The Playground

Kathe Koja

where are you going sheela?
going down the playground
no playground, there's nothing down there but shit & fighting, look what happened last time!
im going
I SAID NO PLAYGROUND!
i made the shed door slam, the door is iron & loud, the chain when it shakes sounds like throwing rocks. sissi was on the swan chair rolling smokes, sissi takes smokes from the bags at the store and makes two out of one, one to smoke & one to sell back to the store. sissi takes care of me since mom, sissi says says our vibe attracks our tribe & we will find her. sissi lit her smoke & said you dont have to do what jacki tells you, she's not our fuckin mom
where is our fuckin mom
dont say that sheela
you say it
well dont anyway, when we find out we will go there. right now you can go down the playground. what you going to do there?
play with whip. climb the tree
OK go, just be back before it gets dark
i know
serious sheela not in the dark
i know
when its dark the other people come to the playground to grab who they find, they come up the road from the big town, its like T-Town but a lot bigger, maybe our mom went to that big town & got lost? whip's uncle went there, whip says uncle paul says its cool, they got lights all night its never dark! & big trucks, uncle paul says i can go with him & drive a truck
when you going?
when im bigger. like when im 10

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the playground is full of shit jacki is true about that, shit on the paths, green from the geeze, brown and black from the dog pack, its called a pack cause they pack in under the roofs of the rusty sheds and sleep together. sissi says the baby dogs are called puppys—i love the puppys & the dogs, i love the geeze, i love the other birds—me & whip climb the big tree & watch them, 1 time we watched the baby birds come right out of eggs!! they just poke out!! i went back & told sissi i dont want to eat babys, at 1st she didnt know what i was saying then she knew and sheela she said, you know we dont have lots of food to choose from, we eat what we get

i dont care

jacki was mad but then she said fine, more for me & your sister! i asked sissi if she would eat the babys?? she said its hard sheela and anyway no babys will ever come out of these eggs

yeah cause you ate them

me & whip kept going back to see the birds. but yesterday at the playground those other kids, the kids up the hill, those other kids saw me & whip climb the tree so they climbed too, & screamed & made noise to scare the birds, & smashed the baby eggs they smashed all the ones they could find. whip cried & threw sticks but they kept on, they found 1 of the birds on the branch & it tried to fly away

they killed the bird

i climbed down & when the other kids climbed down i hit them, i hit them & they pushed me they rubbed shit in my hair, the biggest girl laughed, she said its just stupid birds who cares you stupid little shit? they all laughed except the in-charge girl

i said to that biggest girl ill fuckin kill you if you do that again

the in-charge girl looked at me

then the dogs barked at the shed & she started running, the other kids ran after her but the dogs are fast, i knew they would get away & they did. whip was still crying so we used my nife & his stick to bury the bird, whip said bless us lord & these they gifts, this bird is dead, amen.

who's lord?

its god dont you know god?

no

when i got back jacki yelled & made me sit in the washing machine she said O my god its all over you, sheela what is wrong with you?!? then she cut off all my hair. sissi was MAD, sissi said What the FUCK jacki what right do you have to do that??

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jacki said look at her just LOOK!! she's like an animal!! she smells like an animal she lives like
fuck YOU jacki, sheela come here
that night sissi & me slept outside on a little tarp, the bugs bit us on our faces but sissi said im not laying down where she is & neither are you, are you OK sheela? your poor hair.
i liked laying on the tarp with blankets, i said im OK. but i couldnt save the bird, me & whip buried the bird
what bird? so i told her all what happened. sissi said its sad, those kids are assholes but you cant cut someone about it sheela, that's not why i gave you that nife
well i will
sheela youre 7 years old . . . jesus fuck we got to get out of here.
when sissi was asleep i took the nife out of my sleeve i keep it there folded up. the handle is red and the nife part is bigger than the handle, its like the song whip says, about one cuts two and two cuts four, it goes on thru all the numbers. or the one with the queen, the queen was in the kitchen eating blood & honey
it was dark but i could find my way to the playground anyway, it was hard to see so i didnt try to see, i could smell the geeze shit i could smell the tree. & i heard people over by the place where me & whip rode the scooter before it broke, its flat there and the dirt is hard, the people were yelling & smoking i saw the lighted ends of their smokes. i climbed the tree, i used my shirt to tie myself to the big branch in case i was asleep
& i did sleep, the sun woke me up & my pants were wet, i use to pee in my sleep a long time ago when i was 5
i waited
sissi came to the playground she walked around calling SHEELA SHEELA, harder & harder screaming SHEELA SHEELA, i felt bad but i stayed
i waited
then they came i knew they would, the biggest girl had one of the puppys this time, she was laughing, the biggest girl must have hurt the puppy because it was making a little crying sound & trying to get away, the puppy was shaking all over like it was really cold outside but it was warm. 1 of the other kids said why dont we take it home
the biggest girl said no, were gonna do something else, whos got the lighter
and i untied myself

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and my shirt fell like a big leaf, 1 of the kids looked up but it was too late i was already falling too, i fell right onto that biggest girl, she hit the ground like a big wet sack
& i stuck her
i said what right do you have & i stuck her again
in the side, her whole mouth was open, she was making a big sound and i got off her, i didnt see the puppy anymore, the other kids were running
but not the in-charge girl, the in-charge girl looked at the biggest girl & i told you, she said to the biggest girl, kacey i told you that kid will fuck you up. the biggest girl, kacey, was still making sounds & holding onto her side, she crawled herself up straight, i could see she peed her pants too. & the in-charge girl said to me, what's your name kid?
sheela
is that your mom running around yelling for you?
my sister
kacey screamed at me, your DEAD you little shit your DEAD
kacey, the in-charge girl said, go on home. kacey walked past the tree, & fell & threw up. then the in-charge girl said to me well we better find your sister, kacey's got a sister too and brothers, & theyre all crazy like she is
i dont care
your sister will. you cant come to the playground anymore
my shirt was still on the ground, i wiped my nife with it and then tied it so my peed pants didnt show, i said sissi says we got to get the fuck out of here anyway
maybe ill go with you. im lizza
hi lizza
you sure like birds, lizza said.

Author's note

The liberation of animals begins with our acknowledgement that humans have no rights over them. Not the right to confine, to deprive of habitat, to capture, to sell, to breed, to eat: no rights at all.

What we have—and have used, and continue to use—is force, amplified by weapons of war, and abetted by a grievous sense of entitlement, or "dominion." This story pays homage to Russell Hoban's masterpiece Riddley Walker, a post-apocalyptic novel that respects and foregrounds nonhuman animals: the weary wild boar who begins the book, the wild dog pack who are feared and respected

by the humans, especially that pack's leader, "that black leader with his yeller eyes" who directs and fosters Riddley's perilous journey.
This story also opens the world of *Shebang*, my own novel-in-progress of non-human animals and their rights, and what happens when humans acknowledge or deny those rights. Sheela Bang knows exactly where her loyalties lie, and acts accordingly.

Kathe Koja writes immersive fiction, and creates and produces live and virtual events and experiences. Her latest book is *Dark Matter*, third in the *Dark Factory* trilogy, and *Shebang* will follow in 2026. She volunteers for several animal rights and animal welfare organizations, and is based in Detroit.

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