

**Wendy Delorme**

# **BECOMING LIONESSE**

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PROLOGUE: A BESTIARY

I have been and I am all the animals.

Certain animals, anyway.

Hen, Chick, Mouse, Shrew,

Pig or Sow, Cow, Nag,

Doe, Gazelle, Rabbit, Vixen,

She-wolf, Cougar, Viper,

Monkey,

Mussel, Shrimp, Whale, Clam,

Crab and Tuna, Praying mantis,

She-cat, Tigress, Pantheress, Queen.

And their variants:

Filly, Love bug,

Bunny, Heifer,

Princess, Kitty, Pussy,

Bitch.

And still others I'm forgetting.

I've incarnated a few imaginary ones too.

Dragon, Sphinx, and Unicorn.

Every animal comes with its own bundle of connotations and implicit symbols:

Bitch pants when she's taken from behind.

Venomous Viper slanders her associates.

Doe makes doe eyes.

Bunny, who's kind of dumb, allows herself to be caressed to the point of apoplexy.

Chick, Bird, Hen—that gets more complicated. Two out of three belong to the same species of gallinaceous bird, but their connotations vary.

Chick is small, delicate, defenseless, and needs protection. She's still just a preliminary sketch of a girl. Chick is gender hierarchy's perfect alias when it wants to keep you in line ("I just got off work Chicky, I'm hungry, is dinner ready?").

Bird, often preceded by the possessive adjective ("my bird") to connote affection, disdain, derision, or even contempt, is meant to be cute, but usually just designates a fowl with a tiny brain, confined to a courtyard, to be roasted and consumed.

Hen is more mature, won't put on airs, line of approach can be more direct and price tag is clearly marked. She can be used to make soup, her carcass will flavor any kind of stew.

Mouse: no comment. Furtive, grey, a nuisance. An old girl, in short. One who has not managed to couple.

Porker, or Sow: depends of course on the intentions of the person calling you this name. The female pig is easy, she loves sex. She bathes in her trough, all covered in mud. To be clear: liking sex is dirty (the implicit subtext is that you should like it, but you shouldn't show you like it).

Nag: yes, I've foaled, and like a lot of women, when it comes to domestic tasks, I have the capacity of a good workhorse. In other words, nothing more is expected of my species, but to reproduce and work the fields (run errands, wash dishes, mop the floors, cook).

Gazelle: she has a sure grace but remains savage. The preferred game of predatory wildcats, for the way she bolts away, belly low to the ground, then submits to having her throat slit after a frenzied race, flank heaving and jugular slashed open. The takeaway: you are beautiful prey.

She-wolf: already an improvement. She-wolf lives in a group, she knows how to defend her pack, she hunts, she's dangerous. Consequently, this is not always a compliment. She-wolf gets bad PR, she'll cut your throat without bothering to negotiate.

Shrimp, Whale, Crab, Tuna: simply by listing them one after the other, you can already smell the strong, reeking odor of the

fishmonger's stall. Comparison to sea creatures is always pejorative, who knows why.

Love bug: small, jumpy, above all invasive.

Praying mantis: always an insult. And for good reason—she's the only one who understands that in this system, the most efficient way to survive is to eat the male after copulation.

She-cat, Pantheress, Tigress, and, finally, Lioness: predatory felines, more or less susceptible to being tamed. The choice of specimen indicates degree of domestication.

So try to understand our agitation, at having been addressed, all our lives, by these names from the animal kingdom. It defies all attempt at logical reasoning. I mean, how can you be both a bitch and a bunny? A chick and a lioness? A she-wolf and a crab?

In my case, it started young. I had hair on my legs, down on my arms and lower back, and a visible mustache. In middle school, then in high school, they called me Monkey—until I finally shaved, sacrificing my fur. I've been clean-shaven ever since.

My only rebellion consisted in not removing the hair growing out of the beauty mark on my chin. I caress it sometimes, very surreptitiously. It remains my secret—no one sees it, because I snip it when it gets too long. I can feel it sticking up under my fingertip.

My habit of smiling and stroking the edge of my chin with my index finger when I'm being spoken to is considered charming. Apparently, I'm really good at listening. Because if I talk too much, they say I'm chatty, and then I'm called all kinds of bird names:

Parakeet, Magpie, Parrot, Crane, also (often) Turkey.

Better off belonging to the discreet species of domestic cat.

Therefore, I am a bestiary.

It was in adolescence that my interior started to feel overpopulated. I had a lover who proclaimed himself charmed by my doe-eyed expression and my gracious, forest fawn's demeanor. He liked the roundness of my filly's rump, and he liked to take me doggy-style and call me bitch.

One day, I barked.

Thinking it would please him. Just a tiny little bark.

*Woof.*

But he lost his hard-on.

Men really are a mysterious species.

When he scratched my head and called me pussy, it was acceptable to purr, when he subjugated me, I could curve my spine and squeal. But bark? No way.

Thus, this bitch stays mute. But she's still insatiable, another word she hears during copulation.

Sometimes at night I felt like a great wildcat cramped in a cage, and I often had uncontrollable cravings. The lover found me naked in front of the fridge, lapping up a puddle of spilled milk. Or nibbling on almonds all day long, looking haggard and wide-eyed.

Nights of the full moon were complicated. The she-wolf lurking in me howled ceaselessly, and if she were shut in, she'd claw at the door. I still have the scars, from my lacerated arms.

The psychiatrists mentioned bulimic episodes, self-mutilation, dissociation.

My "I" was multiple.

The lover fled, it was a question of survival. The bitch and the she-wolf curled up their lips too much for his liking, and the queen scratched. We were numerous—he was in the minority.

I took other lovers.

My sexual appetite was always to blame. This goes back to those tumultuous days when being in heat made the she-cat go nearly crazy. It is not acceptable, I discovered, to rub up against boys. The inverse is not true: when boys besiege you, it's considered normal. Their male appetite is a legitimate thing, I understood that very early.

Some place their hand on your rear end, without warning or asking. In high school, when I bared my teeth to the math teacher

who got too insistent, it cost me a two-day suspension and a penalty assignment: write an essay analyzing the meaning of the word “civility.”

Animal tamers are legion. Some want to “break you in,” to “fuck you like a dog,” or “teach you a lesson.” Others palpate your flanks, your rear or your breasts, no big deal, just a quick feel, to see if the flesh is firm. The bus to high school was a little like the agricultural fair. But I had no vocation to play the heifer. I bit too often.

The year I turned eighteen I was put on medication. And since then, they say “things are better,” speaking about me. I don’t scratch my palms, I don’t cut my arms, I don’t bite anyone anymore. When my brain starts to boil and my ribcage locks up, when my fingernails sink into the flesh of my hands, tranquilizers come in handy to lower the pressure and clear the air, so I can breathe. The distress of being multiple is contained under a lid of well-regulated chemicals that keep me vegetal, docile, and tame.

But if you awaken near me at night, be careful. Sometimes I’ll be watching, immobile, in the darkness. I hear blood pulsating in the big arteries, I can see very well in the dark. A few years ago I became a cougar, and they are very agile predators.

Nevertheless, of all the animals, if I had to choose one, I’d



be the lioness—the only wildcat who lives in a clan with her sisters. A lioness doesn't require chemicals to “calm down.” She only goes crazy if she's in a cage, turning endless circles under human eyes, without enough open space to cast her gaze. Wildcats are made to see at great distances, over vast plains. Left enclosed for years, they go nearly blind, develop anxiety disorders. This is why I've been writing every day for more than twenty years: to widen the cage bars, to get some distance from what is containing me, diminishing me, cutting me down to size. I write to rediscover the horizon line.

And today I want to write about the lioness.

## THE LIONESS OF TIERGARTEN

*Berlin, Summer 2001.*

I'm twenty years old. I'm taking a walk with my brand-new friend Zdenko, along the paths of the zoological park in Tiergarten (in German the word literally means "garden of animals"). Zdenko is making a game of showing me—the French girl—the anarchist cafés of Friedrichshain and the underground bars of Kreuzberg, the artists' squats in empty, still abandoned buildings of the former East, the parties held in vacant lots as night falls, the old Communist administrative buildings converted into cultural centers, and the parks of his city. For weeks we scour all of Berlin on foot, Zdenko's Polish accent intermingling with my French one during the course of our walks and conversations in German, a language that is not entirely ours but that allows us to communicate. Now for the first time we are venturing out into the bourgeois spaces of West Berlin.

These walks have a particular meaning for me, as if they could take me back in time, or repair something. Zdenko is the son of Polish migrants, a population that was once exploited—and is still

despised—by many Germans. My father, who came to live in France at the age of twenty, is the son and the grandson of Silesian German peasants who, when Silesia was ceded to Poland in 1945, lost their farmlands, witnessed the rape of the women of their village by Russian soldiers, survived first the expropriation of their land and their livestock, and then the wintertime exodus toward the West, in minus 15 degree temperatures. I knew that my great-grandfather had been beaten to a pulp by the SS in front of my grandfather, his youngest son and the youngest of thirteen children born on the farm, because as a sign of protest he refused to fly Hitler's flag from the biggest building in the village, where he was mayor. I have the comfort of knowing that my ancestor was not a Nazi.

My grandfather spoke of the Polish *Mädels*, young women who lived on the family farm, working year-round as domestic servants or farm hands. What were those relationships like? How were the young women treated? “Wie Familie” (*like family members*), responds my grandmother. My grandfather's not around anymore for me to ask. He died last year, and I realized that I have to ask the elders while there's still time, because memory will be lost when they're gone.

Poland and Germany: a violent history that remained vivid, fifty years later, for even the grandchildren of those who had

endured the war. Neither Zdenko nor I are Jewish. No one in our respective families was lost to the horror of the camps. But the fact that we are part-German and half-Polish is enough to cause potential unease. History influences, often tacitly, the relationships between the descendants of people who once ripped each other apart. It's there, between us, we never speak about it. But together, we're capable of lightness, an easy friendship, we're twenty years old. He's a young painter living in Berlin, surviving on day jobs, and I'm on a university exchange program. I'm in love with the city and I want to stay. I've enrolled in the Humboldt-Universität for the next fall and found a part-time night job in a hostess bar to pay my rent (at the time, you could rent beautiful rooms in big old apartments for less than three hundred euros, the ads were plastered on every street lamppost in the eastern neighborhoods). We like to laugh, to dance, and to take long walks in this immense city that I cherish, as if it were a person who's my perfect match. Zdenko is my guide, because he knows how to flâne—a rare quality.

The sky is clear, the sun is high, and my soul is light. The zoological garden is pleasant and covered in blooms. But in Berlin, History can catch up to you anywhere, when you're least expecting it.

Zdenko begins to explain, in measured tones, that this zoo,

the oldest in Germany, had been destroyed by bombs during the war, and most of the animals killed. In the eight weeks we've known each other, it's the first time he's alluded to the war. My heart leaps into my throat, I can see the carnage of mutilated beasts under stone rubble as if the image were superimposed upon the clean pathways designed to please walkers and tourists. It's a calm morning at the zoo, we're practically alone.

As I listen to my friend, I see a covered arcade at the curve of a gravel path, bearing a sign: "Raubtiere." *Predators*.

Predators, in a closed building? A tawny odor proliferates in waves up to the hallway entrance, where the temperature is suddenly higher. A chasm of heat. I enter without thinking. Zdenko pauses for a moment before following me. "Are you sure you want to go in?" he murmurs—"It's not a nice place."

I keep going anyway. The persistent, almost palpable odor invades me, so thick that moving through it feels like moving through matter. The air inside is heavy and moist, almost unbreathable. And there, behind the windowpanes, I see. Wildcats. In glass cages, vivarium cells, decorated with dead tree trunks and upholstered with sand. Some, panthers and leopards, are turning around in circles. Others are as if taxidermied, you can barely see their thoraxes rising with each breath.

A lioness, especially, holds my gaze. A lioness, unmoving. More stationary than a thousand-year-old sphinx, crouched in the shadows of a stall, between the black bars and the glass pane. A lioness, walled-in. I look at her so long that finally Zdenko, slightly ill at ease, pulls me away by the hand. The lioness stares back at me, without blinking, without a quiver. I can't take my eyes off her.

The memory of the lioness has haunted me for years. Almost twenty years later, I can still call it up precisely: her light-colored face, her dark eyes behind the transparent wall, the odor that clung to visitors' hair, the electric light, the signs in German, English, Chinese, French: DO NOT TAP THE GLASS.

Because the temptation to get closer is strong, to attempt a little rap with bent index finger to see if the great wildcat will prick up an ear, show her chops, plunge her impervious gaze into our own.

The lioness still inhabits me. She is certainly dead—even in captivity lions rarely live twenty years.<sup>1</sup> When I left Berlin the following summer to return to France, I couldn't convince Zdenko to go back from time to time to see her, to give me updates. He shook his head with an apologetic air: "No, I won't go, I don't like that place."

I didn't dare tell him that before leaving the city, I'd often go often to the wildcats' hall, epicenter of a silent drama, to visit the

lioness: this wild animal, exhibited to tourists, separated from  
humans by a pane of glass.

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1. That said, some can live as long as thirty years, versus an average of thirteen to fifteen years in the wild. See Séverine Morin-Garraud, *Anatomie et éthologie du lion (panthera leo)*, doctoral dissertation in veterinary medicine at the University Paul-Sabatier de Toulouse, 2001, p. 19.