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Strange Gospels

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STRANGE GOSPELS

by
Emily Rose Duhé

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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Reader: Dr. Debra Brown Young

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To Jake—

*For all your support, for seven weird years we've had
and for many weird years to come.*

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ABSTRACT
STRANGE GOSPELS
(Under the direction of Ann Fisher-Wirth)

This thesis is a collection of poetry and short stories dealing with different kinds and perspectives of strangeness, particularly with the concept of the Other.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A GENESIS OF WEIRD	1
THE WOODS BEHIND MY HOUSE.....	6
SPECIAL	7
TROPHY	8
DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE	9
YOUR WHITE KNIGHT.....	11
MISS MARY	13
BLACK CAT’S TAIL	31
ALWAYS, ANXIOUS.....	32
STYMPHALIAN BIRTH.....	33
SIWAH.....	34
VARIATION ON A FREQUENT CONVERSATION WITH MY ROOMMATE.....	35
SONG OF THE GORGON.....	37
A GIRL WITH A LAMP.....	41
(UN) MEDICATED	58
INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOOL’S ALCHEMY.....	59
MOTHS.....	60
DISASSOCIATION, OR EVER SINCE THE CLONING ACCIDENT.....	61
PRETTY, SORTA, HURTS.....	62
REFLECTION.....	63
TO PHRASIKLEIA.....	64
WIFE OF THE SEA	65
SIGH JUST SO	74
HOMEBOY	75
THINGS TO NEVER BRING UP DURING CONFESSION.....	76
CHANGE OF SCENERY	78
AFTERCARE	79
WE EAT	80
CALL QUARTERS.....	81
A TYPICAL GIRL	91
DEAR PAPI	92
SOMNIA.....	93
FAUNA	94
SOMETHING ABOUT A CROW.....	95
BOTTLE BLONDE.....	96
WORKS CITED.....	104

INTRODUCTION: A GENESIS OF WEIRD

When I was in fourth grade or thereabouts, there were a couple of girls who lived on the same street as me. They both came from slightly different backgrounds from mine. My parents were both teachers, immigrants from Maryland and Wisconsin and Louisiana; their families worked in finance, were Mississippi natives, and cultivated that particular state brand of Southern charm and gentility. But my parents thought our proximity would make us good playmates, and I was trying to make friends.

At the same time, however, my love for the supernatural had awakened, in no small part thanks to J.K. Rowling. I pored over tarot cards and read my own palm. I knew the name and history of every mythical monster known to Europe, and some to Japan. I had checked out one particular book of superstitions from the public library so often that I had its contents memorized. And at the time, my extracurricular research focused on ghosts: spectral phenomena, spirit boards, séances. I was, rather decidedly, the weird kid—but had yet to see myself as such. My hobbies weren't harmful or dangerous to anyone, and provided a creative outlet; besides, if Harry Potter could play with ghosts, why couldn't I?

One day, when I went over to one of the girls' houses to play, they said that they had just learned a terrible secret about their little suburban house: that it was built on an Indian burial ground, and that a long-dead Indian chieftain had started haunting the hall closet. What did he do? Just sort of stand there, they said, and they had no idea whether he meant them harm. Of course they couldn't tell their parents. They were only telling me, they said, because I knew so much about ghosts; I was the authority they turned to in

this most dire of situations. I accepted their words excitedly, with little fear and no doubt whatsoever. I wanted to meet that ghost. So the three of us took a flashlight, went to the closet, and opened the door.

Coats were cleared away. The beam of the flashlight filled up most of the closet wall, laying bare a couple dust bunnies on the floor, but no ghost. But I waited, and the other girls waited with me. Suddenly, after ten very long minutes, a flicker of a shadow appeared on the backlit wall. One of the girls interjected, somewhat deadpan, that this was the ghost she had been seeing. I jumped up and immediately began interrogating the specter. How had he died? Was he a chieftain after all? What was his life like before he died? But the shadow remained impassive, save for some noncommittal flickers. After two minutes of this, I turned around to ask for some help from my friends—only to catch one of them putting her hands very quickly behind her back. They declined to help and suggested, somewhat giggly, that we leave the spirit alone.

Of course, the pieces of coincidence didn't fit together until later in the month, but by then it didn't matter. My fascination with the supernatural was well-established, as was my gullibility. They had gotten their laugh out of me, and it was only when their parents begrudged them to do so that I was ever invited to their houses again.

What constitutes strangeness? Merriam-Webster's dictionary definition provides for something "exciting wonder or awe," as well as the usual "not before known, heard, or seen" ("Strange"). Suffice to say, the qualifications for strangeness are rather low; anything particularly "not normal" can automatically become strange. But what constitutes normalcy? Who, if anyone, dictates what is normal and what is not?

First, we need some more definitions, in this case from a body of philosophy focused on the concept of otherness. Put simply, the Other is an entity that exists entirely outside the self, “dissimilar and opposite” to it (“the Other”). The definition of Self in this case is rubbery, and can extend to groups, some Us with which one individual Self can identify. Us versus Them becomes very literal. Yet the Other is not a necessarily natural occurrence; it must be constructed, at least in a metaphysical sense. Sartre posits a “look” brought about by “the mere appearance of the Other” through which the Self must define itself, in reference to that Other (198). In a less cerebral sense, then, Sartre’s “look” means that otherness can be defined by culture. My childhood friends were taught, as Baptists, to define themselves against people who believe in ghosts or demons, a line of thought opposed to my love of superstition and even to my Catholic upbringing.

Of course, otherness goes far beyond childhood hobbies and habits, even beyond the quirks of reality; there are entire modes of existence which are defined in opposition to cultural norms. The simplest frame for these terms is “majority versus minority”. In daily American usage, the “average citizen” is embodied as a straight-cisgender-white-Christian-male person, barring any mathematical realities of average. The day-to-day routines of people of color, people in the LGBTQ+ community, the physically and mentally disabled, are envisioned in opposition to this “average” person, never as their own standard of being. And it also goes without saying that moral qualities are quickly applied to strangeness—that it is bad, wrong, against God or country. Whatever is non-normative is unequivocally non-moral. Though the whole process feels tautological, it is nevertheless the best description I have for how society functions.

Ask someone to conjure the strange or weird and their first thought is almost always a monster, and for good reason; monsters are the best metonymic representations of Otherness contained in pop culture. Some of them have real-life counterparts. Aliens have often been used to represent other nations, while vampires correlate to sexual deviancy. These types of monsters often have surprisingly human motivations which provide an opportunity for empathy, or at least for pity: because of a curse, the werewolf is forced to consume human flesh in order to survive. But other, often more contemporary monsters are not so relatable; they terrorize and kill out of sheer caprice or amusement, if they even have a reason. Spring-Heeled Jack, Cthulhu, even the nebulous shadow that haunted your childhood under-bed—though what they “do” to you is never specified, the mere mention of these presences is synonymous with misery. And in every horror movie, when characters gain any understanding of their terrifying antagonist, that understanding serves only one purpose: the monster’s destruction. There is no empathy to spare for something whose only perceivable purpose is your annihilation.

So yes, what is strange is often terrifying, but it is far too easy to imagine whatever we do not understand as scary and say that it must be destroyed. It certainly happens too often, and can quickly become dangerous. The rights of Muslim- and Arab-Americans, of African-Americans, and of gay and transgender Americans (to name a few groups), are frequently lost or infringed because these groups have been so effectively othered by conservative fear and ignorance. Is it even possible, within this kind of toxic cultural context, to see strangeness as non-threatening?

I certainly believe so. In fact, I find strangeness far more interesting when it is viewed not as a threat but as an opportunity for bringing different perspectives to light.

Strangeness is itself most often a matter of perspective; one person's experiences only seem strange or non-normal when compared to those of other people. Therefore strangeness can be ambiguous, and more than merely vague. Strangeness can also deal deeply with the self, especially in cases of mental illness, where the brain feels more like a stranger than a coherent part of the Self. As Sartre reminds us, the presence of the Other does not always have to represent a threat to the Self; this allows the Other to become a friend or even a lover, rather than an enemy. Romantic relationships can be strange as much as they can be fulfilling. Ultimately, strangeness, and the difference that can be found in it, can be something decidedly good—not merely nonthreatening, but beneficial.

This thesis is a compilation of work some two years in the making, exploring these aspects of strangeness and especially focusing on the presence of that ubiquitous Other, in the hope of ultimately celebrating strangeness and difference. If I have learned anything, if I can hope to pass on anything from this work, it would be this: even if something is foreign to you, do your best to understand it, because even if you cannot, you can at least gain insight through that foreign perspective. It seems naïve, almost childish to say that my thesis statement is to walk a mile in a monster's shoes, yet I find no other way to encapsulate this body of work. There is always common ground to be found with others, even with monsters; the only difference is that sometimes you have to dig very deep to find it.

THE WOODS BEHIND MY HOUSE

Out of rain-spattered windows I looked
into the woods behind my house.

It was summer and the trees were alive
and dancing in that honey yellow light
that follows the skirts of a sunset storm.
Behind the dappled birches two deer
padded slow and secret in the brush,
two spots of brown amid the green

—*and I was alone.*

A single blink and the deer were gone,
soundless as the shift of the light
from yellow dusk to reddening night,
and in the leaves I swore I could see
the flash of paper white, imagined skin
between the shadowed birches.

The house was briefly cold and quiet
enough to hear the wind breathe

—*in the trees, in the trees.*

SPECIAL

“You’re not like the *other* girls,”
he said, smiling like a shark
as though he was flattering
her figure or the sparkle in her eyes.
“Every other girl I’ve met was afraid
of gaining weight from eating a six-ounce
steak. How ridiculous is that?”
He laughed, and so did she;
her mouth widened and widened
until there was nothing but teeth
and she bit his head clean off.

TROPHY

It was not so much that she was beautiful—
 though truly I had pursued no fairer—
but that she was beautiful and *defiant*. Yes,
 that Daphne; how so fair a form as hers
could contain an ass's obstinacy! How else
 could she resist me, the sun-god, Apollo,
and all my better qualities? I'm better than a brute
 like Hercules or a pervert like Pan,
not only better looking but better educated and
 behaved—regardless of what my exes say.
I may shoot your heart out, but only under pretense
 of war. I'm a nice guy first; I'll hold the door
for a lady to walk through! But I know she was
 merely misguided, concerned with her
feminine honor, so I went to correct her, to show how
 pure my intentions toward her were—
and she ignored me. Walked away from me.
 So as you can see, I had to persist
until she listened, but the woman would not
 stop running. I was merely keeping up
with her. And when I saw her face flash backward
 to look at me, with those wide blue eyes,
it was like looking at a watercolor, or a sapphire
 set in the eye of a marble statue, and
with skin as white—why, even I could not
 have made a fairer work of art.
And then, of course, she goes and turns herself
 into a miserable brown tree, but know
that I shall make her lovely again. I shall take
 those waxy leaves of hers and make
them into a crown for poets and for myself,
 a crowning glory, a god-king's trophy—

DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

(based loosely on a song by Agnes Obel)

We drove down to the woods on Wednesday,
pitched our tents among the trees
in the high sun. Just a camping trip,
an excuse to escape our houses
and the stress of spring semester.
Emily gave us the idea one night
in the form of a whisper in our darkened dorm
about how cheap it would be
to go camping on her parents' property
out on the Trace, and maybe
(her eyes were bright even sunk in the black)
she could show us the river. We thought
why not?

Seven of us ran to the river.

Except it wasn't really a river,
just a sad, skinny creek surrounded by sand
and rocks. It drew us a fine ballpoint line
where we expected a body. Emily argued
it was deep and its current ran swift
and it fed the Mississippi like an artery.
We laughed as she kicked at the rocks
and stared blankly at the water
(we would not be proud of laughing later)
and brushed the white lie aside. The beach itself
framed a fine spot for fixing a bonfire.

Our laughter poured through the woods
the way the Coke and cheap beer
gurgled from the mouths of sweating bottles
over our tongues. Arms of birch and pine
stretched shadow-thin fingers to snatch us,
but in the warm firelight we felt safe.
Until Emily shot up from her seat
and told us all to shush with such urgency
we cowered, fearing the tramp of a madman's boot.
But she pointed away from the woods,
(toward the water)
and said,

Do you hear their voices?

Seven of us stared at the river.

We listened, we strained our ears,
but all we could hear were the hiss of dying leaves
and the gasp of the current. We looked
at Emily and saw her shiver, saw the shine
of tears in her eyes. She was crying
how the voices gurgled her name
and commanded she come closer,
but she covered her mouth with her hands
(her pale thin lips and her pale thin hands)
and wouldn't say for what. We did our best
to calm her, wrapped her in a blanket
and sat her close to the fire. But she kept staring,
shaking, at the creek. We stayed ten more minutes
before we drowned the fire
and walked back to the woods,
convincing each other it was just the drink
that'd worked her up, or her worsening depression,
that it was only the whisper of the woods we'd heard.
So seven of us slipped into sleep.

One of us wandered from the woods.

Six of us woke on Thursday morning,
and as the first finger of sun flushed the horizon,
six of us ran to the river.
Emily was floating face-up in the water,
her hollow eyes sealed shut
with two river-smooth rocks.

YOUR WHITE KNIGHT

It was just like how I'd always dreamed,
meeting you by accident
when you caught me staring
 —*not really accidentally*—
from across the subway car.
My smile was all teeth, yours
more toothsome for the nervousness on your
 —*pretty pretty so soft and bloody*—
lips. You noticed me and that
was all I needed.

It was only watching at first, me being
shyer than a shark, but it was worth the way
your hair shone slick green gold in the
 —*damn firefly light flickering off-on-off-on*—
subway light, how your eyes seemed so silver. My
precious metal princess! But your voice never clanged,
but sang in the speaker to the tune of
 —*"hi baby coming home yes I love you too"*—
some boy's name. Boy's name? No, I
know you're only mine.

It's true love. I know because you tell me
all your secrets in the sweat pearling on your
brow and the frantic snare of your heels clicking
 —*apartment four-one-one east hart street*—
homeward. I know because your voice sharpens
like a knife in a flute when you catch me on
your phone, not speaking but listening
 —*"hello who is this is fifth time not funny"*—
for the sweet tremor of your voice. I swear I will
never let you go.

It's only your picture now that hangs
across my ceiling, my walls. The others
are long gone, stuffed in a trunk and buried
 —*bits of brown shell sharp smell musty and sticky*—
in my closet. But I'm frugal. I like to scrapbook, you
see. I collect. Bits of your lace, your profile
from a distance. I paste your face on the necks of the
 —*cold plastic but you smell of flesh and sweat and sweet*—
models I used to date. You look so pretty smiling when you think
I am not watching.

It's a candy kind of pain to hear you crying,
hear those frayed gasps from behind
your paper door. But don't you fret, my

—*my home my girl my knife mine MINE*—
princess. I'll get rid of the other boy. I'll get rid
of your dog, your door, any damn thing that stops me
from touching you again. I lost my key but

—*kept your hairpins for a reason*—
I'll be home soon. Just like how
I'd always dreamed.

MISS MARY

There's a new lady in the park today. She stands under the big oak tree next to the lake. I didn't see her at first, because I was playing in the sandbox, facing the road and the picket fence houses and the two-naps-away city. But when I got on the slide, at the very tippy top, there she was.

She has on a long black dress and has her hair done up like Teacher's. I can't see her neck or her arms or her feet. The dress swallows up her skin, like the whale swallowed Jonah. It must be awful hot in that dress because she stays in the shadow all day until Mama comes to get me in the truck.

She waves at me once. I wave back because I have good manners.

I don't want to be in school today. The rain from this morning is gone and the sky is bright but not too bright so I could see perfectly if I went to the park. And it's probably cooler outside, too. I bet the new lady would like it.

A shiver goes through me. I wonder why I thought about the lady.

"Taylor!" Teacher calls.

"Ma'am?" I look up all fast. Everyone else giggles.

Teacher sighs, and she sounds so tired even before lunch. It isn't the first time she's sighed like this. "I would like you to spell 'friend' for me. Can you do that?"

I blink. "F-I-E-N-D?"

All the other kids start giggling, but louder. One of the girls near me who I think is named Ashley sounds like a pig snorting. "That doesn't even have an *R* in it."

Teacher shakes her head. “You got one letter wrong. You can do better than that, Taylor.” She calls on someone else and I look back out the window.

When the bell rings for lunch and I pass Teacher’s desk I look at her. She doesn’t see me, so I go on to sit by myself at lunch.

I go to the park after school. The lady is there again, in the shade, wearing her dress. She waves at me again, after Mama drives away. I wave back.

The girls from school are there, too. They laugh at me, about not being able to spell and about my too-big too-dirty clothes. They told me I was a mole, not a girl, because I was so dirty. One of the bigger ones called me a word that would’ve gotten me a belting from Papa. I guess none of their daddies belted them. Ashley kicks my sandcastle down as she leaves, stomps it until it’s all gone.

I sit for a while and look at where my castle used to be. When I look up again the lady is there next to me. She says hello. “My name is Miss Mary,” she says. “What’s your name?”

I don’t want to tell her, because Mama says to never talk to strangers, and the lady is stranger. She has a thin face and thin hands, like she eats lunch even less than I do. I think the shady place sucked all the color out of her skin and put it in her hair. It’s still up like Teacher’s, but she’s younger than Teacher, younger than Mama. But her dress makes her look so old. Her eyes are old, too. She reminds me of Grammy a little, when she went away. They smell the same, like powder and wet and drooping white lilies.

I shake my head and say nothing.

The lady looks down at the sand. “I saw they ruined your castle.”

I nod, looking at the sand.

“Aren’t you going to rebuild it?”

“They’ll just knock it down again,” I mumble.

“Nothing lasts forever,” she says. “But while something lasts, it can be wonderful.”

I look up at her then. She holds up a red plastic sand shovel that someone had left in the box last week. Her eyes look kind and she’s smiling, the same sort of smile that Teacher gives us when we’re good in class, except she, Miss Mary, means it more.

So I take the sand shovel and clear away the leftovers of my castle and start on a new one. It looks a little lumpy, and I can’t get the towers right, but Miss Mary likes it. She helps, too, shows me places to put windows or more towers or sticks for flags. We don’t talk much, but she promises to help me build bigger and better castles every day I come by the park.

When I have to go we say goodbye and I go to the truck. I turn around and wave at her. She waves back.

I get to school the next day not too late because Teacher isn’t at her desk yet. Everyone else is there, though. Ashley and the other girls from the park give me bad eyes when I walk in the room. A few even look a little scared.

“Who’s that woman you were with yesterday?” Ashley asks. “The one in black.”

I shrug. “A new lady. Said her name was Miss Mary.”

“Creepy old hag,” Ashley says. The other girls nod at her side.

“She isn’t creepy.”

Ashley snorts. “Of course *you* think so,” she says. “You’re as freakish as she is, and birds of a feather flock—”

There’s a loud *smack* and everyone jumps with me, except Ashley. Her head jerks to the side, so that when she turns I see a little line of red dribbling down her lips. She raises her hand to touch, pulls some red away on her fingers. Then something shoves her hard and backward into the desks and a few of the other girls scream a little for they are sore afraid.

There is a little cry from the doorway and Teacher shows up by Ashley’s side, holding a tissue to her nose even as she looks at me. “Taylor,” she says, shaking her head, “you do *not* shove other girls, and you never, ever slap them.”

“It wasn’t me,” I say. “It wasn’t me.”

Teacher is about to say something else until Ashley squeals, “It was the other one! A woman in a long black dress but with—with no face. Miss Mary!” she gasps at last.

Teacher tries to calm her down even while the other girls yell the same thing. “Ashley, there is no one here.”

Soon she takes me and Ashley to the office. I look around the room just as I leave. Nobody is here except for us kids, but the shadows are deep and twisting in the sunlight.

Miss Mary keeps her promise. We build sandcastles every day together, less lumpy kinds with more towers and windows. Everyone from school leaves me alone while I’m with her, especially Ashley, and I’m happy for that. I’m even happier that Miss Mary is always happy to see me.

We talk a *lot* together. At first it was about little things, like the weather or the ducks by the pond or just about how the sandcastle looked. And the more we see each other—it must be two weeks now since I met her—the more I want to talk to her. I tell her all about my favorite things, how chocolate is the best flavor ever and how I really wish I had a puppy and how I want to be president when I grow up. Her favorite things are strawberries and cats and the children she watches.

“You watch kids?” I ask. “Like a babysitter?”

“A little. Do you know what a governess is?”

I shake my head.

“Well,” Miss Mary says, “she’s like a nanny, except she lives with her children and teaches them like your teachers do at school. And we teach things called ‘social graces,’ like manners and how to speak like proper ladies and gentlemen.”

I giggle. “Sounds fancy.”

“It’s very fancy,” Miss Mary smiles. “And it’s a very old job. Governesses used to be trained in England and France, you know, and employed by only the most important families.”

I draw a window in the sandcastle with a stick. “I wish *I* had a governess.”

“You have a teacher at school, though.”

“I’m not too good at school.”

“Oh?”

I nod. “Teacher says I never listen, and I try to, but I just can’t. There’s all this stuff in my head.”

“Has your teacher talked to your mother?”

I don't say anything.

"Does your mother understand?" Miss Mary asks.

I am quiet and playing in the sand.

Mama takes me home that day. Papa had another bad day at work (he has lots of those) and he's sleeping on the patchy sofa with the TV on and five big bottles of his bitter water on the floor by his feet. Mama says to go in on tiptoes and we do but he wakes up anyway and makes noise like thunder as he rises. "You gonna get it when I get up," he tells me.

"Leave our kid alone, now," Mama says.

"Not," Papa growls, "my kid. That's your spawn."

They're arguing now. I go to my room as quick as I can, shut the door and go into the closet. I go to my special playground, the one I built in my head with the sandbox that doesn't end. I'm trying to build a sandcastle there but it's so hard because their voices keep getting louder and madder especially Papa's and I wish I knew why he hates me and—

There's a great big *smack* and I know he's hit her. *Smack, smack, smack* goes his hand, and I don't know where he's catching her but she's crying as he does. He tries to catch her again but she runs, runs into their room and slams the door. Something makes a loud long scraping noise and then Papa's banging on the door, yelling at her to let him in, let him in right now. Mama's crying and reciting from Psalms, and I can hear her through the walls, and the Lord is her strength and her shield and her heart trusts in him and she is helped.

One day Teacher asks me about the yellow slip I got the day Ashley was pushed. I tell her that Papa threw it away. She believes me just enough to give me another slip and a sigh. I look at the paper like a jellyfish just fell into my hands.

When I get to the park that day I ask Miss Mary about what happened that day. I can't take not knowing any more. "Did you really hit her?" I ask.

"I didn't hit her," Miss Mary answers. "I disciplined her."

"There's a difference?"

"Adults who hit children don't have a reason to strike, except out of anger or hatred. But adults who discipline children only strike a little so that the child recognizes his or her mistakes and corrects them."

"What mistake did Ashley make?"

Miss Mary looks surprised that I ask. "Why, she insulted you, dear," she says. "And she insulted me. She was quite cruel about it."

"I guess."

Miss Mary nods. "Sometimes there is nothing so cruel as the caprice of a child."

"Caprice," I repeat. There is a caterpillar crawling on the side of the sandbox and without knowing why I use my shovel to discipline it.

Today I'm making sandcastles with Miss Mary while Mama talks to Teacher. Miss Mary's telling me all about her house. "It's got some very nice rooms, just right for teaching lots of children at once."

"How nice are the rooms?" I ask.

“Well,” she says, “they have high windows to let in the sunlight. I keep them open, to let in the air, and so I can hear the birds singing when it’s quiet. There’s a blackboard or two on the wall, and I’ve never been fond of desks, so all my children sit on large, colorful cushions while I talk.”

“It sounds really nice,” I say, and it does. “It’s not like my house at all.”

“What’s your house like?”

I’m quiet for a little. “Dark,” I say. “And noisy.”

“Why is it noisy?”

“Because Papa’s always mad at me and Mama. You know.”

There’s some quiet. When I look up Miss Mary is looking at her lap. I can’t see her face but I can feel the look on it, worse than Papa’s thunder. And when she looks up I can see it, a great black hole in her face that’s eaten her nose and cheek and left black fire where her eyes used to be. There’s a smell like burnt barbeque. For a moment I’m more scared than I’ve ever been of anything, even Papa, but I know I’m lucky, because this face isn’t for *me*.

But it’s only for a moment. I must have imagined it. She’s smiling and the thunder has gone away and it’s all better. “You know,” she says, “I would love to meet your parents someday. Your mother, perhaps. I’m sure she’s a wonderful woman.”

There’s a growling noise and I see our truck pulling into the parking lot. “You can meet her now!” I say, and I grab her hand. Her skin is so cool. We run over to the truck together and make it there just as Mama comes out of it with her bag over her shoulder and her hair down by her shoulders.

Mama looks surprised to see me. “Ready to go, Taylor?”

“Mama, Mama, I want you to meet someone real important,” I tell her. My voice is really fast.

“Oh really, now? Who?”

I let go of Miss Mary’s hand and back up a little. “This is Miss Mary,” I say. “She’s real nice. She’s been helping me build sandcastles every day for a while now.”

Miss Mary smiles at Mama, but Mama is looking at me. “Really?” says Mama, with ice in her voice. “What’s Miss Mary look like?”

“Mama, I don’t need to tell you, she’s right here,” I say, and I nod at Miss Mary because it’s rude to point.

Mama looks to my side, like there’s another one of me, and she makes a jerky little wave at the empty space. “Hello, Miss Mary. It’s nice to meet you. Now, Taylor needs to go home.” She tries to take my arm but I pull away.

“Mama, don’t be a hag!”

“Taylor, you know *never* to insult your mama.”

“But she’s right there! Why aren’t you looking?” Why isn’t she looking at her?

Mama’s eyes dart and she makes a strange face. “Taylor, let’s go now.”

“No!” Mama pulls me by the arm and I try and get away but she’s too much.

“Mama, look at her! Miss Mary, she’s right there! She’s right *there!* Why are you being rude to her, just look at her!”

I yell and kick and scream all the way into the car. When I turn to look and point at Miss Mary through the window she’s gone and we’re driving away, back home.

Oh, I hope Miss Mary isn’t angry at me.

I'll make it up to Miss Mary tomorrow. It won't be hard, not at all. I'll go to the park after school like I always do and she'll be there waiting for me and I'll say that I'm sorry for Mama's being rude. Then they'll see each other and shake hands and talk and laugh and build sandcastles with me and Miss Mary will know I have good parents who love each other and love me and don't send me to bed with no supper. Then everything will be alright. I'll make it up to Miss Mary tomorrow. I'll make it up to Miss Mary tomorrow. I'll make it up to Miss Mary tomorrow.

Going to see Miss Mary again is so exciting I can't sleep. Last night I was up for so long I saw the moon sinking behind my windowpane, rocking back and forth on my heels like dogs do when they're getting a treat. I even disciplined a spider that was crawling without being scared. Right now I should be tired from being up so late, but the thought of seeing Miss Mary again, of Mama apologizing to her and making friends, it all just sets me off like a firework.

It's early when Mama comes by my door, with loud raps on my door. I try to fake asleep now, just as she opens the door, but Mama has eyes in the back of her head and knows. "Get up," she tells me, pulling the blankets off me. "We gotta get dressed."

She goes to the closet, pulls on the doors hard so they squeak. One of her arms is spotted blue and purple. Instead of my play-clothes, she takes out something different and throws it on the bed. It's not my play outfit. It's my special outfit, the one I wore to Christmas last year, the one I wore to see Grammy. It's all creased and dusty now.

I frown at the outfit. "But Mama, Miss Mary—"

“No buts.” Her voice is like a bee sting and her hand is shaking on the doorknob. “We’re going to church today, and that’s final. And don’t talk about those devil figments. They ain’t—*aren’t* real.” Then she leaves me alone to dress.

We pack up in the truck, careful not to dirty our clothes on the seats. The yellow concrete back of the city streaks past and gives way to the more wild, to greens and browns and an endless gray sky. Mama doesn’t turn on the radio, but talks to me while I curl up in my seat, looking at my shoes. “Now I know your Papa don’t like church, much less doctors, but somethin’ gotta give. He’ll be less mad about church, anyways.” She looks long and hard out the windshield to the hazy road. “Besides,” she recites, “in the Lord there is more strength than in any medicine. Pastor Evans’ll get what’s wicked out of you, just like the Lord did in Luke. You remember that book, now.”

I don’t remember that book now. I don’t remember the service, except the strange parts, like how everyone was shaking and hollering like they’d been struck by lightning, like how we sang the same song for half an hour, like how Pastor Evans’s bald head was shinier than a penny and his shirt was soaked with sweat. I don’t remember being brought to the podium, or the drive back home. I don’t remember doing much of anything except trying to stay in my special playground and building sandcastles there.

But I remember some things. I remember feeling cold all during the service even though I was sitting in between Mama and a *really* fat lady. I remember long shadows behind every chair, deep black ones like night creeping up from the floorboards. I remember how the pastor’s hands shook the nearer they got to my face and how his eyes looked not at me but over my shoulder, wild and wide like a deer’s right before the car

smashes into them. I remember how he pulled Mama aside after the service, how she started to push away until he nodded at me. I remember how they whispered, how Mama's eyes crinkled in worry like they do, how they kept looking at me.

Just because I remember doesn't mean that I understand. But I don't know if I want to understand, not yet.

I haven't seen Miss Mary since I went to church. Teacher's been through three spelling lists since then. I think Miss Mary must be mad at me, but I don't know why. I sit under the big tree where she used to be and discipline the bugs and hope she'll show up but she never does.

I wish she would come back.

One day I shove Ashley into the wall so hard she cries. Teacher says she doesn't know what to do with me and sends me to the office. When I tell them I was using discipline they tell me that I'm not old enough, not big enough, to exercise discipline like that. That it's the adult's jobs. But they're not adults, not really, just bigger kids than me. Some of them are no better than big, ugly bugs. Miss Mary tells me so.

Mama picks me up from the park today. Papa is waiting for us in the kitchen when we get home. There's a bottle of bitter water by his hand and when Mama sees it she shoos me to my room. I start that way as quick as I can but I trip on my shoelaces and fall in the hallway. I'm getting up when they start talking.

"So," says Papa. "You took the kid to that—" he says a bad word "—church."

“No I didn’t,” Mama says real soft.

“You told me you were goin’ shoppin’,” Papa goes on. “I checked the miles on my truck when you got home. Bit far out to the store, that extra ten miles. It’s been eight years since you done that. You’re startin’ up with that pastor like you did back then, ain’t you, Annie? Lyin’ to me, driving out to that *church*—”

“I had to!” Mama screams. There’s a scraping noise and I guess she got out of her chair. “Yes, I went to see Pastor Evans, but not like that. I had to, Rick, I had to. Taylor needs the Lord, needs some kind of healin’ and you don’t like doctors.”

Papa huffs. “What’s wrong?”

“Taylor’s been acting up. Seein’ things.”

Papa says a bad word about a cow.

“It ain’t like that, Rick, I’m bein’ honest. Goes on about some lady named Miss Mary who’s a governess, whatever that is. She ain’t there, but I swear I’ve never seen Taylor so sure. Started screamin’ in the park ‘bout how I was being rude to the nice lady. Got me all kinda stares. And there’s the kickin’ and carryin’ on and you heard about what she did to that poor girl yesterday in the hall—”

“Why should I care?”

“Look, I talked to Pastor Evans and he told me about this camp he got goin’ on a couple states over. Real nice people, all from church, and he’s in charge of it. It’d do Taylor good to get out of the city for a while, back on the Lord’s ground. Healin’ in the solitude of his creation and all that. And you wouldn’t have to worry about—well, about Taylor for a while.”

“How long we talkin’ here? How much?”

“Pastor said he’d pay the bill for the whole summer. School lets out, she goes to the camp, and you don’t have to see her again ‘til fall, promise.”

There’s a long, deep silence that beats on my ears and chest like an animal trying to get out of a trap. Some people say that when bad news comes they don’t hear anything, like someone covered their ears, but my ears are wide open and I can hear everything and I hate it, I hate it all so much.

“Fine,” Papa says. “Whatever. “Your kid anyway.”

I run to my room and slam my door and bury myself in the closet. I’ve been here for a long time now and no one’s come looking for me. I guess it’s a good thing, because I’m trying to build sandcastles but the sand is too wet and I can’t stop crying.

That night I dream about Miss Mary. I dream that Mama comes to me with Papa’s thunder in her face and she’s holding a cross. I dream that the cross catches on fire and burns away while somebody screams. I dream that Papa’s thunder eats away at Mama’s eyes and nose and cheeks until there’s nothing but black and fire and the smell of burnt meat and one hand reaching out to me and I am *afraid*. I dream that the hand touches me, and when it does I see Miss Mary, and even though I’m still afraid I take her hand and follow. I dream that we make sandcastles in my special playground together, and we make them so high that they disappear into the clouds. I dream that Miss Mary picks me up and holds me tight and carries me to bed. I dream that Miss Mary reads me a story and gives me warm milk and tells me that it’ll be alright, that she’ll take care of me forever and ever and ever.

I wake up in the dark in my bed and don't know how I got there. Miss Mary isn't there but I can smell lilies.

Mama tells me over breakfast the next morning that I'm going away with Pastor Evans. She tells me I'm going away in a month when summer comes and that I'll be going shopping with her later for new clothes. I stare into my cereal while she talks. "I want Miss Mary," I tell her.

Mama sighs across the table. "Taylor, I've told you about a hundred times since this started. Miss Mary just ain't real. Plain and simple."

"You think she's real."

"I think she's somethin' you've been imagining," Mama says, "or that the Devil put in your head, maybe."

"She's more real than God."

My cheek stings and I realize after that Mama's hit me, right across my face. I look up with tears in my eyes. Her face is crinkled the same way it usually does when she passes roadkill in the street, or when she sees a roach. "Don't you ever," she whispers, "ever, say that again in my house."

A few tears fall into my cereal bowl.

"Put your head up," she snaps. She goes back to eating with a shaking hand. "And you just be grateful that there are good shepherds on earth to watch after the black sheep of God's flock."

There's one more spelling list before school is over. Teacher's starting to ask where everyone's going for summer vacation. She calls on Ashley, who starts right up about how her parents are taking her to Disneyland as a birthday present. Everyone else claps and makes noise and tells her how much they're jealous of her.

Teacher calls on me next. "So Taylor, what are you doing for your summer vacation?"

I grind my pencil lead into my desk. "Going away," I mumble. No one says anything. Teacher tries to move on.

Please God, please let me say goodbye to Miss Mary. I miss her so much.

I'm leaving today. Mama packed my bag this morning and put me in the truck with her. I thought I was going straight to the camp but when she stopped we were there at the park. I looked up at her and she smiled at me and nodded at the door. "Go on," she said. "Least put a smile on your face before Pastor Evans sees you. We got some time to kill anyway."

It's sunny today and noisy with all the cars on the road going home from work. All the little kids and babies are in the park today, and their moms are pushing them on the swings or catching them at the bottom of the slide or holding them up to reach the monkey bars. Ashley and the other girls are probably on their vacations right now. I'm just sitting in the sandbox while Mama sits by the pond and doesn't look at me.

Everyone else has somebody who watches them, takes care of them and teaches them and listens to them. I don't have anyone to do that for me, or anywhere to go

except away. Mama doesn't believe me, Papa doesn't take care of me and Teacher doesn't teach me. And nobody listens to me. It's just me. Have I always been so lonely?

A horn honks across the street and it's so loud that I jump and look at it. I start to look for the car but I stop when I see her.

She's there, right across the street.

There's a big lump of something in my throat. I smile and wave at her so hard my hands might fall off. She smiles back, just so it shows in her eyes, and she crouches a little and spreads her arms wide open. The road clears and she makes a little motion. Come here, she says but doesn't.

I get up from the sandbox and move. I can hear my feet crunching on the gravel, first soft, then louder and louder until the wind's in my ears and my face and her face is flickering into black pieces and flame and getting closer and closer and I can almost feel her arms around me like a blanket or a warm bath and then a lady behind me screams and it sounds like Mama and a monster roars in my ears and—

I like it here at Miss Mary's. It's just like she told me it would be. The house is so big, like a castle, made of glass and black stone and starlight. And there's a great big playground in the backyard, with swings and a slide and a sandbox a mile wide. I build great big sandcastles in it, as big as an elephant, and they never fall down.

I have lots of brothers and sisters now, lots of friends. Nobody teases me, or breaks my toys, or pushes me. Nobody yells, or hits, or disciplines us. Miss Mary tells us she loves us every day.

She teaches us lots of things, too, things that Teacher never knew about. She teaches us big words from big books, about the light around us and below us and in us. She teaches us the before, the now, and the after.

Sometimes we go to the park, like a field trip. No one sees me, but I see them. The big mean girls are still there, but their eyes are sad now, and confused and guilty. Ashley looks the worst, like she caught the flu. Mama is there too, staring at the sandbox. She never cries. None of them cry much at all.

But I want them to cry. I was so sad before, and angry, and no one understood it. They still don't understand, most of the time, and when people talk bad about me or say that it was coming I discipline them. Ashley, Teacher, Mama, even Papa gets disciplined. When I'm done with discipline, when they start to cry and wheeze, that's when I go to them and whisper that I'm so, so happy. They shiver and cry and don't see me.

I tell the younger kids about Miss Mary, too. They talk to each other about her sometimes, but they don't know her yet. The little girls sit across from each other and clap hands and sing, "*Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black, with silver but-tons, but-tons, but-tons down her back, back, back.*"

BLACK CAT'S TAIL

Ninety lives ago, my mother said,
a cat with a coat as black as coal
was seen asleep in a woman's lap.
Osburn, the woman was called,
then they called her Witch, and
sent her to starve in a Boston cell;
the cat was chased and caught
and burnt alive by association.

And this is why, my mother said,
I should always walk under ladders
and hiss at passing strangers,
to pass calamity over their heads
like wildfire smoke to strangle them.

Because my coat, my mother said,
which is blacker than soot,
bears the vengeful ashes
of those who have worn it before.

Trusting people leads only to burning
and the sharp caustic strike of fur.

ALWAYS, ANXIOUS

Being alone is a clammy fish, an angler
hollow-cheeked with crooked jaws wide open,
teeth in every conceivable direction but right

But beyond me is the edge of the world,
a shapeless maw perpetually opening beneath me
with every step, perhaps toothless but wholly void

And I don't know which is worse
but at least loneliness has a stomach

STYMPHALIAN BIRTH
(from After Us Motherhood by Max Ernst)

Shrug your shoulders back;
open-mouthed, let it sigh out,
 bird-like,
wings tongue-damp and weak,
mewling piteously for light.

Let it dry in the overnight sun
hanging from the browning pines,
 hawk-like,
learning to swoop and claw and cough
out powdered eggshell from your throat.

Watch it turn its wings out flying, this
smoking ochre utterance, bronze-beaked
 beast-like,
and fleeting, and leaving you behind
a sulfur cloud on the pillar where it roosts.

SIWAH

The sun in his chariot hung suspended
 above the horizon, in some celestial fury
 stalling out the day; with his sword
 he bled the clouds purple and scarlet
 on the desert sand dozing below,
above the band of exhausted Greeks
 purchased by tongue and sword
 of Philip, bound as inheritance
 to his chryselephantine son
so far from home.

So they sat on the steps still waiting,
 struggling to regain the composure
 that had melted during the blaze of day,
 the last dew of sweat puckering cold
 against their Attic red flesh.

The doors of the temple stood shut
 against them, lest they interrupt
 the long and perfumed conferences
 of an oracular sand-kissed Zeus
and their king.

*Did you hear how the priests greeted him,
they chattered amongst themselves.
Paidíos, Son of God! Could we be so lucky
to serve the blood of the Father Almighty
in some glorious campaign to come?
There are many sons of gods,
 one muttered alone, less impressed,
but we must wait to see if his wars
will bring us glory, or death, or barren sands.*

Then the doors of the temple were flung wide,
 the sudden torchlight from within
 as blinding as the mid-horizon sun.
Mouth set in stone
and eyes ablaze,
 so exeunt *Alexander*.

VARIATION ON A FREQUENT CONVERSATION WITH MY ROOMMATE

—*We are in the living room chatting
when suddenly she looks up.*—

There's a bug in the house.

Oh? What kind?

Don't know, don't care.

Well where is it?

On the ceiling. It's tiny.

I see it. It might be
a ladybug.

Huh.

—*She grabs her foam dart gun.
It holds six shots.*—

Oh don't.

It's in my house.

On the ceiling, not
doing anything.

It's still in my house.

—*She pumps the gun and shoots
kuthump;
it misses.*—

Oh, come on, don't.
Ladybugs are good luck.

—*She makes a face at me
like I had forced her to swallow vinegar.*—

That's bullshit.

Nope. If a ladybug lands
on something you own, you're
bound to get a better version.

There's no such thing as luck.

—*She shoots kuthump
again; she misses.*—

I think the ladybug disagrees.

—*kuthump, kuthump,
kuthump, kuthump.*

She has missed every shot.—

Just let it crawl down the wall
in its own time. Then I'll catch it
and put it outside. It's better than
killing the little thing.

I'm allowed to kill anything
that comes into my house unwelcomed.

Except it's not just your home
and this is inhumane.

Of course it's inhumane. It's a bug.

But you're a vegetarian!
You're telling me you don't feel
empathy for one kind of critter
over another one that's fuzzier?

I refuse to eat things
that can feel pain.

So bugs don't feel pain?

Not that I know.

Well I disagree.

You eat veal, though.

Never have, technically.

But you eat lamb.

Yes, and some people
eat cats and dogs.

But I made my point. You
have no room to talk about
what's humane and what's not.

Except I'm not the one
actively trying to kill.

*—We stare at the bug together.
There are six dark spots
on what looks like a shiny red shell
that sits, still, perhaps nervous
on the ceiling. She
is holding the spent dart gun.—*

So you're just going
to stand there and wait
to kill it.

Uh-huh.

*—So I shrug
and do dishes instead.—*

SONG OF THE GORGON

I keep no mirrors in my home,
no silver, no bronze.
All my cups are clay, poorly spun
potter's refuse I have stolen,
as I have stolen food and wine
and even this cave I call home
from you, a poor shepherd boy
who was kind to call me guest
but a fool to look into my eyes.
Every morning you sit beside me
with the same disgusted expression
which I have made eternal in stone.
Shall I recount my tales again to you,
as though stone can comprehend
the words hissing from my lips?
But I will tell you all the same.

You should know I was not always
this, this thing worst than any beast
on earth. My hair was long and flaxen,
not coiled dark with serpents splitting
at the ends. And my skin was soft
and smooth as fawn-hide, not cold
and cragged with riverbed stones
crowning my temples. And my eyes!
My father used to say
they were like the heart of a sapphire,
clear and bright enough to rival
the full-swollen moon, and I
more valuable than silver. But now,
well, you know what my eyes do now.
And long before I stole this cave
from you, I served the goddess
gray-eyed Athena in the heart of her city.

Athena! Most beloved in my heart
of all gods, the patron of my city,
my shield-maiden who would keep me safe
beneath her skirts, if I became her priestess.
Whenever I closed my eyes in prayer I could see
the rocky cliff of the Acropolis, washed bright
with salt mist from the sea, and the pale stone
pillars of the temple, and the beckoning glint
of Pallas' sacred statue from within. Was it

that the goddess was calling me to service?
Calling me to ruin? I still do not know. But truly
my dreams of the temple spurred me on;
I had no other wish than to serve the goddess
and keep her fire burning.

Of course there were men
who would have called me wife, but so many
made such desperate overtures to my father
that I grew frightened. By the time I
had seen ten years go by, my father had heard
twice as many demands for my hand in marriage.
And I, afraid, sought solace in Athena's temple,
shutting my eyes in prayer. The high priestess
answered my pleas, invited me to join their mysteries.
My father, my mother, and I especially
were quite relieved. And dutifully
I served the goddess for three years.

One afternoon, two years into my service,
I was given a simple task, to go to the ports
and bring back oil and materials for sacrifice.
There at harbor stood the darkest-skinned man
I had ever seen in my life, a little wild in his hair
and beard, and strong, enough to lift a loaded jug
clear over his head without struggle. I suppose
I was impressed, but more on guard against
what, I did not have words to say,
but I kept my eyes turned downward
and shut them to pray that he would not see me.

But he saw. Not just then, but every day
I went to the docks on the temple's behalf.
Every day I could feel his eyes upon me,
not burning like fire, but cold and wet,
as though the depths of the sea
where fish themselves might go to drown
were closing its clammy arms about me.
I bore his stare because I had to;
I could not make a public fuss
over something so trite as eyes, but
whenever I would come back to the temple
I would take my ritual bath, scouring myself
of his gaze, shutting my eyes against the water
as I poured it hot over my head.

One afternoon he followed me.
They told me later that I should have watched
more carefully, or screamed, or worn my veil.
He followed me from the dock,
his footsteps covered by the crash of waves,
I did not notice until it was far too late.
He called himself Poseidon, told me
I was beautiful, and deserved to be his
consort. I told him no, quietly,
but it did not deter him. And he pressed
and pressed, before he tried to kiss me,
and that was when I tried to pull away
and said that I was Athena's priestess,
my body her temple. Of all things, that
angered him more than my physical resistance.
He snatched the amphorae I was carrying
and threw them at my feet; shards
of fired red clay cut at my sandaled feet.
I am the lord of the sea, he told me again,
and I shall not be denied.
And I could only deny him so much.
I shut my eyes, trying to restrain
my tears and praying for Athena,
for her, for anyone to round the corner
and slay the man behind me,
god or not. But of course
nobody came except him.
When he was done he left me
by the sea and disappeared.
I lay on the sand, eyes still shut
for who knows how long
before I could find it in me to retch.

Of course I told them I could not help it.
Of course I told them that I wept,
that I vomited, that there was no way
I could have stopped him. I even told them
he said he was Poseidon. They cared
not for any of it. And as a last resort
when I flung myself at the feet
of Athena's statue, begging for her empathy,
lightning struck the temple roof
and in the roll of thunder following
I was transformed.
The priestesses cried out in terror
and called for the guards

but I was already fleeing,
head lowered, eyes nearly shut
while they hurled stones and bowls
in my wake. I do thank someone
that none of them thought to look me
in the eyes; though they did betray me,
it would have done me no good
to present them with your stony fate.

I do remember the first man I transfigured.
Yes, it was a man, I imagine a kind one,
because he saw me crouched and weeping
near a busy road, afresh with terror and hurt
from my expulsion from the temple.
He was extending his hand to me,
thinking I was injured. When I looked up
I saw his eyes, blue and clear as the sky.
At the sight of my face he recoiled instantly,
freezing and turning pale, like you did,
except he went beyond pale, into gray,
and then all the blue faded from his eyes
and he solidified into rough granite.
Someone screamed, a woman watching,
and then I was running again
before the crowd could catch me.
I wanted to shut my eyes then as well,
but every time I did I tripped over something
and thought it best to leave them open.

I am not good at keeping secrets.
Inevitably someone will find this cave
and me inside, following the trail of stone men
and women I have left in my wake.
Someone will find you sitting here,
my poor, silent stone shepherd.
And I suspect that when they do come,
it will only be to kill me. I am dangerous.
I accept it. I cannot shut my eyes any longer.
Whenever they come with sword to slay me
my eyes will be wide and my great teeth bared.
I will have him listen, even as you listen to me.
I have gone too long without fighting.

A GIRL WITH A LAMP

The girl was trying to sleep, but she was too warm and there were too many people around her bed. She could see their blurred outlines crowding in her field of view, flickering like so many candles. Their voices were muffled too, like listening through a pillow; they all seemed to be talking to someone else. "Please let me sleep," the girl said, but no one seemed to hear her.

From by her ear came a voice she recognized, but in her exhaustion could not place. "Sissy, don't go," it said. The words were drenched with tears.

The girl tried to sit up, but she was too tired except to prop herself up on her pillow. She turned towards the voice and the blurred face belonging to it. "I'm only sleeping," she whispered. She laid her head back down.

She let out a sigh like a lamp being extinguished.

Sleep came and pressed her eyes closed with dark fingertips. Her small body tensed. The insides of her eyelids shimmered red and black, and for a moment it felt as though she was falling out of the world, stomach first. It was a frightful feeling. But, the girl reasoned, it was only the first touch of sleep; after that there would be only dreaming.

So she relaxed. The insides of her eyelids stopped shimmering. The world fell around her, and that was fine.

When she opened her eyes again she found herself lying on soft earth, staring up at a canopy of shimmering gold. They were leaves, she decided, leaves like golden hands stretching out from a host of bronze branches. It made her think of autumn in the park

across from her house, which was full of oak trees as tall as buildings. She remembered the times she was taken there for walks in the afternoons; she remembered the shadow of Auntie's skirt fading from view, remembered the softness of her sister's hand in hers as they walked together. The memory made the girl's heart ache, as though from sadness, but without knowing why she should be sad.

The girl stood up and brushed the dirt from her skirt front. Her eyes adjusted to the flickering dim as she looked around; the outlines of trees sharpened in her eyes. Across the little clearing she was standing in was a hole in the line of trees, a very large, very dark hole that seemed to stretch indefinitely. At the foot of the gap she could just barely see pebbles, perhaps hints of a pathway, but the darkness beyond swallowed it. The girl shuddered in fear and turned away from the gap.

For a while the girl stood in the clearing, not looking at the gap and trying to recall why and how she had gotten to this place. As she thought she walked towards one of the trees, reaching a hand out to inspect it. Where she should have felt rough bark she felt instead something smooth and cold.

The girl gasped and withdrew her hand. "Why, you're not a tree," she said aloud. Then she took a breath, which seemed to steel her, and put her hand against the trunk again. The unnatural chill persisted.

A thought occurred to her, and she looked up at the golden canopy, more closely than before. Where she had once imagined leaves she now saw hundreds upon hundreds of lanterns hanging from the branches, suspended by thin silver chains. Some lamps were small, some were large, and some were even shaped like animals or like people. Every lantern was made of bright gold and inlaid with precious stones; she recognized

rubies and diamonds, pearls and pieces of amber. Out of the bellies of these lanterns shone fat bursts of white flame that danced against the gold. She thought of the elaborate Christmas trees that her mother had put up every year, and again of her sister playing with the tinsel and the tree skirt. Again her heart ached.

The girl shook her head and looked back at the lanterns, and a thought occurred to her. "If I had a lantern like these," she said, "I could use it to light up that dark pathway, and perhaps I could go onward. Perhaps I could find someone else in this wood," she added, almost as an afterthought.

So she looked for a lantern. All of them were very grand, she thought, and very expensive. One of the lanterns hanging close to her was nearly covered in rubies the size of cats' eyes. The girl reached her hand toward that lantern, intending to take it; it would be so queenly to walk through a forest with such a magnificent source of light. But her hand stopped just short of the lantern's handle. It was rather big, almost as tall as she was, and almost certainly as heavy. The light coming from it also seemed rather small in comparison to its size. No, she needed a useful lantern, not a beautiful one.

No sooner had the girl thought this than she spied a small bronze sapling to her right. On this tree, dangling from a thick iron chain, was an unlit clay lamp. It was small and shaped like a squashed teapot, but the clay was not cracked and the wick was soaked with oil. This lamp she unhooked from its chain and held carefully in her left hand.

As soon as the lamp was well in her hand, the iron chain disappeared. The wick combusted of its own accord; the light it gave off was so bright it drowned out all the other lamps. Somewhere in the distance the girl heard a voice, an older girl's voice, crying very softly.

“That sounds like my sister,” the girl said, her heart jumping into her throat. She thought that perhaps they had both been brought to this forest, that they had been separated somehow and that they now thought themselves alone. And if her sister was there, then she was surely not in this little clearing, but in the dark beyond.

The girl held more tightly to her lamp, and with it she went forward into the dark.

The path, it turned out, was not as dark as she had feared it to be. Once she left the clearing the lamps had disappeared, and so she was surrounded by bare metal tree trunks and gloom. When she had walked on a little ways she found that the scenery around her was beginning to change. The sky around her lightened to silver; the bronze oaks gave way to striped birch trees with fluttering leaves as white as bone. Amidst the leaves she could spy glimpses of deep red. Among the cluster of trees were a little silvery pool and a stone statue upon a plinth.

It was these things which drew her in at first. The pool was as silver up close as it had appeared from afar, and as motionless as frozen quicksilver, as if it were really made of metal. The statue was that of a hunchbacked old man with a thick beard that reached all the way down to the plinth. One empty stone eye socket jutted out from underneath a rough-hewn stone brow; the other eye was shut tight as if against an unseen sun. As for the plinth, there seemed to be an inscription on it, but it was too faded to read from afar.

The girl waved at the statue, looking about half-heartedly for its missing leg, which was nowhere in sight. Then she went closer to one of the trees and reached up for the fruit. When she touched one she found it warm and smooth, and in her surprise she dropped it. It fell to earth with a squishing sound; a little puddle of red curled behind it.

Something about it unsettled her. “But it looks edible,” she said, “and I am hungry.”

So she reached up again, picked up another berry, put it in her mouth, and cautiously bit into it. It was bitter at first, almost like sucking on a lemon, but after a few chews it tasted sweeter. When the flesh was gone she swallowed the pit and made a face.

“Oh,” said the girl, “it’s as if I had swallowed a pebble. But it is a little filling, so I may as well have another.” And she reached up to take another.

A black blur shot out from the red leaves, whizzing past the girl's head and slamming into the earth. The girl let out a little scream of surprise, then recovered and moved forward. A black bird was lying on the ground, twitching, and she saw there was a gash across one of its wings. It did not stir at her approach. So the girl laid her lamp aside, tore off part of her skirt and carefully wrapped it around the bird's wing. “You poor thing,” she crooned. “Something must have attacked you. Does it hurt terribly?”

She brushed its wing accidentally with a finger and the bird convulsed painfully.

The girl cried out apologetically. “Oh no, oh no, little bird, I’m so sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you. Oh.” She spotted a little twig near her foot, just the right size for a bird wing, and snatched it up. “Here,” she said, slipping the twig under the makeshift gauze. “This might hurt a bit,” she warned, before tying the knot up as tight as reasonably possible.

The bird twitched once more before stilling. It looked at her and gave a piteous chirp, as if to say that it understood, that the pain was only temporary, that it was grateful.

She petted its head gently. “Now I shall take you home,” she said to it. “Is your nest in that tree you came out of?”

When the bird shook its beak, she sighed, “So you are lost, like I am.” She sat on the ground, thinking only for a moment how her sister would scold her for ruining her skirt. “I only just woke up here, you see. I’m looking for my sister. I heard her calling to me when I woke, or I thought I did. She has long golden hair. Have you seen her?”

The bird shook its beak again.

“Well,” said the girl, putting her chin in her hands, “what do you suppose we should do? I certainly don’t know my way about even this little clump of trees.”

At this the bird began to hop about, stopping near a berry that had fallen from a tree. It pecked at the ground by it until the girl picked it up, rather confused. Then the bird hopped toward the eyeless statue and started to peck at its plinth as well, until the girl pulled it away. “What on earth are you doing?” she asked it, bending to pick it up.

It was then that she noticed the plinth’s inscription, whose wiggly letters seemed to become more legible the longer she stared. “*Sightless I stand, but plant the right seed, and you on the path to the Porch I will lead,*” she read to the bird. “Well, I don’t know about any porch, but these berries are rather hard, like little seeds. I wonder...”

She fit the berry carefully into the statue’s empty socket. As she had moved her hand away she caught a flash of red light in the pool. The statue straightened, like a mechanized toy soldier, and stuck one arm out, pointing through the trees. A path of shimmering silver stones appeared there, leading out of the grove and on.

“Clever little bird!” she cried delightedly, scooping up the bird and placing it on her shoulder. “Oh, thank you so much. Now we can start to be a little less lost.” And with that she took to walking the path again, holding her bright lamp in front of her.

The black bird, though it could not speak, chirped every so often from the girl's shoulder, as if providing commentary. The girl talked to it, telling it about the woods full of lanterns she had awoken in, and about her sister especially: how she wore her golden hair in curls, how she could whistle like a nightingale, how she protected the girl from the cruelty of neighboring boys. "That is why I must find her," said the girl. "She has always protected me, and now I have the chance to do the same for her. So I cannot let her down!" And to this the bird replied with a gentle squawk.

They walked thusly together until they reached a riverbank made of blue sand. A lilac river gurgled cheerfully beside it, stretching away from the trees and out of sight. The girl took this as a sign of progress, and started to continue down the bank.

Suddenly a voice drawled behind her, "Are you going to see the Torchbearer?"

The girl turned around. A woman had emerged from a different patch of trees, or rather, one woman's body had emerged, and to that body were attached three different heads. Apart from the initial shock of seeing a three-headed person, the girl concluded that each head was rather pretty. They all had shiny dark hair, expertly curled, and their cheeks and lips were healthily dosed with red. There was, however, something about their up-turned noses which reminded her of an English bulldog.

"Pardon me," said the girl, curtsying, "but I have never heard of a Torchbearer."

"Never heard of the Torchbearer?" sputtered the right head. The other heads tittered disapprovingly. "Why, that's unheard of! How can you not know of him?"

"Well, I've only been in this forest for a few hours," the girl replied. She felt rather hot and embarrassed, although she didn't quite know why she should be.

“You *must* know of the Shadeweaver, then,” said the left head. She was glaring pointedly at the little bird, which was still seated on the girl’s shoulder.

“It’s just an injured bird I found on the path,” the girl said, patting it protectively. “It’s just lost like I am.”

“Walk with us,” the center head ordered. “We’ll tell you what you should know.”

“Not too close!” snapped the left head. “That bird is wicked, I can feel it.”

So they all strolled down the bank. The girl told the heads about her sister and explained her quest. In return, the heads told the girl about two great beings who lived in this forest. The first was the Torchbearer, a good Lord of Light who had made the world and everything in it. His enemy was the wicked Shadeweaver, a Mistress of Darkness who strove to blot out the light and good that the Torchbearer had created. It all seemed awfully familiar to the girl, but she listened politely regardless.

Then the heads told her about the Torchbearer’s great shining palace, and of a great feast and greater riches which he had prepared. “It’s quite exclusive,” she said. “Only the most worthy souls will be admitted, those that followed the Torchbearer’s path and love him with all their heart. Minions of the Shadeweaver are, of course, forbidden.”

“But you said the Lord of Light loves *all* creatures,” the girl protested. “Surely—”

“No-no-no,” said the center head. “The Torchbearer destroys even the smallest sinners with the fire of his torch. But you are young, so of course you don’t understand.”

The girl sighed. “Perhaps you are right.”

“Of course we are. We’ve been following the Torchbearer far longer than you.”

“Would my sister be there in the palace?”

“If she has found her way,” said the left head dismissively.

They had come very far down the bank already, and now the girl could see a rickety-looking bridge of white wood spanning the river. But close to the bridge was a hunched, hooded shadow, and the girl felt her heart flutter in fear.

“Excuse me,” called the center head. “Where does this bridge go?”

The figure turned and the girl was relieved to see that it was only an old woman in a dark coat and hat. Truthfully, the hat was the most interesting thing about her; it was very old-fashioned, decorated with fat red fruits and coppery snakes which were decidedly, mercifully stuffed. Her long hair curled like steel wool, and her smile was harmless, just like the girl’s own Auntie. But her gait was too quick when she came to meet them, and her silvery eyes flashed about too quickly in the dim.

The old woman smiled at them all. “Ah, members of the faith, I see. You’re all in luck, for this bridge leads to the great palace of the Torchbearer.”

The heads squealed in delighted unison, then demanded, “Take us there now!”

“Be patient,” snapped the old woman. The girl drew back instantly at the outburst, and she could have sworn one of the snakes on the hat had bared its fangs.

But then the girl recovered herself. “What we mean,” she said, “is that we would very much like to cross the bridge, ma’am, if you would be so kind as to let us.”

The old woman looked at the girl, then at the bird on her shoulder. She spoke more gently. “You all may cross, dears, but this bridge has some conditions.” She pointed to the river. “You must drink the water from this river, to unburden yourself of your memories. Memories are heavy burdens, and this bridge cannot support them all.”

The girl frowned. “Will I forget everything?” she asked.

“Everything,” replied the old woman, nodding. “When you come to the Lord of Light, you will know nothing but a short walk and happiness thereafter. And of course you will never want to leave that sort of bliss,” she added, sounding vaguely jealous.

“It does sound like heaven,” sighed the right head.

“Does the Lord of Light live in the palace?” asked the girl.

There was a silence, brief but heavy with self-inflicted social embarrassment. Then the heads began to titter, then snicker, then outright shriek with laughter, clutching their stomach as they doubled over, still laughing. The girl felt hot shame in her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “That was a stupid question. Of course he lives there.”

The old woman knelt until she and the girl were at eye level. “Don’t apologize, dear,” she said soothingly. “It isn’t a stupid question. Now, would you like an answer?”

The girl nodded. The heads, who were still laughing, were wholly oblivious.

“Well,” said the old woman, “no. But his feast is, and isn’t that what you seek?”

The girl pondered this for a long moment. She looked at the river and the bridge, then at her lamp, nearly forgotten in her hand. The laughter of the heads died down. Then she turned to the old woman. “Is there any other way to find the Torchbearer?”

“There is,” the old woman replied, “but it is longer and far more dangerous.”

“If you could, please, tell me what the other path is, so I might take it.”

“Are you mad?” cried all three heads together. They loomed down upon the girl, as though trying to bury her in the riverbank by gaze alone. “All you need to do is take a little drink, cross a bridge, and reach paradise! You cannot give this up now.”

“I cannot leave my sister,” said the girl emphatically. She glared up at the heads, who suddenly backed away, as if her eyes had scorched them. “And I am not giving up.

I'm simply taking another road, that's all." She looked again at the old woman. "So please, ma'am, where can I find this other path?"

The old woman smiled, seeming rather pleased, and pointed down the river, in the opposite direction from which the girl had arrived. "If you go to the mouth of the river, you will find a willow swamp, and through that you will find your way to the Lord of Light. But you must be careful, for there are many dangers that lurk in that forest."

The three heads cackled and jeered. "Dangers! How do you plan to deal with danger? All you have is a lamp and a wicked bird!"

"Maybe so," said the girl. "But I will go that way." She waved at the old woman. "Thank you," she said. The lamplight flared cheerfully between them.

The old woman smiled in return, ignoring the clamoring heads. The girl kept walking, and in a few minutes she reached the river-mouth. A thick forest of weeping willow trees loomed before her, black-green against a gray horizon; below, the river latticed across the ground, making purple swamp out of blue silt and stone. There was no sound here, except the trickle of water and a low hum like singing.

The girl turned back to wave again, to show the women that she had made it alright. But the bridge and the women were gone entirely, as though distance had absorbed them. The girl swallowed over the lump in her throat, and kept walking.

The girl's shoes were covered in mud, but it couldn't be helped now. The swamp was too vast, the mist too thick to see through for more than a few steps. Above her head she could hear crows in the willow trees, their voices distorted and metallic. Some other wind-sound moved through the willows, rustling their long, finger-like leaves, yet the

trees themselves remained motionless. The river path had long since disappeared. And however she asked, the bird offered her no help, except to warn her of stray roots.

But she waded on, and on, and on through the growing mist. After what felt like hours she stopped to rest, panting and wiping the dew from her brow. “Surely,” she said aloud, “there is a way out of this mire.”

“Lost?” said a voice from behind her.

The girl whirled about, but saw nothing but mist. She shivered and picked herself up again. “No time to rest now, little bird,” she said. “Keep going, and don’t listen.”

“Lost indeed!” cried the bodiless voice, delighted. It sounded rather like her.

The girl trudged ahead. “Ignore it,” she muttered, “just ignore it.”

But ignoring the voice did not make it go away; in fact, it grew louder, trailing behind her like tattered ribbon. “Here you are, in the middle of a swamp, nearly blind for the fog, with nothing to guide you! Yes, this was a *much* better path than the bridge.”

The girl tried to turn away, to find the voice’s source, but she was alone. And the voice kept on: “You said you want to find your sister. How will you find her when you keep making mistakes? How will you find your sister when you yourself are lost?”

“I’m not lost!” cried the girl. “I have a lamp!” She brandished it like a weapon, trying to scrape some bravery from the clay amid the eerie hiss of the trees.

“And what a lamp it is! Just look at it! Its light is nearly nonexistent.”

The girl looked at her lamp, and sure enough, its flame was nearly out. It sputtered on the end of the wick, orange and greasy and barely the size of a penny. Had she imagined it being brighter? Perhaps it had always been this faint, a mere pinprick in never-ending gloom. The trees hissed even louder about her. Tears swelled in her eyes.

“Just stop,” the voice cooed. “If it’s too late to turn back, stay and accept things.”

The bird on her shoulder suddenly started squawking. The girl shushed it, but it continued to make noise. She looked down and began to cry, great hot blubbery tears rolling down her cheeks into the mud. Exhaustion dug its claws into her shoulders and settled there; she felt her knees wobbling, and thought to collapse in the dirt right there.

But the bird cawed directly into her ear, a sharp sound like a knife point jolting her from her tears. When she looked down, she saw that the mud, which had only dirtied her shoes until now, had risen nearly to her thighs, and entirely without her noticing.

The girl shrieked, her exhaustion evaporating. She looked around frantically. There was a root to her right she could just reach. Keeping her lamp aloft, she struggled out of the sinkhole, hoisting herself by the root onto solid ground. At the last minute she caught sight of a tail disappearing into the mud, and without thinking she pulled it out.

It was a little garter snake, gold in color and no thicker than her finger. The girl threw it away immediately; it landed on a rock nearby, hissing angrily. The bird, meanwhile, stopped cawing.

The snake turned on her immediately started to talk. “Why did you—”

“How dare you try to destroy my hopes!” cried the girl. “I have come too far to give up! How can you ask me to stop now? Where could you hope to lead me astray?”

“Look behind you,” said the snake.

The girl looked around. Behind them was not more swamp, but a pitch-black hole set into the face of a jagged cliff that had cropped up from nowhere. Set into the wet, blackish earth around the cave were rows and rows of thick wooden stakes, every

sharp end tipped with tattered cloth. Some of the rags were tinted dark red. The girl turned away. The light of her lamp was nearly out and she felt very ready to cry again.

“Yes,” hissed the snake, “do go on. On and on and on into this pit, where the Shadeweaver lies in wait to consume us. That sounds like an absolutely fantastic idea, little girl. You know she likes snakes more than snotty little girls? She’ll—”

“I see my dislike of snakes is still warranted,” said a soft voice behind them.

The girl, the snake, and the bird all turned around, and the girl had to shield her eyes to see. The first thing she could discern was that the mouth of the cave had been suddenly illuminated, as though the sun itself stood within it. The next thing she saw was a tall silhouette approaching her, holding something in its hand. As the figure came closer, the light from the cave diminished. The girl lowered her hand and looked up.

A tall lady was standing above her. She wore a white robe embossed with golden scrolls on the sleeves, and in her right hand she held a huge torch of willow wood. The flame from the torch glowed brightly, and the girl could feel its warmth even from the lady’s feet. The lady herself had dark skin and a regal-looking face framed by even darker curls. The girl had never seen a more beautiful lady in her life, not even her sister.

The snake was first to speak. “Who do you suppose you are?”

“I am the Torchbearer,” said the lady.

“But,” the snake said, “that cave surely belongs to the Shadeweaver.”

The lady nodded. “So it does.”

The snake hissed angrily, like spattering grease. “You cannot be both the Torchbearer *and* the Shadeweaver at once! That’s simply preposterous!”

“Only to you,” said the lady coldly. The torch in her hand flared.

“So you mean to condemn me?” asked the snake. “When I only ever—”

“Do not dare say that you have followed my path. You have dishonored your kind. You tricked, insulted, and belittled a child, nearly destroyed her for your own selfish sport. Only by her grace are you here to plead your piteous case, but I have already found you guilty.”

“Guilty!”

“Suffer in silence,” said the Torchbearer. She dipped her torch down and touched flame to scale. The girl watched, transfixed. The snake began to glow, first red, then yellow, then bright white, until it suddenly combusted, crumbling into ash on the spot.

The lady lifted her torch back up and turned to the girl, who quailed at the look. But then the lady smiled and everything was alright.

“I see you’ve found my bird,” the lady said. “May I see her?”

Wordlessly the girl took the raven from her shoulder and lifted it up. The bird hopped onto the lady’s arm without urging and chirruped happily. “Sweet thing,” said the lady. She pressed her mouth to the bird’s head; the dirty bandage on its wing unraveled and fell to the ground. The gash on its wing had vanished.

The lady beamed and put the bird on her shoulder. She offered a hand to the girl, who took it. It was warm like a cup of tea in winter, and lifted her effortlessly to her feet.

“You took wonderful care of my bird,” the Torchbearer said, “even though she was not your responsibility, and travelled far with her despite the nay-saying of others.”

“She was hurt,” said the girl. “Of course I had to help her. And I know the snake was bad, but he would have met that worse-than-bad fate if I hadn’t caught him.”

“There’s nothing wrong in that,” said the lady gently.

“Are you really the Torchbearer and the Shadeweaver?”

“I am indeed. And this is my Front Porch.”

“Then please, could you help me find my sister? I heard her calling me when I woke up, but I haven’t seen her anywhere. I’ve come so far to look for her. Her hair is blonde. Have you?...”

The lady’s smile faded. “I’m sorry, little one, but your sister is in another place entirely. She cannot stay where you are, and you cannot stay where she is.”

“She was crying,” the girl said, looking around. “She’s worried about me. She wants me to come home, she said.”

The lady knelt beside the girl and put her warm hands on her small shoulders. “Little one, you have moved on. Do you understand?”

The girl looked at her lamp and its small, flickering light. Something heavy settled in her stomach that was both warm and cold at once.

“I cannot send you home,” said the lady, “for your home now is with me, far beyond this swamp.” With a gentle touch the lady turned the girl’s face to look at her. “I know you remember your family. I know I cannot replace those memories, but I can promise a new set of memories. I can even be like a sister to you, if you would like it.”

The girl stood quietly on the stone porch for what seemed like a very long time. Finally she turned to the Torchbearer, holding her lamp out to her. “I’ll come with you,” she said. “But can you send this lamp to my sister? I want her to know that I’m alright.”

The Torchbearer took the lamp from the girl’s hands and gave it to the raven, which caught it in its claws. “I can promise that much,” she said, and nodded to the bird. With a flap of its wings it flew away and was lost in the mist.

“I’ll go with you now,” the girl said, and without asking she clasped the lady’s warm hand. The two of them walked together into the cave, which was full of warmth. The girl thought of her old fireplace, and of her sister reading in front of it. There was a last ache in her heart, and with some difficulty she let it go. She closed her eyes and let the light shimmer behind her eyelids as she walked on, the Torchbearer beside her.

Somewhere in New Orleans, a sister was crying. There was a tap at her window, but when she looked up, she saw nothing. When she turned back to her bed she saw, beside her black dress, a little terracotta lamp.

(UN) MEDICATED

The things some people put in their mouths
and try to put in mine.
As if I'll put this plastic pill
constructed to change the chemistry
of my brain, on my tongue, in my stomach.
I am what I eat, and on doctors' orders
I fear I could choke and keel, or
if I don't, dissolve. I used to ingest
the flesh and blood of Christ
in a round, chalky church, only to find
it was only ever wafers and wine;
Christ, God did not become me.
But I fear the power of the almighty less
than I fear the creations of a man bent
on making me smile.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FOOL'S ALCHEMY

Draw yourself from bed at dawn
 (try to shower and put on real clothes)
Brew one cup of steaming starless night
 (glorified bean water, sugar to taste)
Envision in the liquid your goals and desires
 (how you wish you could sleep forever)
Drain the cup to complete the spell
 (and hope it gives you the drive
 just to get out the front door)

MOTHS

The moth is on the ceiling, hovering,
a speck of black on beige still fluttering
faintly; in its wings is something whispering
speckled speech to the shadow stretching
below the lamp, below the body lying.
That is, my body lying, my flesh splaying
putty-like on imitation wood, cooling
down every vertebra and down the dying
blaze of my own blood. I see my ending
multiply in a hundred black moths buzzing
on the inside of my skull, all reminding
me that it would be better, my disappearing,
than it would be for me to keep persisting.
This is the ease with which I am easing
toward the spotted desire of not-being,
and right now I am not protesting.
These moths in my head are not caring
for my outcome; they are merely sitting
on the ceiling of my brain and watching
as I on the floor am soundlessly crying.

DISASSOCIATION, OR EVER SINCE THE CLONING ACCIDENT

It was a matter drawn and quartered,
and not solely for the sake of science
that I split myself into parts unknown
until, upon exiting my own great design,
rows upon rows of chrome-plated pods
engendering in bluish agar ten copies
of myself, drawn from my own blood,
I felt drained, utterly one-dimensional.
And starting was likely my first mistake.
I sent my other selves to other places,
so I at least could get some peace.
But it turns out splitting your essence
between ten other different bodies
doesn't free you from yourself,
and in fact does quite the opposite.
It started with simple things,
like forgetting my keys in my purse
or forgetting my phone in my hand,
but now it's more like blinking too long
to wind up in a street somewhere without
an umbrella, in sweeping rain and pouring wind,
or going to bed with an hour-long lover
and waking up kissing a seven-year stranger.
Surely there is some solution to be found,
but all I can manage is to lie in bed staring
into space, wondering where the rest of me went
and hoping one of me remembers to shower.

PRETTY, SORTA, HURTS

I got a pair of knee-high
boots for Christmas, a gift
from my mother. They are
buttery caramel leather
with shiny gold buckles,
and a one-inch heel:
almost equestrian, an emulation
of wealth and worth I
could pretend to possess.
Nothing was too tight or
too loose; the leather fit
like my own skin. And
I was so relieved
to finally feel like
someone of substance.

Except breaking them in
cut quarter sized blisters
on my Achilles tendon
painful as Paris's arrows
driving down to the bone.
But I can't really complain;
girls used to use blood
as blush, nightshade for
a sparkling eye, lead
to powder their faces.
What's two little sores?

REFLECTION

I used to stare at myself in the mirror
not to praise the face in the glass
but to grade it:
 eyes too small, cheeks too fat,
 every part disjointed: too thick
to be pretty. Now look at this,
black and white bone structures outlined
in velvet and pine and earth—
stone cold, a dead drop beauty, but
 nothing I recognize as me.

TO PHRASIKLEIA

No one has ever asked you to run.
Your father, your brothers
are perpetually running forward
with so little bidding,
for work, for war, for glory,
for seven leagues to Marathon.
But your feet they set in stone;
your body they wrapped in lead,
toxic sheets for a fallow marriage-bed
—to keep you safe, they said,
from a dark-skinned barbarian
you would never see,
who would have scorched your
earth as they razed your city.

No one asked you to stand
after centuries of sleep
but here you are, upright,
clutching at your skirt
and the stone bud in your palm.
So for whom do you stand?
For the man you were meant to wed,
for your father or your brothers?
For Ariston who made you, or
for the men who lay eyes on you now?
For me who pities and wonders
what flesh may have lived in your stone?
Or do you stand solely for yourself,
after so many years,
and that tiny peek of toe
belie your stoic smile
with desperation
if not to run, to walk?

WIFE OF THE SEA

sel-kie – *noun, Scot.* – a mythical creature that looks like a seal in water but assumes human form on land.

“I need my skin back.”

It was early Monday morning, the soft rain outside the window turning the sunlight silver. They were sitting at the table, Seamus and Faye Lynn, husband and wife, he reading the paper and she ignoring her eggs. It had been quiet until that moment.

Seamus’s paper drooped down minutely.

“I want to visit my family,” Faye said quickly. “Been meaning to for a while, you know, with the—” She dropped her gaze to her plate, to the two great yellow yolks resting untouched against the blue speckled china. “With the babies coming and all.”

“Just call them.”

Faye wanted very much to glare at him, but did not.

There was a silence. Then Seamus appeared to realize his mistake behind the paper. “Oh,” he said, “right. No phones where they are, are there?”

He began to chuckle at his own joke, set down his paper. The chuckle turned into a boisterous laugh that was loud against the rain. “No phones, no!” he went on. “Can’t have electricity there, can they? Fry their grey seal brains right out the water! *Zap!* No more Mum and Da!” On and on he laughed and laughed.

Faye kept staring at her eggs, but she straightened a little in her chair. She wanted to tell him off. So very much. You think yourself so clever, she wanted to say, because

you found my skin that day and knew what it was. You think yourself such a man, because you took the skin of a seal-woman and made them both your prizes, because you made her swear love to you and be your wife on the land and bear your clumsy children. You think yourself so secure.

The laughter slowed. Seamus picked up his paper again; it rustled in his fingers and he folded it in half. "I'll think about it."

"Think about it?"

He was watching her, she knew. It was a familiar feeling, his gaze, like he was trying to pry open all her private things, take her apart, piece by piece. It drilled on her skull to try and force it open.

She did not look at him.

"You're awfully keen today," Seamus said. "You've never asked to go back before. Why now?"

"For the babies."

"They plan on giving you a baby shower, then?" He started to laugh again.

"They...they need to bless me."

That cut him off. "Bless you?" He sounded surprised, disbelieving. "What, like a prenatal baptism?"

Faye looked at the yolks. "When we...well, our pregnancies are...difficult. We can't handle it in this form, you see, it's not natural. So when we conceive, we have to go back to the sea and call the herd. Then the women come and—"

"Why do you need your skin, then? Can't you just bark at the water?"

“They wouldn’t hear me underwater.” She could see little flecks of salt on the egg whites, on the blue of the plate. “But I dip my skin in the water, and they can feel it, smell it, and they know that I’m calling them.”

“And what happens when the women come?”

“There’s a cave,” Faye whispered to her plate. “The herd will take me there, bear me on their backs like a queen. There’s a great big rock there, like a bed. I’ll lie down on it, and they’ll lay my skin on me, and some seaweed, and bathe me in seawater. It gives strength.”

“To the kids?”

Faye exhaled softly. “To the kids.”

Seamus paused. The rain pattered away against the windowpane, little taps on a tiny, distant drum. Faye shut her eyes in the deep quiet, listened and relaxed. It might not be the lap and crash of waves on the shore, but all waters run into the sea eventually, and that was comforting.

Seamus stood up. The wooden legs of his chair made a low keening noise as they scraped against the linoleum floor. “My tie is crumpled,” he told her.

Without speaking, Faye slipped up from her chair and came toward him. There was only a little crease on the knot, a little lump on the tongue. She smoothed them both, with as light a touch as she could manage.

He caught her hand as it passed over his tie pin, jerked it upwards so her eyes would follow. “You can go,” he told her, “but *only* if I go with you. I’ll be holding on to your skin.”

It was only on Saturday that Seamus had the time to go to the seaside. He kept the skin hidden all week, as he had for all the time they had known each other. Faye did not try to look for it; she had learned her lesson the first time, two months into their relationship.

She remembered it, and in perfect detail, though she did not want to. She remembered putting away Seamus's socks, spying a corner of familiar greyish leather behind the underwear she hated to touch. She remembered dropping the laundry basket and snatching the bundle up, clutching it to her chest against her pounding heart and scrambling out of the room with nothing on her feet or legs. She remembered being almost out the door before it flew open in her face and revealed those terrible black eyes like a shark's; Seamus had come home from work.

The tussle was the only thing lost somewhat in her mind. They had fought, oh yes, to rival a storm with his bellowing and her screaming and crying. She had only let go when he hit her so hard about the ears that her vision winked out and her land-sick knees gave out beneath her. Then—and this Faye remembered the most of all—he had held the skin above her head, unfurled like a long crooked flag, and threatened to tear it to shreds right then and there unless she did all he asked.

That had been his proposal.

They drove to the shore in the car Seamus had bought for Faye, as a wedding present for her to go shopping. It was old and American, with chipping blue paint and an engine that spluttered like a drowning man for the whole two-hour drive. Seamus drove the cliff-side roads—he had more practice—so Faye sat on the passenger side and

watched the hills and fields flash past in the brightening sky. Faye imagined the jutting rocks as dolphin fins and didn't stop until the car ground to a halt on the rocky shore.

Seamus knocked the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. "Bloody car," he said. "It's only meant to be a few from Dundee to here."

"Must be one of the parts," Faye offered. She stared out the window at the shore. Tongues of steely water lapped at the greenish rocks in steady beats, like breathing.

"Transmission, probably. We'll have to go down to Edinburgh for a new one after this is over." He paused; she felt his eyes against her cheek. "You ready?"

She nodded.

"Then let's go."

They got out of the car. Faye abandoned her shoes and traipsed down the hill, over the grass and into the sand. Halfway through she stopped, sank her toes deep in the ground and shut her eyes. There was wind today, not up to its usual Scottish strength but there all the same, brushing her hair onto her face and carrying the salt of the sea to her nose. She could feel her heart nearly tearing from her breast, so desperate it was for the wash of the sea, yet she remained as she was, eyes shut and yearning.

"Planning on getting a move on soon?"

Faye opened her eyes. There was Seamus in front of her, arms crossed over his chest. He was holding a roll of grey leather. The heart that strained nearly leapt from between her ribs.

"You've wasted enough time already. Just get to the water."

Faye ducked her head and went forward with him. It got progressively harder to navigate barefooted; soft sand gave way to smooth stones which gave way to jagged

rocks that could slice a body open. Seamus begrudgingly led her around those. Finally they got to the edge of the water; it tickled Faye's bare toes and glossed across Seamus's black business shoes. She looked at the water, then up into his eyes, and held out her trembling hands. "Please," she said.

Seamus considered her haughtily, and for a moment it seemed as though he would relent—his fingers loosened on her bundled skin, arms almost outstretching—and she could feel waves where her heart used to be crashing against her chest. But then whatever pity he had felt grew cold in his eyes, and he clutched the bundle all the tighter.

"They only need the skin, right?" he asked. "Then I can do it myself." And he unfolded the skin halfway into the sea.

Two, five, ten minutes passed with no sign. Faye felt the waves in her falter into her stomach. Maybe they caught his scent instead of hers. Maybe they were too far away to catch the scent at all. Maybe—this thought stung the most—they had forgotten her altogether, after five years away, and scent meant nothing. Seamus narrowed his eyes and yanked the skin back, and he was about to open his mouth when a great grey seal rose from the water.

Seamus scoffed. "That's it? Just one? I was expecting a whole crowd of the blubbering things."

The seal snorted, rearing its head. There was a faint white line near the seal's right cheek, the line of a familiar scar. Faye let out a small gasp.

Seamus ignored her, still sizing up the new arrival. "Still," he said, "I suppose you're big enough to get the job done."

The seal snorted again. It made a move as though it were about to stand, its skin turning paler, but Faye shook her head furiously behind Seamus's back until the seal lay back down and scuffled forward by a meter.

"Alright," Seamus said, facing the seal head-on. He pointed up at the sky and began to speak very slowly. "When the sun gets to here—" he pointed just above the horizon "—I want her back. You got it?"

Faye shuffled about behind him. Her foot brushed against a thick rock the size of a throw pillow.

"And don't think I won't know if you try to take her, alright? No sneaking around with the fish." His foot tapped against the gravel. "Grey shows up even in the darkest waters."

She bent down inch by inch and picked up the rock. It was only a little heavy in her hands, slippery at the bottom and sharp, but she did not wince or cry. She stood tall behind Seamus, steadying herself.

"In fact," Seamus continued, as though he had interrupted himself, "this is what we're going to do. You're going to call up another seal, yeah, and carry me with her. Those are *my* children and *my* wife you're holding, and I will—"

She swung. There was a soft *thunk* and Seamus crumpled to the sand. The rock fell beside his head, baring a splash of red against the grey. Faye let out a quiet scream at the sight of it, fearing she had killed him; she dropped to her knees by his side and extended a hand over his face. A few puffs of air ghosted over her palm and she slouched, exhaled one shaky breath.

Grains of sand whispered movement, and there was a rustle like that of cloth from the shore. Faye looked up in time to see the seal on the shore transform into a woman with her skin bundled in her hands, naked and proud with the scar gleaming pale against her dark cheek. Faye stood and spread her arms and the other selkie came running into the embrace.

The other selkie spoke first; her voice was low as the darkest waters, her language just as strange. “I knew you were alive. All the others thought you had been lost, and they tried to dissuade me.”

“I never stopped fighting either.” Faye brushed her thumb over the selkie’s scar. “You taught me as much.”

“But how did you convince him to come here? After so long?”

“I told him—” Faye stumbled, put a hand on her belly. “I told him I must be blessed.”

The other selkie’s eyes widened. Suddenly she lunged toward Seamus, and it was only for Faye’s arms that she did not escape. “I’ll kill him,” the selkie bellowed. “I’ll kill him for this, for what he’s done to you. This demands blood.”

“Blood is gotten on the stone. Death is not deserved.”

“It is within rights, by law. Within your rights.” She twisted about to look up at Faye. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

Faye shook her head. “It was not in me. Surely I am a fool to leave him alive, but if I kill him...it is too simple to kill him. But I can leave him alive, can I not? Alive, and without his prize,” she added, only a hint of bitterness in her voice. “It will pain him more than death.”

The other selkie shook her head. “You are no man’s prize. Men do not take prizes.”

“Some do,” Faye said, and nodded.

They broke apart. While the other selkie moved towards the shore, Faye went to Seamus and prised her skin from his fist. The first touch of skin against skin was not electric, nothing so jolting; it was familiar, warm in the same way the embrace had been. The last pains in her heart washed away, and the sky seemed to clear and brighten.

They would get through it, yes. They would go home to their sisters and mothers, who would kiss and embrace them and cry for joy of Faye’s return. They would have a home again together, their quiet cove with the dried kelp curtains. They would go to the wise ones about what grew in Faye’s belly, find a way to fix it. She would give those things away before killing them, but she would not, could not keep them. She would not keep what did not belong to her.

Faye took her skin and went out to the water. The two women looked at each other and put on their skins; they splashed into the sea on wide gray fins. The wash of the sea kissed their skins, softly, breathing with them into the deep.

SIGH JUST SO

Brokeback, broken back and
bare bones on the backseat,
black scratch mattress played
and splayed legs draped around the seat.
I wish I smoked.
Don't make me look for
whatever it is you lost on the floor, your
keys or wallet or heart-stitched sleeve,
because my left eye's astigmatic
and my right eye's leaking salt.
I don't want to look at you,
don't want what's in your eyes
to make me feel any more guilty.
Whatever heat we had is humidity
on your windows, two drops of water
crawling down the backseat window,
jaundiced by the streetlight until
they hit the sill. It's not how it was before,
even if I don't remember what "it" was.
My ribs didn't used to be an iron vise
around a steel drum; my teeth
weren't always a grain mill.
I used to want you to stay, but
now don't use me too long,
don't squeeze my hand,
don't press me for a goodnight kiss.
Because I know once your kiss was sweet,
but it crystallized sour in my mouth
into that stupid candy you like,
and I just want to spit you out.

HOMEBOY

In this house where we used to live
and sometimes I think we still do—
in little patches of perfume littering the places you've been—
 and sometimes your face materializes in shower steam—
in soft exasperated sighs exhaled from oaken floorboards—
 and I continue to load my laundry wrong—
in the shrillness of the kettle steam singing time for tea—
 and the cup you used sitting empty by your chair—
in your herbs hanging green from their patio pots—
 and nearby the lilies I left you like white stars—
even in your side of the bed which is warm when I
wake up, wrinkled into your silhouette—
 and your halo of silk and cedar hardly compares—
and I should know my mind is running away with—
 the hopeless hope of holding you close—
with the thought of you being here again
in this house where we used to live—

THINGS TO NEVER BRING UP DURING CONFESSION

—forgive me Father for I have not
set foot in a church in five years
and I do not count Easter services
and I have not missed the whispers
of guilt while my ass falls asleep
on the wood hard pew and my knees
grow sore on the stone cold tiles
but here I am indeed and I have not
got the time to tell you everything
but you know as well as I that I
have sinned without intent to quit
the rich food that I eat and I have
had a lot of sex like five times
on a Sunday more than once and
even though not all my orgasms
were like earthquakes or more
accurately like tsunamis I have
thoroughly enjoyed it all and on top
of all that it turns out that I am into
some really kinky shit, like fucking
just one man in those five years which
I guess is the same to you as fifty
considering how my sex is lifted
from Lilith and Eve and Jezebel
and even Mary Magdalene don't
start me on how she's the only one
canonized of the lot and even then
still called a slut from no textual fact
if the text brings me nothing but guilt
and shame for possessing my lot this
pair of breasts and a vagina and
an unmutilated clitoris how is it a wonder
that I would rather bear my sex proudly
because I am full of milk and honey
and sometimes lust and gluttony
and whatever sin you call it that
I only got confirmed so I could have
a cathedral wedding at a discount
god have mercy it is worth more to me
to be kind and enjoy my living
than idle away in god's ivory tower
thinking how horrible the world really is
and how miserable I must be to match it
so Father if you please give me my

prescribed number of Hail Marys
and send me on my way I have
three sets of rosaries in my drawer
collecting dust and praise
be, hallelujah, amen—

CHANGE OF SCENERY

I am so used to looking for a man,
for a strong scruffy jaw and oak-thick arms,
a replacement of a father, a protector
and provider, pine needle fingers
to stick and twist forever in my long hair
—oh, no other option for good Catholic girls—
But between the trees I have seen
glimpses of a meadow with bright flowers,
with soft speech and a softer touch,
with the promise of hands like my own to hold
outside the bounds of this forest cathedral
—oh, a dream of wearing flowers in my hair!—

AFTERCARE

It is likely not love but
it is at least nice of you
to pour me some water
and put ice in the glass
now sweating on the table
(too hot in this room for
it and me, two fragile things)

—And it isn't love that you
had a cold towel prepared
to press gently against the hot
dew of sweat on my bare flesh
(the damp patches of sheet
below me be damned, clearly)

—And it was certainly not love
when you used the dark part
of your voice to touch me and
make me sweat in the first place
(at least there's some sarcasm when
we call our doings a cardinal sin)

—And it won't be love two hours later
when we finally get up and you laugh
at my stumbling and make dumb jokes
when you see I put my shirt on backwards
(of course I will exhale in that way where
I'm not quite laughing but it's close enough)

—And if love is made of sweeping gestures
then I should be moving the moon for you
to pay back your hundred little favors
and until then I still can't call this love
(but you gave me the last slice of pizza
and that at least is terribly polite)

WE EAT

Year 1.

This theater is too full of everyone else
for anything to be just us, this movie
might be one of the dumbest things I see
in my life, and our friends will not shut up

but still

I lean over and confess
my like for you
over a butter-drenched
bucket of popcorn

Year 3.

Nobody orders from inside a Wendy's
except us, like we could afford to eat nicer,
and I don't mind buying for you
or both our chicken nugget combos

but still

though I ask for one
you find a reason
to give me half
your fries

Year 5.

Sometimes we talk about steak,
having a real anniversary dinner instead
of holing up in your bed all weekend
and easing our mutual starvation

but still

ramen is quick
and mostly filling
and there's always
pizza delivery

Year 7.

My tater tot carton is dripping clear grease,
I feel like I should eat my hand sanitizer
before we try holding hands again, and
our small intestines will never forgive us

but still

if I'm sitting in
a Sonic drive-in
I'm just glad
it's with you

CALL QUARTERS

“With my left hand I summon thee. With this bell I command thee to appear before me.”

The bell tinkled once, twice, thrice; the silver rings of sound rebounded against the bathroom tile and settled in the worn treads of the towels. Adelaide held her breath and waited.

And waited. And *waited*. The candles around her continued their slow burn, and another blob of coal-colored wax plopped onto the tile next to her. No change in the air, no hint of sulfur. She sat in the circle of bull-blood runes until she heard the heater kick on outside her bathroom door.

“This is stupid,” she muttered. “I’m taking a bath.”

She stood up and stepped out of the circle, careful not to get drying blood on her bare feet. The candles remained lit; stubby as they were, they would go out in ten, maybe fifteen minutes. As she undressed she thought about the receipts from WitchMart from when she had bought all of the summoning gear, how she couldn’t return any of it now. What a waste of money, she thought, pulling her shirt over her head. Better than spending it on another textbook—her parents told her never to rent, that she would need those books later when she found a job—but even so it was over fifty dollars down the drain, most of it on blood she would never use again.

At least the bath bomb she got for Yule would get some use. Thank heaven for gift cards and an indifferent boyfriend.

After the shirt came the bra, then the jeans and the underwear. Addy left the pile in front of the tub and stepped in, grabbing a callus shaver off from the plastic drawer set by the towel rack: first things first was a pedicure. The black plastic was peeling off and the blade probably needed changing, but it was what she had, and a cheaper purchase than a cheese-grater-style thing or a pumice stone.

It was like putting a vegetable peeler against her heel, to much the same effect, except it was pieces of her brown skin coming off her heel instead of carrot shavings. Abby wasn't exactly concentrating. All the thoughts she had been suppressing during the summoning rituals came flooding back to her. First was homework. Well, if you could call home-schooled, self-motivated research without deadlines "homework." She had to practice her transmutation, parse Latin and Greek, read up on alchemical theory, and then...

The blade slipped too deeply into her skin. Addy hissed and dropped the razor into the tub. A bead of blood bloomed on her heel, swelled, and dropped like a cherry onto the tub floor. She pressed her hand to her heel and lifted it onto the edge of the tub, trying to staunch the flow. "Oh, come fucking *on!*"

It wasn't the pain. She'd had worse times with papercuts. But on top of wasting her time, her money trying to summon this thing—fifty dollars for a bucket of bull blood!—on top of getting nothing out of it except feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy coozing up in her stomach, when at last she took a break, she bled. Like the time she tried going to a play opening to find the entire cast had come down with pox, or the time that Paralysis Poison spill got cleaned up just in time for all of her afternoon

labs. It was like someone had put a permanent Evil Eye on her ever since she got to university, some kind of hex that turned everything she wanted into acid in her throat.

Addy pulled her hand away. There was blood all across her palm, between her fingers, sinking into the whorls of her fingerprints, creeping under her nails. She started to wipe it away on her thigh, but stopped. A very stupid, very petulant, very ineffective train of thought was flickering in her mind like yarn in front of a cat.

So she took it. Dabbing a little more blood on her index finger, she drew a straight line across her upper left thigh. Then another line, then a curve, then a few dashes and dots—the first summoning rune.

The second rune she drew on her right thigh, beginning to recite. “I call on thee, O Magorkhanan, lord of shades and shifting things and crusty assholes who never answer when called.”

The third rune went on her left arm. “By thy name of unpronounceable, overcomplicated names I call on thee!”

The fourth rune involved three dots, and it went on her right arm. “I seek an audience with thee, O Most Massive of Douche Canoes, for the tenth” —she jabbed a dot onto her arm—“fucking” —jab— “time” —*jab*— “in a row.”

The last rune, the protective circle, went on her stomach. “Let it be known I pay the price in blood, my own blood, even, since thou art the most absolute shit.”

She threw her hands up. “By my right hand I summon thee!” she cried, and kicked the faucet, which gave off a dull *clunk*. “With this bell I command thee to appear before me!”

“Lord Magorkhanan isn’t here at the moment, but I can take a message.”

Addy swore violently and twisted in the tub, trying to hide but only succeeded in knocking her head against the edge of the tub. When she looked up from the rim, there was a very sharply-dressed woman standing there. Well, not really a woman; she looked eighteen at the most, and the short black skirt made her look younger. And her face—dark plaited hair, bright red lips, and a third eye tattooed white against her brown forehead.

Addy couldn't help but stutter a little. "Where the—the hell did you come from?"

The woman sighed. "You called, miss. Or, rather, you called my boss, left a rude message, and since he's out on lunch, I'm responsible for answering his messages. So, here I am."

"I called, like, ten times earlier today."

"Did you now?" She turned back and looked at the runes on the floor, at the black candles and the bell, and let out a little hum of amusement. "Sorry, miss, but bull's blood is entirely the wrong ingredient."

Addy furrowed her brow. "But even the Book of Solomon—"

"Oh, you were using Solomon? He had a habit of doing that, changing the kind of blood for summoning rituals so that the wrong people wouldn't be able to use the spells." The woman chuckled. "Of course, he died before he could tell anyone the *right* blood to use, and then the whole deal-making industry turned into the first law firm, and passing around the calling card for so long gave all of us the worst problem getting business. On top of hundreds of years of demon hunts and sub-human legal status," she muttered, "but who's counting that?"

There was a small *pop* and a yellow legal pad and a pen appeared in the woman's hand. "Anyway, we're talking about you, not your textbook authors. What is the purpose of your call?"

Addy blinked. "I wanted to make a deal."

The woman started to write on her pad. "And the nature of this deal?"

"Knowledge," she said. "About alchemy."

"Just alchemy, then? Any subsections you want to focus on, or are we just talking knowledge of all alchemy?"

"What's your name?" Addy blurted.

The woman looked up, opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "Call me Charlotte."

"Charlotte?"

"Or just Char. The pun is pretty obvious, don't you think?"

"Oh." Addy laughed a little. "I get it. I'm Addy, by the way."

"So," Char went on, "about your deal?"

"Just regular alchemy, I guess," she replied, feeling less certain the longer she looked at Char. "Nothing special."

"And what are you willing to trade for this knowledge?"

"Isn't it standard to give up your soul, or...?"

Char smiled like she was swallowing a secret. "No, that method is a little outdated. Or, rather, it's an extreme method reserved for our more...enthusiastic customers. Debit card will be fine, if you're trading money."

Addy nodded, then shook her head and said, "I don't know."

“Well, I suppose you could work out payment later.” Char pursed her lips and scribbled some more things down. “Now, I can draw up a preliminary contract in the meantime, until you work out your payment, but—”

“No, I mean, wait.”

They looked up at each other for a moment. Addy realized she had stretched an arm out toward Char and retracted it. “I just don’t know,” Addy said. “Everything is happening so much. Can we talk about it?”

Char huffed and looked at her watch. “I suppose, for a little bit.” She found the closest wall by the front of the tub and leaned against it. “What about the deal do you not understand?”

Addy’s ears prickled red like they usually did when she was embarrassed. “I understand it just fine,” she said.

“Mhm.” Char nodded at Addy’s bloody foot. “How’d that happen? That wasn’t just to get my attention, was it?”

“No,” Addy said, “no, god no. I was trying to shave off my calluses and cut too deep. It doesn’t hurt,” she added quickly. “It just won’t stop bleeding. And I can’t get out of this tub without getting blood all over the tile.”

“Why’d you draw the runes on yourself, though?”

“I was bored, partially. Mostly angry about being ignored by your boss. I didn’t think it would work.”

“And now you have me,” Char said.

Addy let out a little breath. “Yeah,” she said.

They were quiet for a while. Addy looked at her foot and not at Char's long legs. They were very nice legs, but they were girls' legs. Not that she didn't like girls, or that she wasn't attracted to girls, or she wasn't at least a little attracted to Char, but she had a boyfriend, for a start, and she had to be polite. This was a business meeting, in a way.

She subsequently realized that she was conducting this business meeting in the nude and blushed to the roots of her hair.

"So," Char said, "if you understand the deal, and the terms of it, why hesitate?"

Addy mumbled something affirmative and tried to curl into a less exposed position.

"I mean, I assume it's because your grades are lower than you need them to be. Is it a core education class, or...?"

"I'm homeschooled," Addy said. "But I take assessment tests when I can get them. And on those I do great, actually. In the ninety-fifth percentile."

Char's face contorted into what seemed to be a mixture of confusion and disbelief. "Then why are you calling me? My boss, I mean."

"I don't know."

"If you're looking to be the best alchemist who ever lived, you'd have to change your wording."

Addy shook her head. "That's not what I want."

"Then why ask for knowledge?"

"I don't know!" Addy said, curling even more into herself. That feeling of embarrassment was settling back into her stomach like bad cafeteria food, and worse, she was babbling. "All I know is that my parents expect me to be an alchemist, because

they're both alchemists, and their parents were, well, not alchemists, but servants to an alchemist and they actually wound up making all of his stuff for him. But they've wanted me to be an alchemist since I started playing with my brother's cauldron sets, just like they want me, expect me, to get married to the guy I've been dating since high school, and everything I've ever done has been leading up to this point but I don't know what the fuck I want out of my life because I've never felt like I had one except what they gave me and I'm *so* sorry I didn't mean to swear."

Char stepped away from the wall, toward the tub by a foot or two. There seemed to be a glimmer of concern peeking from under the sharp eyeliner, but nothing came of it except a few soothing *shhs*. "Breathe. I don't mind the swearing if it lets off steam. Stress is awful for your health."

Addy shook her head. "It's the only thing I *can* do, except study."

Char shrugged. "Try yoga?"

"And the worst part of it is that yeah, I'm good at alchemy, but I don't like it,"

Addy went on. "I don't love it. I don't want to be stuck in it as a career."

"So find what you do love. Join a club, find a hobby, study something else."

"But what if it turns to shit, like everything else I've tried doing for myself, like this pedicure? And how do you know what you want to do when all you've ever done is what everyone *else* wanted you to do?"

They were quiet again. Addy felt herself open up a little, felt her muscles relax and her uninjured foot touch the tub wall. Her other heel, it seemed, had stopped bleeding, at least for a moment.

"Demon studies."

Char looked up. “Excuse me?”

“I read a book on demon studies last year that I really liked. Maybe I’ll do more of that.”

“That’s a good place to start,” Char said.

“Or I could dye my hair.”

Char nodded, and the corner of her mouth turned up into the faintest smile. “Pink would look really good against your skin, I think. Or silver.”

Addy smiled back and touched her hair self-consciously. “You think so?”

“Of course. Maybe after you decide on a deal, and I can get time off from work, I’ll help you pick a color.”

“Well...”

Char’s smile vanished. “Well what?”

Addy closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled before talking. “Look, I know I said I wanted a deal, but after talking it out with you, I don’t. All it’ll do is make me poor, if I give you money, or fuck me up some other way. And for something that I don’t even need? It’s not worth it. Maybe I’ll really dye my hair. Grow a fro.” She laughed.

Char sighed and crossed her arms. “I’m glad you figured that out. Except now I’ve wasted, what, a half hour of company time trying to talk you into a deal with me and—”

“Wait, a deal with you? Not your boss?”

“Of *course*,” Char said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “How else am I supposed to get up in the world, take calls for my asshole boss for all of

eternity?” Her eyes widened and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “I just called my boss an asshole.”

Addy laughed as good-naturedly as possible. Char chuckled too before clearing her throat. “So, I’ve lost the deal. Anything else before I’m dismissed?”

“Would you. Um.”

Char raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“You know I said that I have a boyfriend?” Addy said. “Well, he never calls me or texts me unless I do first, and he never listens to me when I talk about stuff like my parents and school, and I’ve been thinking of kicking him to the curb for ages, and I guess I’m wondering if I do, if we could go out. For coffee. Some time. When you’re free. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“I—well.” Char fiddled with her braid, bit her bottom lip. Then she looked up as bright as hellfire. “Sure. When I’m free. And when you’re free. Just because I’m a demon doesn’t mean I don’t have a system of ethics.”

“I never thought you were unethical,” Addy said.

“And,” Char went on, “if it makes you feel any better, I won’t let the coffee date turn to sh—go badly. Promise. And no deal involved, either.”

Addy grinned. “Great. Thank you.”

“Oh, and one last thing.” Char scribbled something onto the notepad, tore off the page and folded it, and handed the paper to Addy. “Call me next time, to set up coffee.”

Addy opened the paper and scanned it. “You have a cellphone?”

“Of course,” Char said, the corner of her mouth curling upward. “It’s not the dark ages anymore, you know.”

A TYPICAL GIRL

She is just like any other girl—
 bright blonde and blue eyes
 picturesque in a black mascara frame
 and cheeks painted copper with freckles;
 sporting shorts and Greek letters
 and golden dimples when she smiles
—yes, just like any other girl
if any other girl had her looks
and her name and her mind in one.

DEAR PAPI

I remember on your birthday you would ask
for churros, not cake, and Mama would serve
them hot to you, along with a bottle of Sam Adams—
not cold, but warming amber in your hand. You let me try
some once—I was ten—and you laughed when
I made a face. Then you hugged me close—
your beard still had sugar in it—and called me *niña*.
Was that the last time I heard you laugh, heard
your voice like the widest pipe on a church organ?

Twenty-five years have gone since then,
and now—how I'm doing? Well,
we missed you at my wedding—
and I know he's at work now, but
he would like to be here; he did save the seat
next to Mama for you at the wedding mass.
I have roughly thirty kids at public school
that I teach for—well, I won't complain.
The class next door are positively wild
in comparison to my kids; one time
some little girl threw her open juice box,
hit her teacher square in the back, apparently
just because she could. *¡Dios mío!*
Who taught her how to do such a thing?
And is it good that I feel bad for her?

And I have my own *niña* to hold, Maria;
she has her papa's thick, coarse hair
and your fondness for warm churros.
She's not a troublemaker yet, and I hope
she won't be, but she's got time.
Regardless, she'll be something
good when she's grown, I think.
I hope that you can see her when we visit
your grave each year, see her gentle touch
when she puts her chubby fingers to your name.
And Mama still makes you marigold garlands;
she grows them, all bright yellow and orange
in the garden. She said last year she heard you
laughing, like you were right behind her as she lay
the flowers on your stone. Is it wrong for me
to be jealous that my Maria won't know
what your laugh sounds like?

SOMNIA

Sometimes I imagine sleep
wears a woman's form, fitted
in a night-long dress, and her
dawn-dark hair netted with stars.
I imagine she slinks into my room
through the window, softly,
maybe with a smile on her face
as she slips into the nearest chair
and waits until I least expect it
to dissolve in my eyes and ears.

FAUNA

I found her wild in the woods and bowed
before a mirrored spring. Her head reflected
mine, bent low as she drank, her face
by tangled white-blond hair obscured;
her hands like golden autumn leaves cupped
the flowing water and trailed the sleeves
of her fur cape in their wake. I could have
watched her longer, perhaps even forever
bewitched, but for the sudden snap of a twig.
She startled violently like a storm-snared
birch, and looked up, it seemed, from fear;
and this is when at last she caught me
staring, and I could see her face.
Against the autumn gilded in her skin,
her eyes brightened blue like summer sky,
then blackened, all pupil, reflecting
in each eye the pool and my prying gaze.
But just as I felt the first swoop of guilt
she turned on her heels, then on four gold hooves
where hands and feet had been, a white deer
where she had stood. And so she fled;
the fur cape lay forgotten by the spring,
one sleeve sliding slowly down the bank,
until I caught it in my hands.
And so I lost her as I had found her, wild,
and I have wandered the woods as wildly
with her cape in hand, to return to her.

SOMETHING ABOUT A CROW

Walking about campus,
and for a moment I caught
sight of a singular crow
alighting on a Bradford pear,
glossy black against white
and pink as though she belonged.
And I was inclined to laugh
until I noticed the sky looming
thick with steel-dark clouds,
the kind of atmosphere expected
of a haunted house or
another portent of disaster.
And so the crow cawed,
laughing at me, my presumptions,
my audacity to judge nature.
For who is stranger here,
a crow on a blooming tree,
or the tree amid a storm?

BOTTLE BLONDE

Well, what choice did I have, really? It was a Monday, the bus broke down almost as soon as I set foot on it, and I had a total of twenty minutes to get on campus for my exam. Walking would take thirty. Car was in the shop. God knows how long it would have been to wait for a replacement bus.

But then there she was. Piped up from the back of the bus, “Look, my car seats six. Anyone need a ride?”

Of course I took her up on the offer. What was my other option, flunk my exam? Twenty percent of my grade down the drain, in a class where I was barely scraping a C—desperate times call for desperate measures, and all that.

So five other girls and I followed her off the bus. God, but I was the sore thumb sticking out of the pack. It was the uniform: all in shades of bottle blonde, bright oversized sweatshirts with various Greek letters slapped onto them. Three of them were wearing shorts in the middle of winter. Then there was me, with my red hightops and faux-leather jacket, and a fifteen-pound bag slung over my back making me look like a turtle. It was pretty clear who was coming along for kicks and giggles, and who actually needed to go to school that day.

We threw our bags in the trunk and crammed into her car. Turns out, when this girl said her car could fit six people, she meant it could fit four people sitting in the seats, and two inanimate bodies lying on top of the backseat passengers, something I imagine she had learned through experience. I was the last person to get in—something about

being polite and chivalric, even though I am also a girl—so I just kind of clambered in and landed on a lap.

“Sorry,” I said, and actually was, because nobody, especially me, likes having their personal space invaded even by necessity.

“It’s alright,” she replied, smiling, acknowledging the awkwardness.

I smiled back and turned around. “Thanks for the ride,” I said to the girl in the driver’s seat. My fellow passengers chimed in similar thank-yous.

“No problem,” said Driver girl. She started the car with a hum and pulled out of her space. Some barely audible pop station floated out of the side speakers.

Once we had left the lot, the girl in the passenger seat turned in her seat toward the one girl I wasn’t sitting on. “So um,” she said, trying to be confidential, “did Jess get home okay last night?”

In that moment several things occurred simultaneously. The first was an almost immediate litany of “don’t fart”. The second was a realization that my usual tactic of looking at my phone to seem less intrusive wouldn’t really work when I was sitting on someone in a cramped car, and was probably rude anyway. And third was a certainty that, god help me, she was about to launch into a tale of drunken weekend antics. I braced myself on all fronts.

The girl next to me nodded emphatically. “We drove her home when we found her, she passed out on our couch.”

“Oh thank god,” said Girl One, sounding genuinely relieved. “I was afraid she was actually going to try to drive. I couldn’t get her keys from her.”

“Yeah, Lindsey took them from her when we picked her up, no trouble. Probably because she was pretty far along at that point.” Girl Two’s face wrinkled in almost-disgust, mostly disapproval. “Why does she keep doing that?”

“Because of her—” Girl One stopped and glanced at me. I pretended to answer a text, and she continued haltingly, “—her, um, home stuff. You know. But it’s not good. This is, like, the third time this month.”

“Have you talked to her?”

“We’re trying to set up a whole big thing, but it’s just difficult with everyone’s schedules, you know?” Girl One sighed, like a balloon deflating. I glanced up from my phone to look at her, just for a second. Her brow was a little furrowed, nothing too dramatic, but far more genuine than I expected. And then she really surprised me when she said, “I wish she would stop.”

“Yeah,” Girl Two said. They sounded the same: tired, sad, some combination of the two.

Then Driver Girl piped up, loudly; clearly she had been listening too. “So! Does one of y’all have Dr. Richards for English lit? Please tell me I’m not the only one.”

“I’ve got him at, like, ten today,” said the girl I was sitting on.

“Has he given y’all papers back yet? Because it’s been, like, two weeks, and he said one at most.”

“We haven’t gotten anything back either.”

“*Uuuggghh*,” said Driver Girl. “I hate this so much. I just want to know what my grade is before midterms so I know how hard I need to study.”

What wording, I thought. Not if, but how hard, which means you actually study?

“I had him for my intro honors class,” I said, out loud, and not really looking up from my phone.

“Really?” said Driver Girl.

“Yeah, he’s really bad about papers. But it’s not as bad as Llewellington, if you ever get her, she takes forever and a day to grade papers. It’s awful.”

“What are his tests like?” asked Seat Girl.

“Um. Provided he hasn’t changed his format, not bad? As long as you paid attention in class you’re basically guaranteed to get an A.”

“Perfect,” said Driver Girl. I perceived a nod of agreement from Seat Girl.

“He does get kinda difficult later in the semester, though. Like, if he’s still having you do final papers, that’ll be the toughest thing you do in the class, because it’s supposed to be research. But unless you’re going for an English degree you should be done after this class, so.”

“Yep, and then more calculus,” said Seat Girl, and I could practically hear her eyes rolling.

“So you’re an English major?” Driver Girl asked.

I finally looked up. We were at the last stoplight before turning onto campus. I could see Driver Girl’s eyes in the rearview mirror. They were brown and fringed with long dark lashes that probably had mascara on them. I could even spot a little bit of chocolate eyeliner. But there was nothing inherently fussy about her makeup; no absurd amounts of blush or eyeshadow or even lipstick. I even thought I saw a smudge of undereye circle, something her concealer must have missed with her concealer brush.

And I wondered for a moment.

Then I realized she had been talking to me directly. “Oh, yeah,” I said, feeling a lot like the time I ran into a post while reading and walking.

“What’s it like?”

“Oh,” I said, still looking at her mirror eyes, “it’s kinda dense sometimes. Like, when I took medieval lit, we spent almost a month on English folklore. Fairies, goblins, all this obscure stuff.” I stopped myself, thankfully, from adding how Driver Girl looked like the spitting image of Morgan le Fay, save for the blonde hair.

Driver Girl nodded; the mirror eyes blinked once and then disappeared. “Still, there’s gotta be something about it you like.”

“Well, Sylvia Plath is pretty great.”

Everyone else in the car hummed assent.

We had made it into the heart of campus. Driver Girl pulled into one of the lots behind the sorority houses. “Technically this is service only, but nobody cares,” she told me, when she saw my concerned expression in the rearview. “They only tell you to move if you’re blocking the way in.”

So we parked, piled out of the car as awkwardly as we had piled in. I thanked Driver Girl on the way out; she opened the trunk and I grabbed my bag, then thanked her again for the ride. She smiled, big enough that her eyes crinkled. “Totally welcome,” she said.

We all stood there a little too long. I pulled my phone out to check the time and nearly swore. “Oh god, I’ve got a test in a half hour, so.”

“Yeah, no, go do that!” said Driver Girl. Everyone else took the same cue to split, spouting more thank-yous as they went along. Driver Girl stood by her car, locking

everything up and waving at everyone as we went our separate ways. The rest of the day, test included, went well after that.

This morning, about three months after that car ride, I got on the bus for class. I had my headphones in, listening to—well, you’ve probably never heard of them, and it isn’t important anyway. And I was holding my collection of Sylvia Plath, because I wanted to review one of her poems before class. Said good morning to the bus driver, quietly, grabbed a seat near the back out of habit, and opened up my book.

Less than two minutes in, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whipped my head around to see Driver Girl’s bright brown eyes looking straight at me and only jumped a little. I waited for the moment of recognition on her part, the moment when her eyes would widen and she would remember the lone girl in hightops who functionally hitchhiked with her to class. But the moment never came. She just mouthed something I couldn’t hear through my headphones.

So I took them out. “Sorry, say again?”

“Is that any good?” asked Driver Girl, nodding toward my book.

I looked at the book like it was a newborn platypus shoved into my hands. “I think so, yeah. Got free time?”

“God, I wish,” she laughed. “But I am taking a women and lit class next semester and I’m pretty sure she’s on the list.”

“She is in fact on the list! That’s the class I’m in right now.”

Driver Girl leaned forward and rested her arms on the back of my seat. “What’s it like?” she asked. “It’s not boring, is it?”

“Dense, maybe? But I don’t think it’s boring.” I too readjusted in my seat, trying not to crane my neck so much. I also got the chance to comprehend her look for the day; like the last time we met, there was no dramatic makeup, and her blonde hair, the roots of which were now showing brown, was pulled back in a high ponytail.

“It’s just, I had to read *The Bell Jar* in high school, right, and all we ever talked about was how sad she was, and how bad suicide is, like she was a beat-up puppy in a PETA commercial. And of course it’s awful she committed suicide, but I absolutely hate how we had to talk about her. I don’t want to sit through another class where, like, probably the most influential female author suffering from depression just becomes the object of everyone’s pity party instead of getting treated with respect. And I’d love to hear something about Zelda Fitzgerald, because that whole situation...”

She paused. I realized that my mouth had fallen open listening to her and I immediately shut it. She laughed nervously and put her hand near her mouth. “Sorry if I’m boring you or anything. I was just hoping—”

“No! No-no,” I said hastily, “you’re fine. I just—I don’t usually get into literary gender politics this early in the morning. And I haven’t had enough coffee.” I faked a yawn for emphasis.

Driver Girl laughed again. “Oh, I know that feeling.”

“But your high school sounds terrible. Just *The Bell Jar*? None of her poetry? Because you’re missing out on a lot of good work...”

We talked that way for the rest of the bus ride, about ten minutes altogether. When the stop onto campus started to come up she stopped in the middle of explaining why F. Scott Fitzgerald was a terrible person and probably a plagiarist—which I had

never heard about—and asked me for my number. “It’s so nice to find someone smart to talk to,” she said as she handed me her phone. “Or, well, someone who knows what I’m talking about, really.”

I unlocked my phone, pulled up my contacts, and handed it to her with a nod.

“Yeah, this has been...really fun. Are you not already an English major?”

“I’m thinking about it? I’m in journalism right now, gender studies minor, but English sounds like a lot of fun. Especially if everyone’s as up on their stuff as you.”

We finished typing and swapped phones just as the bus pulled to a stop. Our pinkies brushed and I felt the little snap of static electricity against my nail. I tried not to jump or wince too visibly, more surprised than actually hurt.

Driver Girl chuckled. “Sorry. Oh, and I’m Laura, when you look in your phone. I’ll text you later to make sure?”

“Yeah, do. I’m Rachel.”

We stood up and walked off the bus, her behind me. Outside the air-conditioned bus interior it was bright gray, the eight-thirty sun trying to push itself through the coming afternoon’s rainclouds. She pulled a huge pair of aviators out of her purse and put them on. “Well, it’s nice to meet you. And I’ll text you later!”

I waved at her, starting to walk away. “See you around!”

“Yeah! Bye!” Laura flounced about and went on her way, probably toward the journalism building, her blonde ponytail swinging cheerfully in her wake. What choice did I have, really, except to watch her go?

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