

IN EXTREMIS

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Home for a visit, I set out for a walk one evening and saw a raccoon in the park, followed by a handful of people. It kept looking over its shoulder, could barely stagger along, and every ten steps it stopped to rest. One woman thought it a lost pet and felt in its fur for a collar but it toppled over and showed its teeth silently. After that people kept back, asking what was wrong with it, since it didn't look old.

I was startled by how human it seemed, with its black and white rings and face. The whole body trembled, each hair drooped, the eyelids were almost closed. Encountering a tree, it tried to climb but fell before reaching the first branch, got up and reeled on, snarling blindly.

I thought, I'll call the police and they'll take it to the woods, but I didn't. Who has a home any more? What will endure? Life was a germ in the slime only an eon ago. Looking down the microscope one can still find no end, no last way-station to nothing, no singular thing: always new worlds appear within.

The clutch of spectators became a dozen. An old couple sat down on a bench to watch. It was an August the 4th. Momentarily the river was red with the setting sun, the library a black fortress.

The park is a half-acre of lawn in the middle of town, bounded by four streets. When the raccoon started across Washington I held up traffic, hoping it would get to the other side, where behind the Cosmopolitan Club brambles grew in a ditch, but it saw my feet, lifted its lips and turned back, climbed the curb and wavered into the park again, the crowd making way, then closing behind. Someone collared a dog that dashed up growling, then curled back on itself like a cat, and sniffed warily at the lowered tail.

The raccoon tried three trees, always falling, hitting the ground with a bump, lying dazed, then cringing in pain, getting up, going on, never trying the same tree twice, till finally it got five feet up a gnarled maple and clung where a sawed-off branch had been, and looked at us dimly without fear.

More and more passersby joined the half-moon closing around the tree, murmuring our questions— Is it rabid? Was it rat-poisoned?— all bent slightly at the waist and neck, as if the light had failed.

I did not await the outcome but returned to my desk bereft and ashamed, not knowing what to do or why.