

The Forest Tribe

Emily Skaja's poetry collection *Brute* reflects the relationships between girls and nature throughout each piece. With passionate depth, the complex code of symbols, metaphors, and anecdotal accounts are used to compare the girls to animals and vegetation and the girls are described as being in tune with nature and being a part of it. Some examples of the repeating metaphors scattered in the collection include individual girls as trees and a collection of girls as a forest. Their connection with the planet and each other is also portrayed through self-growth and evolution. The "girl tribe" theme suggests that Skaja is calling out to girls with their own experiences on their shoulders. Just as other female writers did for Skaja, Skaja offers girls a human connection based on past and present, continuing the cycle of sharing the female experience and uniting as one through that experience.

Skaja describes individual girls as trees and other wild things throughout many of the poems and describes herself as something remote as well. This individual connection with the forest is relevant throughout the pieces by portraying the embodiment of being a natural process (the trees growing vs. individual human growth and change). When one thinks of the wild, one may imagine freedom, remoteness, mysticism, and survival. In "Rules For A Body Coming Out Of Water", Skaja writes, "In a story, a girl is a tree / is a bird / is a wilderness" (35). Trees can symbolize being rooted to the earth, growth, strength, and constant change. A tree is also home to many creatures and is a symbol for time, as is a girl home to many memories which can become creatures themselves. Skaja's bird comparison also stresses that sense of freedom (being able to fly away and escape) and oneness with the planet (being able to see it all from the sky). In "Four Hawks", Skaja describes herself as a creature of the forest, writing "I'm lining my body with burrs, / because I'm antlers and talons and I know / the smell of cedar is home" (43). This

reference of a forest being home also connects to the many trees she lives among who share her suffering and her growth.

Skaja's metaphor of a forest and a group of girls falls under the "girl tribe" theme sprinkled throughout her work. One can see who makes up her forest through her poems that are addressed to different girls. In "Dear Ruth", Skaja writes, "Whether you are lost / or whether you are the blondest bird leaned against a fence / hemming in an orchard, Ruth, you are the holy thing I look to" (28). These poems where she speaks to other girls demonstrates her shared experiences with them, how they help one another through the darkness. The association with witchery also plays a part in her own identity of persecution, wildness, and unity with other girls. The forest is the place made up of girls who have been broken by their past in some way, who have lost pieces of themselves and who run to look for a new home. Together, the girls make up an ecosystem thriving with life. Their roots tangle beneath the soil and they become a tribe, a cult, a family, a forest, one that supports itself by supporting each other. Girl tribes in her poems represent her call out to "lost arrows," the readers who feel alone and need a forest to grow in (31).

As Skaja was impacted by other female writers such as Anne Carson, Cherrie Moraga, Sylvia Plath and H.D., the publication of her words reaches out to those who need the support other female writers gave Skaja when she needed it. Her mention of girl tribes brings the reader back to the reality we live today; other girls are going through what she is going through. The girl tribe theme grows heavier in the second section, "Girl Saints." She begins to use pronouns such as "we" and "our," writing things such as "They said they wanted to prove we were holy," "You think you can choose to remember our story / however you want," and "Even the salt we licked from the table / won't return us to our roles of wanted and wanting" (24, 41). Her tone of

voice in these inclusive poems makes it evident that Skaja is not only speaking up for herself but for the others, using her voice to rally up girls as a weapon against what could harm their forest.

The vulnerability Skaja portrays is not only for her own growth from the past, but for the sake of the others who have also endured similar sufferings but have no voice or no voice to call familiar. Her act of cathartically expressing her fight with the past and her recovery continues the lineage of other women who have done the same. The forest and girl tribes are not only limited metaphors controlled by the context Skaja spells out, but also a metaphor for women in writing, for the larger tribe of “the female” living in a patriarchal society.