

## Every Autumn I Shed My Skin

Basil Wilcox

I was hiking last fall and fell behind the group. I was too embarrassed to ask them to slow down and wait for me. I didn't know them that well. I was so tired. The green dots of the backpacks melted into the mountain. I stopped trying to keep up. I was angry, but still trying to be happy about the fact that I'm alive. You know the feeling. I thought: *it'd be great to see a snake right now*. And so, one emerged from the thicket of grass, glimmered its way across the path in front of me. An eastern garter snake, shiny black with a yellow streak. This was the first time I wished for a snake.

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It's the second month of quarantine and I'm watching Sarah's new burlesque routine over Zoom. I send her tips through Venmo, type little exclamation points in the chat box. I don't feel so empty. Freddy Mercury is her ball python. He ripples over her shoulders, slithers in time with Jimmy Hendrick's guitar. It's beautiful, really. I'm trying to remember that things can be beautiful.

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What I know about rats is, they can play hide and seek. In two weeks, six adolescent rats learn how to be both "seeker" and "hider" in a game with a scientist. The rats stay silent while they hide, but make ultrasonic squeaks when they seek. This hints at a higher-level cognitive capacity called theory of the mind, where they can imagine what others are thinking and predict their actions. According to the researchers. If the rats could speak, they'd tell you your OCD rituals are becoming too time-consuming. That's according to me. We don't even know where rats came from, really. Just that they're everywhere now. Every continent where humans are, except Antarctica. We call them "model organisms" in laboratory research, stow them in boxes under fluorescent light then hide

behind the door and have them come find us. Their squeaks are cute, sure, and we like to think that maybe they're happier here than wherever they came from.

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All those years ago, the little gray rat Roxy surveyed the house from my shoulder. Evenings she lounged in the Barbie Dollhouse on a plastic bed. Her rat ancestors watched from some other place and sighed. *Good for you, Roxy. You look like you're going to be okay. Do you still know how to climb a tree? Could you burrow and find warmth in a soft spot under the earth?* She'd probably say no. What we all need to do is take a deep breath at the same time and think of The Some Other Place. Then stow ourselves into boxes under fluorescent lights in a sterile environment. If we're quiet enough, we'll hear our ancestor's ultrasonic squeaks and eventually they'll find us. The lid of the box comes off and it's all light, color, everywhere. After, we all go back to our beds and in the morning we wake up knowing how to climb trees and speak to one another again.

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One autumn in Ann Arbor, Sarah takes me to the gay bar for the first time. It's all color everywhere. Her purple dress and the Wet 'n' Wild gold eyeliner she stole from the drugstore last week. The emerald of Annie's grandpa's slacks she hemmed herself. And then there's Sam's powder blue dress, made of silk seamless as sky. Yes, please don't tell anyone, but sometimes I love the way rich people dress. I'm weak in the face of pretty things. I just can't help it.

It's not until we leave the dance floor and smoke on the patio that it sinks in that I'm alive and at a bar and I'm not scared. I've been scared of bars after what happened in the parking lot of the straight bar that autumn before. I've been scared of a lot of things. Sarah has two Marlboro Menthols in her mouth at the same time so that she can light mine and hand it to me. Purple lipstick

clings to the end. I'm not scared. Later, the lights on the dance floor are pink when she asks, "Can I kiss you?" and I'm not scared I'm not.

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What I know about the television show *New Girl* is, someone wrote in the script that the character Cece should say: "There's nothing less sexy than a dude asking if he can kiss you." I don't know who wrote this, but I would kindly like all of their teeth to fall out and for a rat to shit massively in their sock drawer.

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Everybody has to wash their hands now and then. Especially now. Still, I can't say that I don't miss the grosser version of myself. My vertebrae bends uncomfortably under my skin while I crouch over the sink and if I had to give up my blue hair and the new folds of my skin to be less compulsive, that's fine. I drank moldy apple juice when I was teenager because I didn't want to waste the rum I'd poured in it. I worked in the rows of strawberries and green beans and came home with dirt in my teeth. My therapist tells me to chart the amount of time I spend a day washing my hands. That first we have to understand how much time it consumes so that we can celebrate when the time eventually lessens. That many of my contamination fears seem to relate to water. That it's interesting, given the way I used to love water. I think it's interesting that I now know words like "contamination fears" and what they mean in reference to myself and my life. It's like you get over one fear, then one day you're walking in the woods and go to pick up a cool rock and underneath it, you find seven new fears.

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It's Thanksgiving weekend and I'm drunk at the gay bar with Sarah. There's a buffet set up in a corner of the bar, and this is before we had to worry about things like bars and buffets. There's turkey legs and mac and cheese. Hushpuppies and potatoes. Is it strange to eat from a buffet under color-changing LED lights? Maybe, but that doesn't make it any less delightful. She tells me she bought Freddy Mercury off Craigslist and that might just be one of the best sentences anyone's ever said to me. I tell her I've been thinking about buying a snake, but I'm not sure if I could feed it. I was the kid in middle school with a pet rat that hung out on my shoulder. When people came over for a slumber party, they had to be cool with Roxy the rat first. I don't think it's so bad, she says. Snakes have to eat and something has to feed them.

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When I finally summited the mountain on the hiking trip, the group cheered and I went and sat on a rock and cried. Not out of embarrassment or anger, but because my body had carried me all that way. I'd forgotten that my body was strong and capable, even when it doesn't feel as strong and capable as others'. I forget this often. I wished for a snake again, mostly just to see if it would work. If I could make snakes appear simply because I wished for them, people could abandon me on mountainsides all the time, that's just fine. I'd be the Snake Summoner. Snake Seeker. Other Cool Snake-related Names. Alas, the snake never showed up on the mountain and so I went back to the group, sat on a rock, and ate trail mix.

A week later and I'm sitting on the dock by our camp. It's hot and I'm friends with everyone now, so I'm half-naked in the sun with my feet in the lake. I close my eyes, stretch out, and doze off. Doze away. Somewhere else. I love to sleep sometimes. It feels almost like I'm rebelling against a world and a brain that demands so much of me. When I wake, a northern water snake is basking next to me. I could reach out and touch him if I wanted, but what I know about water snakes is that

they can be aggressive when cornered. Though nonvenomous, northern water snakes have an anticoagulant in their saliva. If they bite you, you're likely to bleed more. He doesn't bite. His maple-syrup colored scales are dry, as if he'd been basking beside me for a long while. I wonder if an old relative loved snakes. I like to think so. To imagine them thinking, *Look at you, Basil. You look like you're going to be okay.*