumbling the leaves, silent killer. Swinging his axe around, taker of all things holy.

A tickle down her spine, only her sweat.

Lingering of his eyes. He would pay one day.

She finished stacking the wood and prepared the tub inside the cabin with water that she brought to a boil. She sat down before it to wash their dirty clothes and breathed in the steam. Her stomach aching as it had during the hunt.

And she removed her gloves. The peeling off of her armor.

Starting with the left.

Carefully, so as not to cause too much friction, the skin of her hands, as it had always been, like that of an ancient creature, cracked and blistered, as if melted and torn apart and re-sewn. Shadows of pink and dark patches of red as though perpetually stained with blood. Marks of purple as though bruised from birth, webs of veins scattered throughout so dark they appeared black. Blisters and sores, tears and fissures from existing. When one healed another oozed; when one closed, another opened.

Off with the glove on her right.

The skin twisting its way out of the leather grip, a procedure precisely executed.

Her left ear, the same texture, its shape that of a shell. No hair grew from the surrounding area and so she was bald on nearly the full left side of her head, exposed for all to see what veins crawled there.

From when she was young, she was taught to shave the right side of her head to regain some sense of symmetry, leaving only the hair on the very top of her head untouched, which she would then weave into a tight braid leading from the center of her skull down the back of her neck.

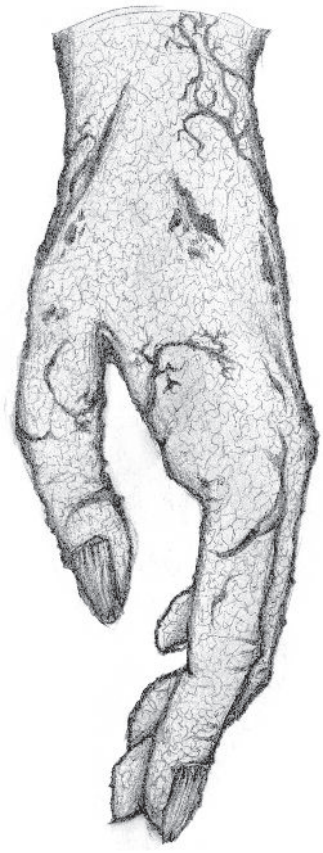
She lowered her hands into the boiling hot water. A sigh escaped her mouth.

And as unsightly as those hands were to the eye, still they were put to use from morning to night.

She scrubbed and brushed and dug and fired, she cut and plucked and pulled.

Every day a reunion with that which made her live in exile, with that which made her born to die. But her body was strong, you see. Her hands were strong. It would not be weakness that would kill her. No mutant to ever live had lived for long. Succumbing to sickness, dying from disease and weakness, too frail to move, too frail to breathe.

As though there was some luck, in being the last mutant. As though all that death had come together, for the last mutant blood in her veins to be more potent than any girl human living.



These hands accidental. This face born from the depths of deformation.

Even where the toxic air seemed not to reach still it seeped into her unborn blood long after the last mutant had been executed.

It may seem peculiar, but for years she had begged for them to be cut off from her limbs. The monstrosities, as she used to call them, were all that separated her from the world of mankind that the Teacher had taught her.

She had the means to. The Teacher had blades in various sizes. Cleavers and slicers and forks and peels. The Hunter and his axe and his crossbows and swords and daggers and hammers.

Raised around tools of death, why would she not believe she could cut off the parts of herself she did not want?

But even without her hands, still her face betrayed what she was. A mutant is simply ill-fated.

Such death, such deformation that had sprung, nothing of the old world remained. The nuclear reactors oozing misery in their wicked deaths, all that The Day had so drastically changed. The mutated and diseased among the survivors, the children they birthed more foul, more doomed.

The blistered, the oozing, the peeling of the pink skin, the purple veins through which coursed all that death, all that sickness.

And these days were behind them. Natural Law had proved it so.

But suppose there was a baby, born from two humans, born long after the last mutant had been killed.

To remember! Once there was a man, during an era long ago, during the old world, who would describe such a phenomenon as survival of the fittest.

3

Gaia Marinos was no stranger to the fate those of her kind had lived. The Teacher taught her all she needed to know. The Hunter taught her all she needed to kill. She knew her life was a death sentence. She knew she had had a mother and father killed by outlaws; she knew she was here because she had been saved. She knew mankind was the great enemy. She knew she was a mutant, a wildling; she knew death would be all she would ever know.

And to stop her from crying about her frightful self when she was still little, when she was still fearful, the Teacher sewed her a pair of leather gloves. A new pair, every winter, as she grew.

How much these hands would do, hidden still.

She placed the gloves beside her and washed the clothes. She hung them one by one on the washing line in front of the wood-burning stove. Once she was finished she put her gloves back on and she buttoned her coat.

The animals were waiting for her.

She stepped outside, where she felt the waves the strongest. Out in the open there were no barriers to prevent them. There were two streams to be felt in one's lifetime, one pointing upward and one downward, one ancient and one new.

Upward were the waves of life, transmitting through all beings. Manmade objects they curved around unless finding a way inside. These types of wavelengths could sometimes be seen, and sometimes they could not. The unseen could be found in all life with physical roots attached to the ground, growing between the branches, painlessly passing through the body, opening up her lungs, filling her nose with scents. The seen wavelengths were like the growth of ivy climbing up the wall of a house, curling around the edges of the windows, continuing on and on, outgrowing whatever stood in its path.

She did not learn about the other wave stream – the waves of man, or, as she liked to call it, the waves of misfortune – until she was taught about the history and customs of man. In the irradiated regions the breathable air was once limited and the waves of misfortune had seeped through everything alive or dead.

Manmade misery, bodies deformed, including hers, and she had sworn to forever condemn mankind for it.

Indeed, if she lived alongside them, they would have killed her for it long ago.

She unlocked the fence and entered the farm. Watch her steps, how lightly, watch her braid bounce, watch her, so rarely, walk like a child. As she entered, the bell attached to the wire around the fence rang, as it was designed to do if ever a wild creature managed to enter or climb over the perimeters.

But not was she one of them.

The bliss to know that she was no stranger to these particular animals, that she was loved by these creatures. That they could not see what others saw. That she was no predator to them as she would be to the rest of the world! And yet, it is for you to decide – once all is done that could have been done, and all has been fought for that could have been fought for – if the world had been mistaken.

Three sheep crawled out between the legs of others and made their way to her, loudly. By spring they would be one winter old. Beings of goodness. Even amongst them she was a ghastly sight.

Mutant and animal, an unlikely pair. Their thick wool pressed against her hands. The two cows stared at her lovingly, side by side. Their gaze tranquil, a trust uncomplicated. The donkey, fixated on the air vibrating between the trees outside, stood still in solemn obedience; he, too, was utterly undemanding.

Still the land here was good.

Though the Hunter trod here and breathed this air, still these animals lived and prospered here; still the land was good.

And she loved the sheep and the cows and the donkey
and the horse and the chickens, and she loved them
as though they were her own kin.
And she knew not all would live to see old age,
and she knew the sheep would be slaughtered
and the chickens would meet their fate.
What else was there to love in a place so wild?

She wrapped the donkey and the horse in their blankets before she let them outside.

The cold mornings of a lingering winter. She lowered to her knee and inspected the pregnant ewe, unmoving. She knew it was time when the animal's head started to pull upward, reaching for the sky. The contractions beginning, the signals of the waves of life. Without making a sound she was there to witness the birth.

And if books had still existed then, such scenes would have been written about, and she would have read them, and she would have nodded, and she would have known what it was like.

The mutant sat watching between the surrounding eyes of the other. The front hooves came first. Once lying on the floor the lamb was smelled by its mother, her nudging muzzle encouraging it to breathe. The second twin's arrival was licked clean as the first, and so the mutant was there to witness it all. She added fresh water, hay, and a blanket for warmth.

These times of peace she would long remember.

How silently the other sheep approached, to smell the new life, then the donkey and the two cows and the horse. An official naming ceremony was to take place, Gaia decided, and she cleaned out the compost, and she replaced the hay, and she walked over to the chicken coop around the corner outside, and she greeted every chicken and looked for eggs. She took her time.

These were the moments of peace, these farm creatures were her allies. It was her duty to protect them.

Whatever human killer she might become,
whatever duties would be bestowed upon her,
there was a time once, in the wild,
when she was only a farmer.

She went to look for the Teacher to tell him the news of the birth. He said it was a sign of new beginnings when she found him inside the butchering shed. He praised her for handling them with care, and told her to wash her hands to help him with preparing the deer hide for leather making.

She obeyed him. She always would.

The fresh hide, from the deer they had killed days ago, was to be immersed in a solution of urine to remove any remaining fat, hair, and flesh. It would then be washed, made to soften in a solution of bird droppings, and washed again to be covered in layers of ground oak bark.

It was a long process before it could be used; rags of deer leather still hung to dry in the cabin cellar that had soaked for a full winter at the least. Nearly ready. A process with a terrible odor, never to be conducted in the cabin cellar. After she had gone to wash her hands, she met the Teacher outside.

She held her gloves in her grip.

The Teacher took them from her, inspecting the wear at the corners; in some crevices the thread had loosened.

'I think it is time you receive a new pair,' he said.

Gaia had already imagined stitching her own gloves with the deer leather hanging in the cellar.

Humbly, she argued, 'They are still in good condition.'

'They covered your wrists once,' he said, 'you have grown.'