



SHENANDOAH

Volume 69, Number 1 · Fall 2019

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Power Animals

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I noticed the dead opossum during my descent on my bike into the valley, but I gave it little consideration, other than to refrain from breathing as I passed its body, since I had no desire to inhale what I imagined to be the kind of foul odor I associated with its decay, and which I have had cause, during my bike rides, to frequently smell. Moreover, I thought of the opossum as a kind of menace; after all, the mere sight of the animal—what with its beady eyes, snarling expression, and naked-looking tail—was something of an affront to my senses. I was up and out earlier than usual, as the day's heat was expected to grow quickly and reach dramatic heights. I coasted into the valley without incident—no deer leapt unexpectedly from the woods, no obstacles appeared in the road, no vehicles tailed me impatiently, suddenly gunning their engines, honking or giving me the finger as they passed me on blind curves. The enormous green wedge of Paris Mountain loomed in the distance, blurred by haze. I passed the silver, square-shaped sign imploring drivers to DRIVE SAFELY, which, according to a smaller, rectangular-shaped sign below it, had been dedicated to the memory of one Haydn Woodall, a name that I knew, thanks to a search engine, had belonged to a Virginia Tech student who'd been the unluckiest of several passengers riding in a car piloted by a young show-off who, according to a newspaper report, had announced to the occupants of his car, as they approached an oncoming curve, that “this was the fun one,” and then—after downshifting, or yanking on the emergency brake, depending on whose story you believe—attempting to “drift” around the corner. Instead, the vehicle fishtailed and flipped over; the driver was now serving a ten-year prison sentence, because Haydn—only twenty years old—had died at the scene of the accident. According to his obituary, Haydn had been “a bon vivant, a stylish dresser, and an irrepressible free spirit. He was kind, compassionate, witty, intelligent, curious and charming. Haydn viewed the world through a kaleidoscope of his own colors and never met an article of Comme des Garçons clothing that he didn't like.” Now, a wreath of pine boughs and a stuffed cartoon character from the show *Adventure Time* hung from the sign bearing Haydn's name; a ceramic angel, neck ringed with a necklace of withered flowers, stood at its base. I wondered what effect, if any, such a sign might be said to have, and how many people had read the name Haydn Woodall and registered absolutely nothing or had wrongly assumed, as I had for years, that the name belonged to a woman or girl. Whatever the case, it seemed to me that the traffic was heavier along the road that cut through Ellett Valley on that morning, and I figured it must have something to do with the time of day—school buses, landscaping trucks hauling trailers that caged enormous mowers, and dump trucks



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