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Bones I Found in the Garden

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Bones I Found in the Garden

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY


Alena Indigo Anne Sullivan

2018

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Alena Indigo Anne Sullivan entitled *Bones I Found in the Garden* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A Johnston', written over a horizontal line.

Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JP Kelly', written over a horizontal line.

Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justin Tussing', written over a horizontal line.

Director

Accepted

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AM Tuchinsky', written over a horizontal line.

Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Adam-Max Tuchinsky

Abstract

This collection is a volume of small, intimate moments portrayed in both poetry and prose. Rather than grand, operatic plots telling convoluted stories, this work speaks of the magic in simple things, looking in at personal (and often difficult) moments—the process of finding the beauty in ugly things, finding the crumbs of human emotion that slip through the cracks—lending them the attention they are due but often fail to receive. This collection digs up potsherds of childhood trauma, bones of old romances, and ghosts of things that will never be, all presented to the reader through the lens of fantasy. The collection is broken up into three parts, each with a major theme: *The Tanglewood and the Void*, pieces that draw from fairy tales, science fiction, and fantasy; *The House and the Hospital*, pieces that focus on identity and processing trauma; and *The Garden and the Rain*, pieces that focus on interpersonal intimacy and transformation.

Acknowledgements

I have been a writer since my very first days—a visual artist too, really—so I must, of course, begin by thanking my parents for supporting and encouraging my creativity at every turn. They gave me support financially, verbally, and emotionally—I didn't realize until I came to Stonecoast how rare it is for someone in the creative arts to have a completely open relationship with their family, and I am so grateful that I was raised by people who loved me and taught me to love myself—taught me to find myself, taught me to *look* for myself.

My father taught me to paint, taught me how to defend myself, taught me that music is always better if it can call people to dance or sing along. He taught me that there is no way to dance or sing badly if you are moved by the spirit inside you. My mother taught me a kind of strength that women were told for centuries that we were not allowed to have, taught me how to look for magic in the everyday world, and spent a decade homeschooling me. Both my parents taught me that there is nothing more important than finding my gifts and using them—to help those around me, to honor the gods who gave them to me, and to give myself the peace that you can only really find by doing what you are meant to do. They gave me a loving home in a place straight out of fairy tales, a place where I was safe in ways that I have grown to know that most children are not safe. They raised me to dance around fires, to dance to drums, to find the drum within myself when there are none to lead me. My father taught me the mysteries of the stars; my mother taught me the secrets of growing green things. They encouraged my every curiosity and provided me everything I needed. Most importantly, they have encouraged, praised, and

supported my writing at every turn—both by reading it and by providing for me on a practical level for so long. Thank you so much, Mom and Dad.

I cannot acknowledge my Grandmother enough. She has been my secret confidante since I was a child, telling me stories and coaxing stories and plans out of me when we lay in bed at night. She raised me to always, *always* feed those who come to your table. She raised me to know the important things in the world—that a lady never leaves the house without lipstick (but will usually manage to somehow lose at least one half of every pair of earrings she owns), how to cook a good baked ziti, and how to balance a checkbook. She is smart as a whip, good to the core, and the best friend I have ever had or will have. She is on my side every day of my life, and I could not have begun to get this far without her. Thank you, Gram, for everything.

My other grandmother was a woman I hardly got to know—partly because I was just a young teenager when she died and partly because her husband was a hard man who grew harder with the years and he simply didn't let her come see us very often. However, I know that she managed to raise my father to be a good, decent, honorable man despite having no male example in his household. I will never know exactly why she chose to stay with a man like my grandfather, but with every new story my father tells me of her during his childhood, Dolores Sullivan becomes more and more a symbol of warmth, gentleness, and kindness in the face of adversity. Thank you, Granny D, for making me the girl whose dad everyone is jealous of.

My boyfriend Bruce is a man who defies description, defies being made small by painting him with weak adjectives rather than anecdote. He is a man who, without question, without complaint, has cared for me as an invalid from the easiest days where I

am almost myself to the days with humiliating bodily failures. He has been my marvelous Prince Charming in the most feminist and wonderful kind of way for about ten years now, and I could not be luckier or more grateful for his love. He is the smartest man I have ever met *and* the kindest, and I could not write what I do without such a miraculous partner to write about. He makes me feel safe. He keeps the sleep paralysis away. He reads everything I write, helps me make it better, and somehow manages to make me feel both incredibly clever and incredibly beautiful in his eyes. I love him more than I love words, and that's quite a lot.

I come now to my late godmother, Kathryn Ann Fernquist Hinds. She was a small and mighty woman of many skills. She taught me, in turn, many of *my* skills, and she was also the woman who handed me my first Tamora Pierce novel. That novel sent me to Alpha, a young writers' camp where Tamora taught, and an Alpha alumnus sent me to Stonecoast many years later. Without Kathryn, I would not be at this school, would not have dared to look at my completed BA in Anthropology and say, "No, this isn't what I want," and would likely not be a writer now. It is one of my greatest regrets that she will not be here to read my first book. She was a woman beyond compare who seems to defy proper description more with every attempt. She dedicated books on Amazons and unicorns to me—to me, by *name*, showing me that I was special and that she believed in me in a way that I can still take down from the shelf and look at every time I miss her. She was 4'11" and bigger on the inside, full of cats and tea and rainstorms, and this thesis is dedicated to her. Kathryn, I will never stop holding a place in my heart for you, I will never stop being your daughter on the inside, and I will think of you every time I sit down to write for the rest of my life.

And then there is my sister, Ariel. She has been so kind as to do such enormous things as lend me her suffering when I need it to write with and get me addicted to America's Next Top Model and to be my binary planet since the day I was born. Even in the coldest, loneliest edges of space, she is my balance. She is the first thing I remember from my childhood and the first thing I remember writing a poem about, and both of those things seem both clearly important and yet still inadequate. She is the best artist I've ever known, the worst sleeper, and the best shoulder to cry on, even if it's extremely bony. She gives me the strength to fight monsters for her when I cannot fight them for myself. Without her, much of this collection would not exist, and she is, without question or equivocation, the bravest and most wonderful young woman I have ever known.

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Thank you, Jeannie, for teaching me to find the wedge and to not be afraid to write out all the bad poems to get to the good one. Thank you for teaching me how to play with words instead of just using them—and for teaching me that playing is just as important as productivity. You were exactly who I needed that first semester, and your remarkable balance of force and delicacy means that you have been added to the very selective pantheon of small, fierce, bigger-on-the-inside women who have made me who I am. You are in excellent company and shine brightly among them.

Thank you, Jim, for being my True Mentor and the person whose good opinions kept me afloat when I thought I could not possibly turn back to the keyboard. My first novel will be almost entirely your fault, and I am more grateful than I have words for. You are a Master Word-Sorcerer, a Story Doctor, and most of all, you are the Mentor Magnificent who gave me honest criticism that in turn made me believe your honest

praise. At every moment working with you, I felt like you were truly working to hear me and help me get *my* voice improved and out into the world, not make me a copy of your voice, and that is such a valuable thing. I owe you the greatest gratitude and respect as a teacher.

Thank you, Dora, for getting me through the endless fog of sickness to the end of a paper I could be proud of. I know you were writing at least two books of your own at the time, and yet you still made space to hold my hand and walk me through the Dark Forest, the semester that became the hardest and most physically awful times so far in my life. You are a fairy story of a woman, a spectacular spiderweb-spinner of a writer, and you pulled me into fairy tales so hard as a kid that I never found my way out again. You have the face and poise of a fairy queen and the wisdom and sharpness of a thousand-year-old-witch and yet, are, at the same time, a little girl in a rose garden, wearing red shoes, singing to herself and sharing her gifts with whoever passes by, just because you're that good inside. I'm honored to have gotten to work with you, even if I was barely tethered to my body at the time.

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Kyleen Kelsey, for trying to wake me up by throwing rocks *through* my window rather than at it—it worked, and standing guard while you peed in public behind a dolphin statue was a privilege and an honor.

Anyone I didn't list by name, know that you are still loved and have my gratitude—I am so young and yet have already lived such a rich life full of inspiring and miraculous people. You have all supported and healed me in so many ways and I am so grateful. Thank you.

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Preface

You are standing on the edge of a cliff. The grass at your feet is unrealistically green, the clover is full of bees buzzing like electric guitar strings, and the sea below you is cold, green, and shining with a mirror of the sun, just like the moon.

Behind you, a cow makes a disgruntled noise and bumps you with her shoulder. For a second, the choice is nearly being made for you, the water of Dingle Harbor is rushing up to meet you. Instead of thinking something like, "Oh god, that's scary," you think, "Oh yes, that's it."

You beam at the cow, a little drunk on the wildness of this place.

She stares back, eyes glassy as obsidian, and you pat her gingerly on the haunch. The grunt she makes this time is a little less annoyed, and she lets you pass further down the winding path toward the lighthouse.

You make it to the path above a little beach—barely a beach so much as a strip of stones and seaweed and then a fingernail of sand. You don't walk down the path like most people must do; you hide your backpack between two great boulders, kick off your shoes, and tuck up your skirts into your underwear.

A passing fisherman waves, maybe a little luridly.

You begin to climb down the stony face of the giant boulders, paying no mind to who sees your undergarments—no, you are a spider, scuttling over the rocks: huge, dangerous stones that will lead you down to the beach. You are an inhuman thing, all spider legs and a mouthful of birds trying to scream and when you come

across the dead ram, body crushed between the sea and the very tide wall you are climbing down, you say a prayer for him and keep moving.

You hear him saying a ram's prayer for you in return in the back of your head; as usual, you can't tell if that sort of thing is real or imagined. You have finally decided not to care.

When you look up, the fisherman hastily looks away. He does not look back again. That is probably for the best, given all the variables—you are here to look for an unborn child, a child that never existed. You are here to mourn the love of your life even though he is still alive. You are here to drown at least once.

You finally reach the little crescent of Slaidin Beach. Off to the left and behind you is Hussy's Folly, a crumbling watchtower. Across the harbor is a low mountain topped with Eask Tower, a blurry memory of the British. As you stand there, the tide begins to come in. It is now or never; the beach will be gone in minutes.

The dive you make is not a graceful one—it is the descent of a witch trying to fly and failing. The leap is prefaced by an animal howl, something formless and wordless that's been living under your breastbone for months, since that night in the bathtub with seaweed and plum ropes of blood as you lost the idea of a child and then kept it close to your heart until you could make it out of the everyday, until you could make it here.

Dingle Harbor hears your raw bellow and you feel something deep, deep and dangerous and calling you. You bend down, splash the freezing, salty water on your face, but it is not enough. You hear bells in the distance—bells you will

learn later belong to St. Mary's Church, but at that moment, they are calling you like drums in your blood.

You wade out gracelessly, fabric soaking and clinging to your legs. You could very really drown here. You push forward faster, further, and then leap the rest of the way in, flinging yourself forward and letting your dress billow out like a sail before you are submerged.

The cold is a shock somehow, despite the wading and full knowledge that it's early May, not high summer. The cool water slides over your skin—liquid glass, shaping you and being shaped by you as your mass separates it from itself and lets it slip back together as you pass.

You swim for a few long moments, letting the sea drag at your dress and pull with fingers of current at your hair.

And then you feel it, whatever you always feel when you spend too long in the ocean alone—something dark and deep and older than old. You have moments, you can feel it, even if that's wildly illogical and there's nothing there, nothing except perhaps the town's signature dolphin, but you begin to scramble your way back to the beach anyway. Much like creeping yourself out in an empty house at night, you *know* better, you do, but the back of your neck is prickling.

When you make it to the beach, you drag yourself through wet sand and seaweed onto the gravel and grass of the path. You watch crabs the size of fingernails have very heated arguments as you force yourself to sit, breathe. You sort through stones and shells on the beach, picking up things that catch your eye

and stuffing your pockets until they begin to overflow and shed stones behind you as you start the long walk back into town.

You make it to the edge of town, still dripping. You trudge, cold, down cobblestone streets, one after the other. You pass rows of jewelry shops, tourist shops, artisanal food stores. Suddenly, so small you nearly miss it in your haste to get back home now that the chill is making its way into your bones, is a bookstore. You pause. Its doorway shines with the sort of warm light that reminds you of easier days, days less complicated.

A stranger's *hello* startles you out of your reverie: outside the bookstore is an older, dignified sort of man and a lovely older lady you presume must be his wife. It's the man who greeted you.

You greet them in turn. Their smiles make up your mind:

"Excuse me," you say, polite but somewhat out of breath, trying to get past the couple into the store. You are still dripping seawater. Little stones and shells are falling to the cobbles around you like rain.

"You look like you could use a bag," the man says kindly.

"I don't have a bag," you say, feeling strangely dumb and distant from yourself. You spend a minute trying to explain that you're just there to get a book you'd been recommended and you don't have the extra money for a bag.

It takes less than another minute for a bag to be pressed into your hands, numb and shaky as they are. You manage, barely, to say thank you, and begin to shovel your pockets full of treasures into the bag as the man holds it open for you.

"You know, you look like you could stand to come inside and get warm for a minute," the man says, gesturing into the main part of the bookshop. It could sound creepy. It does not.

"I'm a wet mess," you try to argue.

"Yes," the man agrees, eyes bright and very pleased for some reason, "but you're a poet. And it just so happens that we are a school of poetry, doing a reading right in this very bookshop, just now, for free."

You have not mentioned being a writer of any sort, let alone being a poet, to anyone since you've been in Ireland. "What makes you say that?" you ask the man, warier now but pleased, too, like the poetry in you is better than you thought, is loud enough to call to people without you saying a word.

The woman pats your shoulder kindly while the man beams. "I knew it," he tells the woman, voice full of the triumph of a man who has just won an extremely unimportant bet. "I told you!" Turning to you, he says, "No one but a poet would jump fully clothed into Dingle Harbor in May and then walk the whole way back, soaked, with a storm coming on and her pockets full of rocks."

You cannot quite manage to argue with that.

You sit on the floor by the couple until they step out *over* you—they are in charge. They welcome you to something called a Stonecoast Night. A dozen other writers go up, speak, say words in strings that give birth to earthquakes in your hands, a tremble in your heart.

And then he holds his hand out to you. You know that this is it, this is the moment when you are surrounded by mice with sewing skills and your fairy godparent is holding out a whole magical future.

Breathing deep, you take it—his hand, the three little stairs, the whole future. Your dress is still damp where it clings to your ankles. You close your eyes, voice shaking, shaking *hard*, and you let out that first line of a poem you've had in one of the desk drawers in your mind for years.

The room snaps to attention.

The fairy godparents smile knowingly at one another.

You finish the poem and begin to flee like you're supposed to from the ball so the fairytale has its proper plot arc, but the man catches you with a gentle arm on your elbow. "No, take this." He hands you a business card. "When you apply, tell them Ted Deppe will vouch for you."

You take the card, fingers numb, take the handshakes from these strangers complimenting you, more and more of them as you try to escape like Cinderella into the night, shaking from head to damp and sandy toe.

Eventually you wriggle out the door onto cobblestone streets and fresh night air and you feel something there, under your sternum, struggling into life like that almost-child. This, though, this is an unkillable thing, a dream, and you don't hesitate.

You take it.

—

It's been three years since that jump into the harbor. Two years until I worked my way into Stonecoast itself and began this collection.

It turns out that I wasn't listening when they told us that all our work should be working towards a single, coherent thesis—a surprise to no one who knows me, who knows I was probably too busy talking myself—so I just *wrote*. I think that probably made me a better writer—is still making me a better writer—than I would otherwise had been. Instead of my usual tight level of control and obsessive perfectionism, I was blissfully unaware and able to explore without worrying about consequences. I entered Stonecoast in the Poetry department at Ted Deppe's (my aforementioned fairy godfather after my harbor jump) behest, but the program said that it offered cross-genre work. Instead of asking what that meant or was, at least, *supposed* to mean, I *decided* what it meant and began, with the remarkably patient help of the faculty, to build my own cross-genre program.

The first two semesters had changed me in all the ways I expected a program like this to change me—working with brilliant writers to gain a better command of language. I felt like I was a sorceress learning new spells and practicing them under the steady eyes of experts far better than me. It was a symphony of learning all the things I didn't even realize how badly I'd wanted to know. I alternated between focusing on poetry for one workshop or even whole semester, then popular fiction (specifically the sort of stories that appear in this work—magical realism and fairy tales with the occasional doses of science fiction or more straightforward fantasy), until I had built up a body of work that I was reasonably proud of. This body of work.

I came into my third semester high off working with James Patrick Kelly, a man who is an even better teacher than he is a writer, and that is saying something. Before him, I had worked with the indomitable Jeanne Marie Beaumont, a poet stunningly graceful with her words and who spoke, as she will tell you quite plainly, for the dead. This time I was paired with a heroine of mine, Theodora Goss, as my next mentor, and I was raring to go—a mentor who wrote fairy tales like me, poetry *and* prose like me, and her work was so beautiful! I had such great things in store.

I began the semester with what I thought was simply a small, regular flare up of one chronic illness I've had for many years.

It was not.

It turned out to be something worse and, worse even still, something quite resistant to diagnosis by even the most vast array of specialists. I struggled to read the reference material for my third semester academic paper as neurological symptoms began to keep me from comprehending more than a few sentences at a time. I began to struggle to type as I lost feeling and gained incredibly painful tremors in my hands. I was lucky to have the incredibly supportive Stonecoast staff, but they couldn't force a diagnosis from the doctors, and the deadline was coming due. I had used up all my wiggle room and found myself quite without the ability to press for more—residency was upon us, my paper was incomplete, and my hands barely worked. My brain worked less. I couldn't keep linear thoughts

together in it, couldn't remember whole conversations I'd had just moments before.

That was unacceptable.

Not just for the faculty, no—I was a heroine myself, a protagonist, and I owed the books and authors who had brought me to that moment my very best. I had mentors who had invested long semesters of work in teaching me to reach deep into myself and find the most vulnerable and creative parts of me:

Jeanne Marie Beaumont, a tiny little sorceress who taught me the magic of using formal structure in my poetry, taught me how to begin to arrange my words with the precision of a master gardener. She taught me to play; she taught me all the rules and then made sure I understood that if it makes for a better piece of writing, the rules can be thrown out the window. She spoke to ghosts and gave them voice and showed me how, through rigor and the endless craft of editing, to do the same.

James Patrick Kelly, a wizard amongst wizards, a science fiction writer and true mentor, even beyond the pages of my work. He *cared* about my work in a way that was new to me—with no grandfathers to respect and only a handful of father-aged men in my life who I considered honorable or decent aside from my actual father, he was an unexpected sort of uncle, a figure I respected and admired like blood family. Jeannie was something I understood: a tiny little woman full of a great deal more power than people might expect. I was used to admiring such women, wanting to be like them. I had never considered wanting to grow up to become like a man beyond my father. Jim, though, pushed me to reach outside my

comfort zone, to work in worlds beyond fairy tales and witches, to *combine* fairy tales and witches with shiny mechanical tidbits of science fiction. I was so afraid of disappointing him that I forced myself to become better, to examine my work more closely, to demand more of myself. (He also said a lot of unnecessarily mean things about my use of adverbs, but I'm keeping them, Jim, *I'm keeping them.*)

Then, too, Theodora Goss, my mentor for the paper at hand, who had first called me to the world of writing fairy tales at the age of thirteen when I first began seriously writing at all. She was a dainty figure, a perpetual little Victorian girl in a rose garden and red shoes, ready for magical adventures. She had the poise of a ballerina and the severity of a lawyer if tested, and she put my work to the test of both those types of rigor during our time together.

I had people who had poured so much effort and knowledge into me, people I simply couldn't disappoint. So I shouted at my hands—quite literally shouted. I had a conversation with those miserable, shaking palms and phalanges and twitchy little tendons and I gave them what for—if they wanted to remain attached, I informed them, they would not stand between me and the paper that needed writing.

And so we went, my hands and I: I knocked back a shot of Jameson's (entirely inadvisable with the medications I was on, but it did feel extremely writerly) and sat down to my keyboard. I would shout things over my shoulder like, "Bruce, what was that book with the—" and my most wonderful boyfriend would produce the book in question nearly instantly each time. Together, we got through the

night. I wrote the paper. I, as one of my mentors would say, just went ahead and got the words on the page.

I continued, even at my sickest, to write. I wrote on IV painkillers in the hospital while blood clots burned in my lungs. I wrote when I woke in the night unable to breathe. I wrote on the sofa, on the porch, in the bathroom. I wrote an entire poem on my phone while laying face down in the gravel in my driveway while I waited for my boyfriend to wake up and rescue me because my own legs couldn't hold me.

I had remained afloat, sick as I was, for another semester. I went to residency and learned all sorts of wonderful craft tidbits that I am still assimilating into my mental library of such things. I became friends with brilliant humans and lost friendships with *supposedly* brilliant humans and learned, as anyone who has been sick with a chronic disease can tell you, that some people are simply not worth chasing after if they walk away from you—it's frankly too much work to get up from the chair, let alone do the rest of the intricate social dances required for such things.

Instead, I continued to write. I did not realize, as previously mentioned, that all our writings were meant to become one thesis—no, I wrote stories about lesbian witches and world-ending aliens and the small, intimate moments between people. I wrote poems about *everything*. I wrote to escape the hospital; I wrote to honor my religion and its mythology. I wrote to speak to my ancestors. I wrote to lend solidity to my love for my boyfriend, Bruce—and to lend solidity to the hurt

we'd done each other and fought our way back through. I wrote brief escapes from reality and detailed records of it.

At the end, as I began to panic that I had not written a beautiful, coherent body of work, I realized that I *had*, in fact, written a beautiful coherent body of work—just a bit out of order. I began the Great Effort, the process of unweaving and reweaving my words that my mentors have taught me in these two years.

Being sick, I have had to learn to do things differently—hold pencils differently, feed myself differently, do art differently. I embraced the looser kind of art that being sick had pushed me toward and began to weave the pieces I'd created since coming to Stonecoast, reweaving and reweaving until I had found the coherent piece of art hiding within them.

Most of it, of course, belongs to the fantasy section, as I am, for the most part, a fantasy writer. But there were other things that had begun to grow in me as I wrote through those nights in the hospital, the days moving slowly through the house. I began to understand the way they all called to each other when the program called on me to produce a single thing for them to hold up and say, "Look, this girl can write! She's still one of us, really!"

I produced, because they were correct. I could write, even on the darkest days when my body was most brutally betraying me. It was different than it had ever been—less linear, more impressionist, but I needed it, needed the catharsis of writing, so I followed necessity down and kept going. I used words as an anchor, a grappling hook, a single finger holding me from falling off the ledge into the volcano—I used them to keep me alive. I don't mean that in a twee, "words are

my life" sort of way. I am still struggling with the doctors telling me that if Bruce hadn't forced me to go to that emergency room that night, I would have died within an hour or two. That if I hadn't told the doctors who told me that absolutely nothing was wrong that I would not leave that bed until they'd found what was wrong with me and that I would quite physically damage anyone who felt inclined to try and make me, I would have died.

I wrote impossibly—on IV painkillers, with numb and shaky hands, late at night in the hospital—and I followed my words to residency. Then I gathered them all up with notes in every shade of pen, notes that will change my writing when I've reread them, assimilated them. I came home still sickly, but full of new words, new ideas.

Even though I was cracking in a hundred places, residency filled them with gold and kept the little teapot inside me full of words, new words, new things to say. New ways to better myself, new ways to create places of safety for others scared and suffering, new ways to gather the fragments of myself and use them.

I came home. I came home to the divorce of my parents, the betrayal of the family by my little brother, the movement of my grandmother into surgery for a cancer that had popped up as suddenly as daffodils through snow. I came home to the death of my favorite godmother: my godmother who had taught me everything about writing, who wrote the most beautiful things and dedicated them to *me*. Who taught me everything she could about words. My godmother who taught me to bellydance, who spoke Latin and French and played the harp, who wrote haiku to tuxedo cats and chants to the Goddess, who was a magnificent High Priestess

in my Pagan faith, and who was, far more importantly than anything else, my Mrs. Weasley, the safe place for every storm I could never have weathered without her.

I came home and I spent forty-eight hours awake in a surgery waiting room, waiting to find out if my godmother would survive. I looked at her and talked to her even though she was under. She *looked* like she was under, underwater—teal hair a thin, matted swirl on the pillow, freckled fingers swollen with having spent too much time below the surface. She died a mermaid, a selkie.

I come back to the question that the program asks us to answer with this piece of writing: how has my writing process evolved since that day when I flung myself into the harbor? How has Stonecoast changed me?

Before Stonecoast and its lessons in the mystic arts of writing, I would've met her death by buying a plane ticket and flinging myself into a freezing harbor to be able to live with the hurt racing through my heart like algae bloom. Before this, I would have been a ram carcass waiting to be eaten by loss and the sea. Before this, I would have been a little girl curled into herself and crying, *no, no, no*.

Now, I have command of the words, spells ready to cast to protect me from myself and the losses life will inevitably cycle forward to feed me more and more of—as I said to my mother, it's not as though *less* of our friends die as we get older. But now I have the tools to arm myself against the need to drown, the tools to build cairns of remembrance on that little thumbnail of beach instead of trying to let the water take me.

Now, I am wearing a ring set with a bubble of glass swirled with my godmother's ashes. It flashes under the light at the desk, never still, always present in the forefront of my thoughts. Instead of just weeping—and oh, I do weep, but I do not *only* weep—I can do her memory justice. I can finish her the incomplete sequel to her novel. I can use words to paint her into the world in permanence, to process my pain, to use the lens of the fantastic to show the power of small heroines who sit at keyboards, writing monsters into the world and then slaying them because we cannot yet slay the real ones around us. My godmother, a woman of a mere four feet and eleven inches, wrote her part in the battle for human justice and, moreover, kindness, gentleness. She was a tiny little Norsewoman, unshakable in her goodness and her ferocity. Since her teachings, I have had James Patrick Kelly tell me to kill my adverbs, Amanda Johnston tell me to just get *words on the page*, Theodora Goss tell me to start with the research, and Jeanne Marie Beaumont tell me that you should only follow the rules if they aren't keeping you from finding the good work, the best work, inside of you.

How has Stonecoast transformed me as a writer? How has writing this thesis changed my work? On this path, I have *become* a writer; I have found the beginning of my life's work and am equipped to walk the path into it, to fight it, subdue it, make it the most beautiful. I have spent two years strengthening my muscles as Stonecoast gave me the best teachers and most miraculous classes in an academy of pure magic; now Stonecoast is handing me my sword, my wand, my *pen*. Now, I am ready to put it to paper and begin to better the world around me.

Bones I Found in the Garden

The Tanglewood and the Void

The Witchling

The little novice witch girl mutters, grumbles, and looks
among old spindles and yarn for just the right books,
rips them open, to pieces, as she fumbles to steal
words, spells, whole pages to make this beast real—

woven from wool and small as a sneeze,
sneaky as shadows or a fingerling breeze,
called from the Mystery for the simplest of tasks:
to serve at her hand and do as she asks.

Witches can do this, can conjure familiars,
though the neophyte witch is still learning from elders.
But this act could make her, could bring praise from on high—
assuming, course, it does not go awry.

Word-creature-beastling wakes on the loom,
sits up and takes measure of witch, of cauldron and broom—
“Come, minion,” witch says, trying for force,
but made up of stories, the creature ignores her, of course—

It hops to her chair and gives a great yawn,
one eye lazily open, the witch fixed upon.
“Fie on you,” says the witchling to that;
“If that’s what I wanted, I’d have gotten a cat.”

She nudges it over, all long-suffering sighs,
but gets no more than a roll of its numerous eyes.
She sits in the chair with an almost-fond huff
and pulls the beast into her lap to scratch its soft fluff.

The day wanes on as witchling gives in
to the charm of the spell she’s just given skin;
there they sit, hours folding on hours,
surrounded by spellbooks, herbs, dusty objects of power:

Golem, homunculus, words pulled from the void—
and the little witch girl, both pleased and annoyed.

The Moon Has Open Heart Surgery

I lay down on my back in the tanglewood,
mountain laurel and kudzu knotted above me,
 a blanket fort of green,
all the worries and wonderings held at bay
as I watch the starry surgeons prep
and begin without delay,
 begin
 without
 delay.

Tonight they're taking the blood from the moon,
her blood and all her fleshy secrets,
rooting around her slick and sticky silver organs,
a thousand little mouthfuls
endless and ephemeral
like rabbit hearts
 and wet daffodils
sticking to her ribs and spine,
 her ribs and ribs and ribs and
 spine.
They insist she will be fine,
the statistics say she'll
 be
 just
 fine.

She'll be just fine.

They show each of the organs to me as they pull them out
and set them in metal bowls
where they shine,
 they shine,
 they shine—
fierce and fragile all at once.
They begin to pick the pearls from her bones,
letting each
 one
 drop—
—clink—
into the steel-bellied bowl,
 one
 by
 one.

The moon doesn't move,

doesn't flinch,
except to carry on in her nightly
stroll
across
the sky.

She is in pain,
even she is not immune,
but she glides through the dark with her heart cracked open
and she does not cry
out, does
not
cry
out.

*Women do not let the pain get to us, my mother says—
we are Amazons, Amazons—
we are Amazons.*

The moon is a different kind
of Amazon, not my mother's
kind
of
Amazon—
no, she's a round-faced mother in a kitchen,
pale and freckled and full of secrets—
secrets and opal organs
like rabbit hearts and wet daffodils
sticking to her ribs
and spine—
sticking to her
ribs
and
spine.

I lay on my back in the tanglewood,
mountain laurel and kudzu knotted around me like tangled veins,
watching the stars finish—
finish and close, close her back up,
close
her
back up.

The stars have put in an artificial valve tonight,
and though they assure me the chances are good,
that she will

be
just
fine,
but down here, I have gotten the call already—
they have made the call already,
they have called, called—
they have called
time
of
death,
time of the end of an age, the end of the line—
and pretending that she was the moon
is just a way to pass the time til it feels real to me,
just a way to
pass
the
time.

Questions to the Wolf (I)

Where was your father, Little Red,
 when you took your long walk in the woods?
When the wolf took—
 bit by bit,
 little by little—
 everything you had
 and then some?
Your sweet mother,
 all crumpets and lambs' wool—
 where was she when that creature beckoned you
 to a bed that should've been safe?
And now, when you prowl the dark,
 snarling jaws and claws for hands,
 full moon beating where a heart should beat—
 where a heart should beat,
 bloody hunting *beat, beat*—
 new and thrumming like
 deadly drums in the dark—
 do they know where you are?
Do they think it's another date,
 another party?
Do they tell themselves that you invited it,
 summoned your own nightmare and relished the attention somehow—
 because you paint yourself like a woman
 and walk in five inch heels down that dark and dangerous road?
Or do they know—
 do they *know*,
 in some secret place
 deep down in their denying guts—
 do they know the truth of the hungry thing they invited into the house,
 what was taken from you
 night
 after night,
the knowing hanging heavy as the stones
 your bloody hands stitched in—
sharp as the axe
 thudding into flesh, into bone—
tearing away at them,
 bit by bit,
 little by little—
 with snarling jaws
 and claws for hands?

Things the Wolf Will Not Say to Her Parents (II)

My mother tells me how I need to be mature now,
how I need to grow up,
need to either tell the whole story or
need to square my shoulders and—
and just swallow the words if
I will not say them.

I had such small hands.

Finches would land on them and sing.
I looked so innocent, I know,
I'm that princess
keeping secrets from my sister—
broken nose reset in stoic silence,
a broken pinky finger that'll never be the same.

I was so convincing.

No one would ever know if you asked,
but oh god, oh god,
no little red hood
would've kept me safe in the night,
would've filled in the fractures in my face with gold
or made me believe

I could be safe again.

He broke my heart open with his man-hands,
wrinkled and covered in wolf hair,
and as he ate it, he promised me
that if I told a soul, they'd never believe me,
or worse, he'd eat them, too.

I believed him.

I am older now, and stronger, and stranger—
I growl when beasts in the forest look my way,
when their eyes linger too long on me, or
my mother and her tender flesh.
I am reborn with long, sharp teeth
that catch the light
even in the darkest of bedrooms.

I spent so long afraid.

I am afraid still.
I am afraid, but he taught me to share with him—
where I was going,
my basket full of cookies,
the more tender sweets deep in the heart of me.

I am afraid still,
but he will learn to share in my fear, too.

The Enchanted Forest

You are the perfect kind of forest for getting lost in—
wild and verdant and full of secrets,

where maybe a voracious, precocious little girl
sneaks into bears' houses to take things that aren't hers—

where maybe a girl sleeps in a glass coffin,
watched over by 7 little men who love her,
each in their own way,
but take nothing from her—

where a hut on chicken legs attends
to the needs of its occupant—

where maybe other witches grow
a lot of lettuce and other leafy greens—
 growing a story to push back the loneliness,
 a story just waiting for a girl
 whose most secret, inner name
 grows like luscious jade in that spell-sown soil—

You are the perfect kind of forest for getting lost in:
deep and dark and hiding
all sorts of scuttling secrets and beautiful vulnerabilities—
that's my favorite part,
the way your brambles part for me,
 the way your bark peels away so I can read
 the poetry scratched beneath—
you see,
for all your wolves and witches,
all your secret spells and sorcery,
I am never afraid in your darkness,
never afraid of your depths.

What Is Eating My Chickens?

I find him standing there,
naked,
feathers around his mouth,
blood smeared down his jaw.

We had thought it was,
perhaps,
a fox.

It is definitely
not
a fox.

His hair is matted
like a dog's,
and he smells
not unlike the grungy men
that sit outside the grocery store—
like unwashed human
soaked in humid Georgia June—
but somehow
without a trace of human kindness,
human mercy.

A few feathers fall,
flutter,
settle on the grass.

The shotgun is steady on my shoulder, but
my fingers tremble,
hovering over the trigger guard,
uncertain.

Those things,
raggedy velvet and uneven,
pushing through his hair—
antlers?
Those dirty claws—
are they truly so long,
so spindly and sharp?
Are his eyes as red
as they appear,
or is he just
some wild woodland boy,

some child of this countryside,
sent out years ago
and never called back
for supper when the sun went down?

Either way,
my coop is empty of life,
eggs cracked
and sucked dry,
only feathers and shell fragments
remaining as testament.

Another feather falls
and he bares his teeth:
a too-wide mimic of a smile.
The teeth are jagged,
uneven,
and there are still strips of chicken flesh
clinging to their razor points.

My finger stops trembling.
Flat crack
and the smell of burnt powder:
I lose a little of my own humanity,
but my chickens will sleep safe.

There's No Arguing About It, That's For Sure

Sometimes we have brunch.

Sometimes we have brunch, my could-be self and I.
Brunch is the only meal I can imagine her eating—
everything dreamy and delicate.
Everything about her is imperial,
assured,
unquestionable.

She's so accomplished—
she's a Real Artist,
you know?
Some glorious inhuman confection of fear,
certainty,
and purpose.

She drinks her coffee black as the void,
so dense you can feel it screaming its own gravity,
a hot morning event horizon.
She eats whole undulating galaxies with a spoon,
easy as milk and cereal.
I cannot imagine the road between being myself and becoming her.

She tells me not to be intimidated,
that she's just as fallible
and directionless as anyone else.
But look—
her version of directionless fallibility
looks remarkably like demidivinity to me.

There's no arguing with her—
she's armed
with hands that can take anything and make it Art
and a pair of volcanic black-glass eyes
that dare you to call it anything else,
anything less.

So when she tells me,
this woman who is all the chances I have not taken,
all the opportunities I have failed to seize,
a cup of Void and a bowl of Infinity on her side of the table,
a scone and sense of self confidence crumbling concurrently on mine—
not to be intimidated,

I agree—
tongue fumbling, furthest thing from her eloquence—
I agree—
a beetle pinned down and twitching
under a gaze that brooks no argument—
I agree—

but only out loud.

From the Crow-Wife

The problem with falling in love with a crow, you see,
is that crows do not like to live indoors.
They are also not partial to most of those of human conventions which would make the
situation an easy one,
 let alone one a proper lady should admit to.

Luckily, you are not a proper lady,
you are a witch.
Yes, a witch—

 wild on the inside,
 with owl feathers sprouting from your lungs,
 the eyes of all beasts blinking
 in the chambers of your heart.

How could you love a human again
when the crow comes to your window,
 bringing shiny things he knows you will treasure,
 looking at you with eyes that shine too brightly,
ringed in iridescent black that belies other colors—
 beetle green,

 oil-slick violet,
 gloaming indigo,
 the silver of starlight?

 (Things brought daintily,
 gently;
 he takes care not to startle
 you.)

It isn't such a bad romance, really it's just that you worry—
he loves you, too,
he does,
and truly,

 but he loves you with a crow's heart.

It tells him to bring you treasures—
 pearls

 and bangles
 and broken glass—

and to sit on your shoulder and preen your hair,
and protect you fiercely with loud cries
 and a stony beak.

But it tells him, too,
that he does not sleep in your bed—
 perched on a bedpost,
 half asleep,

always wary—
but sleeps in dark forests
among quivering and hungry things that would devour him,
given half a chance—
and his heart does not tell him to worry.
(He has never been caught,
trapped.
You have.)

Yours does—
you are a witch, yes,
but a woman also,
and you know the vulnerability of life,
human or otherwise.
You know that likely,
one day,
he will not return to your window.
You cannot coax him to make a home inside,
not on a bedpost
or among the rafters.
(But he will not get drunk
and hit you, either.)

For all that he will spend a thousand hours perched on your shoulder,
whispering secrets of winged creatures into your ear
while you brew potions
and crush beetles and herbs,
bright crystals and bones
with your mortar and pestle
and drink tea
by the window
while the rain pours down,
and for all that it will bring you the fiercest joy
every moment you see his ink-dark feathers
and his brilliant eyes
and hear his rough voice feeding you tidbits of the Mysteries
while you delicately scratch at the feathers at the back of his neck,
at the end of the day,
you keep house alone,
go to bed alone,
wake alone.
(But he has no hands,
no fingers to leave bruises.)

You draw a blanket around your shoulders
to keep back a chill that has nothing to do with the weather
and everything to do

with the empty chair across the table,
the empty side of the bed,
the wedding gown you will not get to wear.

(But you can wear
whatever suits you;
there are no big, rough hands
pushing you, pulling you,
pinching you
if their master is displeased.)

These are things you must make peace with, you know,
things you must learn to put aside if you're not going to be a proper lady—
if you are going to be a witch—
like the worry and the loneliness
when he goes out treasure hunting
or off to learn the heart-paths of the forests,
things you must tell your own heart it cannot sigh over forever,
as they are part and parcel
of loving a crow.

This cottage is barely standing,
just the most meager idea of a house in its frame.

(Whoever lived in it before
did not love it like you do.
Every board and shingle is a promise, a
shield between you and the life you almost
kept on living.)

You sleep with the windows open.
It gets cold,

but you have learned to like it
because you have decided to like it,
you have made a *choice*. Witches get to do that,
make choices.

Proper ladies get to make embroidered pillowcases
and play piano
and keep songbirds in cages
as if they meant to do something with them and then simply forgot
the birds were even there.

Your best choice, your big choice was not in loving your crow, no—
everyone knows love is blind and there's no choice about it—
but to live the life of that crow-loving woman
and not become the proper lady
who once might have been.

(She died, that could've-been-lady.
A witch killed her from inside her because
she couldn't bear it, couldn't, couldn't—)

You have made a choice,
and you will make do without those ladies' things,
those things shared with human men.
You are a witch, after all, learning all the secrets of the world
 from a crow who loves you,
and who wouldn't call that enough?

Practicing My Mother's Arts

The leaves are dry between my fingers as I measure—
no scoops, no strainers or bags
just the alchemy I was promised made small,
made my own—
the whisper of boiling water rushing,
warming clay,
turning leaves into something miraculous.

The cup is pregnant with answers—
promise of the future,
promise of a quiet mind
held in its warm clay belly,
suspended in liquid,
waiting for the quickening.
If I feel the heartbeat,
it is a trick of translation between my palms,
amplified by what once was water—
my heartbeat,
nothing more—
not yet.

Seven sips—
no, nine.
Then the soggy birth of tea leaves onto the saucer,
mess concealing something beautiful,
surely,
if only the nurses would wipe away the nonsense
and reveal it.

The dregs are cold by the time I give up,
all murmurs of magic gone from the air,
alchemy a failed art
stillborn on the table,
no water left to carry a hopeful heartbeat.

Crow's Snack

Crow stole the best corncake from Man.
Crow cackled and flew with his spoils
and hid in the night sky,
where Man could not see him for all the blackness.
There, he devoured,
crumbs crashing down from his beak,
forming asteroids.

On the Earth,
Man was still searching for him,
the very picture of outrage.
Satisfied with his prank,
and his belly full to bursting,
Crow decided to nap.
He set aside the rest of the corncake,
pale and round and pockmarked from his sharp beak,
leaving it to become the moon.

After a long time,
the corncake-moon dried up,
shriveled,
disintegrated into scattered crumbs:
white stars that pooled against the black,
forming the Milky Way.
Knowing that their light would hide its gleam
and Man would still not know where to find him,
Crow slid open one beady eye.

He surveyed the world as it was:
violent, loud,
sticky with blood and sweat.
His skin pimpled beneath his feathers,
shuddering.
Man, unable to find Crow,
had taken out his rage on himself,
on Woman,
on the very Earth itself.

The corncake turning uneasily over in his belly,
Crow slid his eye closed again.
It was better to sleep a little longer.

Living the Dream

You find the note a few weeks in—
maybe abandoned by another crewmember,
maybe left by some tech before takeoff.
What happens on Earth stays on Earth, it says
in slanted, feminine handwriting.
An ex-girlfriend of a crewmember, a wife?
A parting memorialized on paper,
small,
painful.

Forget all this crap. Trivial bullshit.
the note continues.
Forget the sound of grass rustling.
Forget the taste of oncoming rain.
Forget the way sheets tangle around your ankles,
anchoring you while you drift in dreams.
Forget the fond and sleepy brush of chapped lips
at the corner of your mouth
when you dash out the door in the morning.
This is your world now:
metal
and plexiglass
and zero-G spacewalks
and dehydrated ice cream
that tastes nothing
like licking it off the tip
of a laughing lover's nose.
Your chest aches.

You're living the dream now, babe.
This is what you worked for—
this has always been your dream.
But there are no anchoring sheets while you drift here,
at the apogee of human innovation,
brushing the edge of nightmare
if you aren't careful,
if you forget, even for a moment,
where you are:
You are so close,
all the time,
to vacuum-punched lungs and frozen sclera and you know—
you know—
your lover used to tell you that you had the most beautiful eyes,
but it's hard to think anything is beautiful

after the malfunction that left stunning,
sparkling-eyed Matty on the outside:
 face blue,
 eyes blue,
frozen over and reflecting the rest of you,
watching,
 aghast,
 from the viewport.

Nothing else matters. Just forget it.

Forget the smell of coconut shampoo on the pillow in the morning.
Forget the slippery feel of avocados squishing between your fingertips
 when the two of you make tacos,
 messy
 and graceless
 and perfect.
Forget the little blue world full of trivialities
 like patterned socks
 and real pasta
 and fishing
 and love—

I love you, it finishes, scribbled
 hastily, messily.

There are creases from crumpling;
the only way to survive out here
is to fall in love—
 with the dream,
 with the stars,
 with the mission
and let the rest fall away.

Fairy Tale in Four Parts

I. Snow

One sister,
 round as a robin,
 paler than fleece,
 face like the full moon,
 heart warm as honey—
 slow to shift,
 rich and sweet and the sort of sticky
 that one can never be rid of—
 dark eyes shining like starlight on water.

In another life,
she slept overlong,
waiting for rescue,
depending on the kindness of strangers and true love's kiss.

In another life,
she woke
and feared the fruit that felled her.

Here,
now,
she breaks their thin flesh with her teeth,
 crunches,
 chews,
 swallows,
licks sweet juice from rosy lips.

Here, she is not a cautionary tale.

Fearless,
 she presses
 pudgy thumbs
 into dough,
rolling out pie shells to fill with apple slices and cinnamon,
 kneading loaf after loaf
 of fragrant apple bread.

II. Rose

The other sister,
 thin as a whip,
 heart like spun-sugar—
 sweet
 and sharp
 and deceptively fragile—
hair red as poppies,
red as cherries,
 redder than blood,
luminous lamps for eyes—
 cat's eyes:
 wide,
 bright,
 ever-shifting.

She ran from a wolf in another life,
 wore his pelt as a prize in another,
 keeps the wolf in her chest in this life now,
 growling low and dangerous,
and she is never sure if it growls at her
or the world outside her ribs.
 She isn't sure
 she wants to know—
no easy life leads to a wolf like that.

Here, she is not anyone's sweet little anything.
Here, she needs no sunset to ride into,
 needs nothing but these quiet moments.

Her slender fingers are deft,
 masters
 of needle
 and thread,
summoning works of art
 strand
 by strand.

III. Sisters

They were not always sisters—
their mothers and fathers are worlds apart,
their faces dissimilar as faces may be,
 but oh,
 they are sisters now,
wolf-pelt rug under their feet,

apple pies turning golden in the oven,
no love truer than this—
 this being awake
 and alive—
 free of Once,
 free of After.

There is no shame in preferring contentment to adventure.

IV. The Bear-Prince

The sisters sit together by the fire,
each to their task,
while winter roars outside.

A bear,
 once a man,
 perhaps even a Prince,
waits to be a man once more,
ice turning to rain
 as it falls from his fur
 to the fire-warmed floor.

The sisters wait with him—
 needle pressing through cloth,
 teeth crunching through apple-flesh—
relishing this, this secret life separate from
and resist telling this man
 that it is better to be a bear,
 free of Once,
 free of After.

The Wildwitch

The wildwitch tells me of her apartment back home, far from the sea,
nights haunted by freight trains singing like a kettle in the night, their song
ghosting up like steam from the teacup in her hands, hovering in waves.
The sound, she says, is more comforting than the tea itself, almost answers
the questions she can't bring herself to ask herself—or me—or the moon;
questions she trusts only to the hearts of birds.

Her family owes too much to the hearts of birds,
she tells me, leaning in, dark curls clouding her face like storms at sea.
“To gain psychic powers, my great aunt ate the heart of a living bird under the new
moon,”
she says, half-singing the whispered secret like a macabre children's nursery song.
“No one asked what kind of bird until I did,” she confesses. “No one had any answers.”
Her sloe-black hair tumbles in the rising wind, tossing against her face in riotous waves.

Dingle Bay is the curl of an ear, secret and safe. Near-imperceptible waves
shimmer over her pale, dangling feet as she watches the wheeling seabirds.
When they scream, she opens her mouth wide, eyes fluttering shut, and answers.
It's an unearthly sound, made of raw loss and a longing to be part of the sky, part of the
sea.
It's wordless, humming along my bones like drums, some wild, ancient song
and in this light, evening sun spilling pools of silver, her face is as inhuman as the moon.

All of her is an echo of the moon:
round face, curved hips, soft belly, skin translucent white as the foam on the crests of
waves,
too far away to touch, no matter how close she sits to my hands, and that song—
she's still in wild communion with the wheeling birds
and there's something else, tentacles coiling and uncoiling under the surface of the sea—
“Kraken,” she says abruptly, like that word holds any answers.

She really doesn't give me many answers,
just tells secrets all out of order and apropos of nothing—like how the moon
wept when she pleaded with the Pacific, years ago—when she asked the sea
to drown her, begged the green-glass waves
to close over her, crash down, paying her heart-debt to the birds.
She says, smile bitter as blood orange, “That's when he taught me the song.”

She hums something like her call to the seabirds then, but lower, deeper—kraken song.
The water roils, one slick black tendril coils up and answers
her entreaty like an old friend. The birds
flee, screeching their objections to this ancient impossibility. The moon
rises over the watchtower at the mouth of the bay. The waves
are rising, too, just a little, as the wildwitch hums louder, eyes intent on the slate-dark

sea.

I'm just vessel for her secrets, if that's what they are, a witness to her song for the sea.
She answers all my questions with new mysteries. When she stops humming, the waves
calm, kraken retreating, the surface still enough to reflect the silhouettes of birds against
the moon.

The Witching Tree

The foxes come en masse—
white hordes of them
pooling like water under indigo sky.

They hold the flames in their mouths,
jaws delicate,
tails flicking like feather dusters in the flickering light—
gold with firelight,
silver with stars.

The two witches stand,
shrouded in cloaks woven of grasses
of feathers
and twigs;
twin tributes to the testament of Baba Yaga,
even this far from her homeland.

The foxes come.
Flame dances.
The tree hums its summoning song of secrets—
under the breath,
barely audible.
Audible
nonetheless.

The foxes lay their flames,
one by one,
at the witches' feet,
at the base of the tree,
then move to stand
or sit on their velvet haunches,
and listen,
rapt,
as the annual telling of the story begins,
ancient cosmogony echoing in the night:

*“In the beginning
the Grandmother in the dark
spoke the secret word and
broke the silent sun open
until it spilled across the hills
like the broken yolk of an egg...”*

The tree goes silent to listen, too.
In tandem,
the witches recite.

*“...in the beginning
the Grandmother in the dark
spoke the secret word and
woke the sleeping giants under the mountains
and devoured the shimmering remnants of their dreams
to break her fast.*

*In the beginning
the Grandmother in the dark
spoke the secret word
and the great wheel of silver stars began to turn.”*

The witches go on long into the night,
foxes spellbound,
tree silencing its susurrus
against even the strongest breezes just to hear,
and somewhere in the deepest dark,
somewhere secret
between the hearts of mountains
and the belly of the sea,
the Grandmother turns over
and smiles in her sleep.

Once Upon an Alien Invasion

6:20 a.m., Georgia

ten minutes until whiteout

Blanche bakes pies.

She can't eat them herself anymore, of course, not with the diabetes. Can't risk an episode if her blood sugar goes all topsy-turvy, especially since the stroke. But Blanche has been baking all her life, and, like her daddy always said, there's no not being what you gotta be, and no not doing what you gotta do. So, whether she can eat them or not, Blanche bakes pies.

Turns out it's not even a waste—the neighborhood boys come by whenever they catch sight of one out cooling on the sill, sure as crows to something shiny. They're sweet little things, all smiles, even if they don't speak much by the way of English. Blanche doesn't half mind that; she has enough trouble with words herself since the stroke. She calls them all by nicknames, short words that are easy to remember even with the aphasia, if she even calls them anything at all—mostly they don't talk, just eat and laugh and eat some more.

It doesn't take a lot of words between her and the boys, anyhow. Just a slice or two of pie and a glass of milk or lemonade, and then they scatter, all seven of them, scurrying around the place like helpful mice or little sparrows, hopping here and there, pecking at one thing or another. Sometimes she'll point things out to them, but mostly they find things that need doing and get them done—cleaning the gutters, mowing the lawn, doing the dishes. Between the boys and Blanche's baking, everything that needs doing gets done, and she hasn't needed a nurse (babysitter) since her first week back from

the hospital. Straight road to hell with the doctors and their handful of nursing home pamphlets. Blanche doesn't need to be hovered over; she's a grown woman who knows her own mind. Even if that mind isn't as sharp as maybe it once was, well. The boys have got her covered.

Nurse Handsome still comes in once a week to check her vitals, sure, but Blanche doesn't mind him. Maybe it's since he was there when she came out of it, when she woke up, hands reassuring on her own, or maybe it's just that he's charmed her with his endearingly blatant compliments, calling her "young lady," and "missy," but she almost likes him. Doesn't mind him poking and prodding, measuring and checking. Besides, he always asks for a second slice of pie, and Blanche'll put up with anybody if they know how to eat. Her daddy'd always said you could tell good folk from their good appetite—Blanche couldn't tell you if it's true or not, but it had always made her feel a little bit better about her big belly and thick thighs when she'd ask for a second portion at dinner. She'd been a beauty back then, all curves, red lips and fair skin starkly framed by black hair, just *gorgeous*, but hadn't ever thought so until long after plump cheeks had turned to wrinkly ones. She doesn't wish for her youth back now, doesn't sit around lamenting, "if only I'd known then what I know now, had appreciated how beautiful I was!" She'd heard enough of that horseshit from the other folks her age when she was in the hospital. She's not interested in being anybody's cliché, thank you very much.

It's apple pie today, Blanche's personal favorite. She nibbles at a piece of apple peel, sucking the juice from the crisp flesh. It's not half as satisfying as a bite of pie, but it doesn't put her in a diabetic coma, either, and she'll take what she can get.

Fingers sticky, Blanche turns the tuner on the radio until something comes through clear. Her niece is always trying to get her to watch the news on the television, but all the new TVs have too many buttons to remember and remotes to lose, and really, Blanche thinks there's something comfortable about getting the news from something just about as old as she is.

"—the President assures the press that all claims of UFOs are unsubstantiated, that people are simply witnessing the harbingers of the upcoming anticipated meteor shower a few days early. The White House insists that there is nothing to worry about concerning the—"

Blanche harrumphs, peeling a honeycrisp. There's always something to worry about—if it's not the politicians, it's the corporations, and if it's not the corporations, well, it's probably her health.

The apple skin falls to the counter in smooth curls. Blanche's hands are steady, wrinkled as they are, one cupping the apple, the other firm on the peeler.

"—further reports of missing persons, however, continue to rise, even as Atlanta public officials insist that—"

Blanche sets the honeycrisp, now naked and skinless, nearly as pale as she is, beside two others in the same state, and turns the radio dial again. She doesn't stop until she finds one of the Spanish stations—even at this hour, they play lively music, and even if she doesn't understand the words, well, she can't remember half her own words now, anyhow.

Humming along with salsa music, a cheerful little shake in her step, Blanche crosses to the knife block and pulls one out. Starts slicing the apples, little half moons,

thin and even. Fingers careful, she lays them out in the pie crust, already set in the pan—one slice half on top of the last, and so on, spiraling out and out. Even now, it matters to Blanche that things are beautiful.

There's a noise at the door, little feet shuffling. It's one of the younger boys, maybe eight or nine, already shirtless in deference to the heat. It's near eighty degrees, even though the sun is barely up. July in Georgia is no peach, as Blanche's daddy would always say.

Blanche wants to tell the boy to knock, damn it, wants to tease and ask if he was raised in a barn, but the words are a jumble, tangled like yarn somewhere between her brain and her mouth, so she just raises a scolding eyebrow and waves him in.

He peers up onto the counter, leaning up on his tippy toes, watching with huge, liquid brown eyes as Blanche arranges apple slice after apple slice.

She doesn't try to form the words to ask if he's hungry. Little boys are always hungry. Smiling, she hands him an unpeeled apple from the bowl on the counter.

He beams at her and takes it with both hands, biting into it without hesitation, loud crunch and juice everywhere.

A moment later, there's a second loud noise, and for an instant, Blanche wonders dumbly if the boy somehow broke a tooth and how the hell she's going to tell his mother, let alone pay for it.

Then the white light floods in, hot and harsh, and Blanche doesn't wonder anything anymore.

—

3:24 a.m., California

six minutes until whiteout

"There were *aliens*—" Luna says, simultaneously hushed and frantic as she clambers up onto the bed.

"Trying to *take* us—" Phoebus insists, hands on his footie-pajama-clad hips.

"—they wanted to *experiment* on us—" Luna wriggles her way over Aurora, burrowing down between her and her wife, who is somehow still asleep despite the increasingly loud children. Mal sleeps like the dead—"One of us has to," she always teases, poking at Ro's insomniac tendencies whenever Ro complains about how impossible Mal is to wake up or how damn loud she snores. Like a dragon, Ro complains, every time, albeit fondly. A dragon or a fucking freight train.

"—or *kill* us—" Phoebus says, eyes huge. He's still firmly planted on the floor, trying to be brave, but Ro doesn't have any patience for that bravado shit, just reaches out and scoops him up, tucking him against her other side.

Squeezing the twins close, Ro says, "What kind of aliens?" She's learned that it's better to talk out the nightmares than to negate them—a lesson learned both from her own years in therapy and from after-bout drinks with the derby team.

"The horrible kind," Phoebus says miserably, burying his face into Ro's side. She, in turn, smushes a kiss onto the top of his head, holding him tight and burying her face in his fluffy dark curls. She inhales the sweet child smell that some ancient part of her brain is soothed by—her baby, safe in her arms, clean and wriggly and wearing adorable dinosaur pajamas: all is right with the world. "The horrible, abducting and experimenting and *killing* us kind."

Luna shudders, clinging to Ro's arm for dear life. She's got her fingers dug into one of Ro's worse bruises from practice, but Ro does her best to ignore it, squeezing back as best as she can. "They were like—"

"They said they were gonna destroy the *whole world*—" Phoebus cuts in, voice muffled by Ro's pajamas and the flesh of her side.

"—yeah, the *whole world*, Mama, they're coming, and—"

Ro squeezes her kids a little tighter, pulling them close to her sides and rolling the situation over in her head. They're fucking *terrified*, and that's not something Ro likes to see—she'd finally shook herself awake when she'd gotten pregnant, finally gotten away from Adam and the drugs and that whole life where she was bruised for all the wrong reasons, had left it all and gotten clean and free of it all so that her kids would never have to look like this, sound like this, *shake* like this. She spent how many nights curled up and trembling, from withdrawal or fear or both?

"It's just a nightmare, just a bad dream," she soothes, stroking their hair back from their sweaty foreheads, combing her fingers through springy dark curls. "You're safe. Mommy and me have you, okay? Anything bad that happens, it's gotta get through us." Them sharing a dream isn't unusual, twins do that a lot, and there have been mentions of UFO sightings and other alien bullshit all over the place lately. The twins must have heard some joke of a newscaster or some jerk looking for their fifteen minutes and had the alien theme pop up in their heads for processing while they were asleep. Still, it cuts at Ro that anything can get to her family, can make them boil over with fear like this.

"But—" Phoebus cuts in.

"And what have we said about getting through us?" Ro asks, interrupting him with a kiss to his furrowed little brow.

"Nobody gets through derby girls," Mal says drowsily, rolling over, fair hair tangled across her face as she curls herself around Luna from behind. They match each other, all moon faces and silvery eyes like storm clouds, though, without her makeup, Mal's deep crows' feet are starkly evident. "Especially not mama bear derby girls with cubs to look after," she adds, kissing Luna's temple.

Ro feels both the kids relax a little, like somehow having both parents awake is enough to make the room an Awake Place, a place where nightmares have to wait outside. Ro likes that, *loves* it—loves that, between her and Mal, there's a space safe enough for all of them in this bed, a place with no room for the bad things in the world. Neither woman came from a background where beds were places of safety at all, let alone comfort. Bed used to be a terror for Ro—bedtime at home had been when she'd lay awake, listening to her parents scream at each other, wondering if they'd come for her next (they often did), and bed as an adult had meant Adam high as a kite or pissed as hell that he wasn't, groping and shoving and punching either way. Sleep had only come with drugs or finally just laying awake in terror so long she passed out. Ro had learned to hide the black eyes at work—a friend had tried to show her how to cover them with green-tinted makeup and layers of powder, but her dark skin made the green stand out like face paint. By necessity, she'd messed with it and messed with that oily green makeup and endless shades of eyeshadow, powders, foundations until she got it right, managed to make it look intentional, a fashion thing, not an ugly echo of the beatings. Half the time it

was easier to just wear too much smudged eye makeup and pretend she was simply tired when people asked questions at the diner.

Mal's old life wasn't exactly any better or safer: a long road of bad foster homes, being taken advantage of, taking drugs to feel like she was somewhere else, *anywhere* else, until she'd found derby by a lucky accident. The strength of a chosen sisterhood to support her as she turned her back on all the tangled threads of that life and cut herself free.

Both women had agreed it was paramount to make a life where the twins felt safe, *really* safe. Together, they made this soft little nest of a world, and now, no matter how long a day is, no matter what else happens, sleep is for snuggling and the bruises are from derby, from an honest-thrown elbow or a clean fall, and they're badges of pride. When she gets asked questions at work now, she proudly shows off her bruises, hands out flyers for the next bout, tells them all that she goes by Sleeping Brute-y, flexes and lets them admire the muscles she's built up.

Derby makes *all* the bad things take a step back for Ro—makes bruises a clean thing, makes guys take a step away and think twice when they see how built she is, and, hell, it's how she'd met Mal. She'd been a derby cheerleader, all purple glitter and green eyes and so much blonde hair. They'd met during Ro's first bout on an actual team, nearly a year after she'd had the twins and gotten her feet under her with derby training and learning to love the pain when it was her decision. Mal had watched her pull a C-block on the opposing jammer so hard the girl had skidded backward on her ass. Mal had been so impressed that she'd asked Ro out for drinks.

They'd ended up skipping the whole drinks plan altogether and just talking and making out in the parking lot, but Ro didn't exactly mind that. They'd ended up staying up all night in the parking lot, talking about abusive exes and bad life decisions and whether or not they still counted as young. Mal had shown her how she covered her crows' feet with layers of glittery eyeshadow, hid the way her skin was patchy from smoking under stripes of cheerleader face paint or sparkly temporary tattoos. Mal had had her own version of Adam, her own Nightmare Man, her own drugs. The fact that they'd both found strength in derby, in *choosing* how people saw them, *choosing* when to risk the bruise or show the extra skin—the value they placed on the act of being *able* to choose had linked them from that first date, if you could call it a date. The rest had come naturally, little by little—Mal meeting the twins, the four of them slowly melding as a family until Ro finally proposed. It wasn't technically legal yet back then, but they'd had a ceremony and done the rings anyway because it was about that *choice*, that act of being able to choose each other.

"I love our life," Ro says abruptly, reaching over Luna to stroke her wife's cheek. "We're kind of awesome."

"Mah-*muuuuh*," Luna grumbles into her side. "Quit being *gross*."

"So gross," Phoebus agrees. "Grosser than aliens."

"Oooh," Mal says, voice still rough with sleep. Scooting closer so they're all squished together, the four of them half in a row, half in a pile, she asks, "what kind of aliens?"

The twins sit up, mussed little heads popping up out of the blankets, mouths open to relate the nightmare once more. Rather than letting them start up again, Ro smacks a hand over each of their mouths, shaking her head.

"No," she says, trying not to smile and failing. "No, see, you've woken up me *and* Mommy now, and you know what that means?"

Phoebus groans, but Luna wiggles happily and says, "Snuggle naps?"

"Snuggle naps," Ro confirms, pulling the comforter up over all four of them and resettling herself on her pillow. "Nightmare-proof snuggle naps until morning."

"I cannot fight this plan," Mal says, still mostly asleep. "It's time for the good kind of sleep, little monkeys. Safe sleep. Come on." She flops so she's wrapped around Luna, one arm draped across the girl and onto Ro's stomach.

Phoebus huffs and mimics Mal's position, curling around Ro and just letting his little hand brush Mal's. Ro grins at the ceiling so Phoebus doesn't catch her smiling and pull back. He's just starting to get old enough that he's getting a little shy about affection; it's something to keep in mind and work on so that he doesn't pull back from them *too* much as he gets older. She wraps her arms back around the kids, settling in, and turns her head so she can meet Mal's eyes.

Mal is smiling, eyes sparkling even in the dark. "Sweet dreams, Aurora, my beautiful li'l sugarbean."

"Sweet dreams, my puddin'pop," Ro answers fondly, a familiar echo between them, and lets her eyes drift shut.

When the white light comes in, Ro is mostly asleep, seeing nothing but a brightness behind her lids that reminds her faintly of the bright lights in the stands at that

very first bout. Humming happily to herself, she rolls over into the heat, drifting into the good kind of sleep.

—

4:22 a.m., Illinois

one hour and eight minutes until whiteout

Being homeschooled means that all the local kids think she's some sheltered goody-goody, or that Mrs. F is some kind of a religious nut, keeping Zella sheltered from the sinful eyes of boys or whatever, but Zella knows why Mrs. F keeps her at home. Mrs. F took her in because Zella was like her—foolish enough to break out of places, break into others, get into the wrong situations with the wrong people. Mrs. F's only rule was the homeschooling, to get Zella back on her own path—her *own* path, not the *right* path, not *god's* path, just her *own*—that's what had won her over and brought her here. And Mrs. F hasn't been wrong so far. Little by little, Zella *is* starting to find her own way.

She doesn't even usually mind it, and on days when she starts to feel trapped, she looks at her foster mother's face, with its brutal scars and twisted nose, at her hands, gnarled from being broken and never healing quite right, and the itch to go out—to be like the others, bright and glittering on the city streets, loud and maybe drunk and maybe high—quiets.

On those days, Zella goes out to the back garden and gets on her knees in the good, solid dirt, pulling weeds from the herb beds and the lettuce patch and helping train the jasmine up the high chain link fence. There are already half a dozen trees growing up and half-through it, sheltering the yard from view of the neighbors. They're good for

shade, but they don't do much to keep curious neighborhood kids from daring each other to climb up the fence and sneak into "the witch's" yard.

"Pah. We don't need trees for that," Mrs. F always says. "That's what the gun's for."

For all her crotchety threats, Zella hasn't seen Mrs. F take a shot at any of the kids—even if she's pulled out her brother's old hunting rifle and taken aim more than once. She suspects the old lady has a soft spot for young idiots, really—she's the first to admit that she'd been one once, herself, after all. The scars are proof plenty of that.

A small part of Zella thinks the whole thing is kind of sweet, in a ridiculous, youthful sort of way, but it gets a little less endearing when they end up stealing half the kitchen garden bit by bit to bring back trophies of their bravery.

"This is why," Zella grouses, dumping out the sparse handful of potatoes and onions on the table and watching them roll hither and thither, "we should move to an apartment building and keep a garden on the roof."

Mrs. F snorts. "Nothing grows right on a roof. How's it going to grow right with nowhere deep for roots, huh?"

Zella grumbles a little more but doesn't say anything else. It's an old argument—not even an argument, really, just something tossed back and forth every time the soup ends up too thin or there isn't enough basil for the tomato sauce.

Mrs. F takes up the potatoes in the old, bent metal colander and starts washing them, scrubbing at the skins with the wiry little brush by the sink. "There is always enough, *maidele*." Her back is turned, shoulders hunched to her ears. "God provides what we need, huh? Maybe those kids, they need it more."

Zella pulls a face, but does what she's supposed to do—takes the clean potatoes, starts laying them out beside the battered wooden cutting board on the table, digging through the drawer for a knife. "They *don't* need them, they're just taking them to prove they were brave enough to get in and out." She starts bundling her hair up onto her head, mashing it all together in some hybrid between a braid, a bun, and a ponytail—it doesn't matter, it won't stay out of her face, but since she won't cut it, Mrs. F insists she tries to at least keep it out of the food. Zella pulls the worn hair tie off her wrist and secures the mess as well as she can. It wobbles, but stays.

"And more foolish them, wanting to get out at all," Mrs. F retorts. "Who sneaks into a place with so much food and such a *shaynermaidele* and then sneaks back out again, huh?" She pinches Zella's cheek affectionately.

Zella grins, but hides it with her sleeve. Once it's under control, she starts chopping potatoes. Mrs. F's hands are too shaky to do the chopping these days, and the left one is too gnarled to hold the veggies steady without dropping them or cutting herself. Zella doesn't mind doing it, finds it strangely peaceful. "Ones who've seen the *maidele's* mother with a gun, I'm guessing," she teases with as straight a face as she can manage.

"Pah," Mrs. F scoffs. "Actual brave ones would stay. Stealing a head of lettuce or a tomato isn't going to cover that kind of character flaw, huh? And what kind of wives will they get? Who loves a man like that?"

Zella lets the smile show this time, and recites her foster mother's common answer: "Only a *schlemiel*, Mrs. F."

"That's right, maidele. Only a *schlemiel*." Mrs. F tuts, shaking her head. "We have enough potatoes and beans for a good cholent, huh?"

It's not actually a question. Mrs. F never questions if they have enough; she has decided that whatever she has *is* enough. She was raised with nothing, and not the kind of nothing that people who *talk* about being raised with nothing mean—she was born in occupied Poland, smuggled out too young to know her parents, sent to an orphanage in England to be safe. The problem with being safe in an orphanage was the same problem that Zella had found in every group home she'd ever been in—other kids. In Mrs. F's case, war orphans—frustrated, angry young people ready to blame anything and anyone. Moreover, they knew a Jewish nose when they saw one, and Mrs. F wasn't the kind to try and hide who she was.

Mrs. F doesn't have much of a nose anymore, not after the attack, but she still calls it a Jewish one. Proud, like the torn stub of a thing is proof of something wonderful, something godly.

Zella isn't sure at all about god, but she thinks the nose is proof enough that Mrs. F is tough as nails, and she thinks maybe that's more important than being godly when it comes to living in the world.

"We have enough," Zella confirms, even if it's unnecessary. She plugs in the slow cooker, dumping the potatoes in. One by one, she starts shelling the beans straight into the pot.

The cholent is starting to grow on her. Mrs. F doesn't even *really* care if Zella observes any of the Jewish rules, though it's usually easier to go along than it is to make all her own, separate food, so she's been getting used to it. Part of her still thinks it's

weird to make food on Thursday night or Friday morning to eat on Saturday, but come Saturday, she's been smelling it so long that finally eating it is intensely satisfying.

Zella chops the onions next, fanning out their layers as she tosses them on top of the potatoes and beans. Working in a kind of silent ritual, she takes whatever veggies Mrs. F hands her—zucchini, carrots, tomatoes—and chops them up, adding them to the slow cooker one at a time.

"Speaking of foolish people," Mrs. F says, leaning over Zella's shoulder to shake some paprika into the slow cooker, "have you heard this *mishegoss* everyone's talking about, these aliens?"

Zella snorts and keeps chopping zucchini. "People always think there's aliens. Crop circles, UFOs, you name it, there's been people saying it forever."

Mrs. F shrugs her broad shoulders. "Sometimes under smoke is fire, huh? You think it's nothing?"

Zella makes a face, surprised. "I didn't exactly think you'd be someone who buys into all that conspiracy stuff. You *just said* they were foolish people."

Another shrug. "What, foolish people can't be right?" There's a wry quirk to the old woman's mouth, visible even through the scarring. Nudging Zella jocularly in the side with an elbow, she adds, "Even some Americans admit global warming, *maidele*, huh?"

Zella tries not to laugh and fails outright. By the time she puts herself together, still wiping tears from her eyes, all the ingredients have made their way into the slow cooker and Mrs. F has officially started the cholent. Sometimes they start as early as Thursday nights, but Zella was up late this time, finishing her reading for Social Studies, and whether Mrs. F makes Zella follow Jewish rules or not, eat Jewish food or not, it's

nicer to cook together. It's more peaceful like this, anyway, in the pre-dawn morning, joking back and forth about mostly nothing—politics, neighborhood gossip, Americans, idiot children who steal vegetables, *aliens*—until everything is put together and then put away. It makes Zella feel real, somehow, grounded and solid, like she's a part of something for the first time—if not a family, then at least some small ritual, something that needs her to do her part for it to function. There's something beautiful in that, she thinks. Humanizing.

"I'll finish up," Mrs. F says, snapping gently at Zella's hands with a dishrag as she goes to dry the cutting board. "I have your schoolwork for tomorrow to go over after this. For now, you go. Take some time, go outside and be young. Admire the clouds. Flirt over the fence with boys until one is brave enough to do better than steal all my good lettuce, huh?" She flaps her wet, soapy hands at Zella.

Zella hides a smile. She feels less and less like she has to hide them these days, like Mrs. F is probably not going to mind if she acts like a real person, but it's a hard habit to shake after so many foster homes, so many people being so bizarrely angry when she'd show any emotion other than the desire to be some kind of robotic house minion. It's been nearly a year now, and Mrs. F hasn't been anything but kind—brusque, sometimes, or a little sarcastic, but kind. Considering it, Zella moves her hand, lets the smile show. "You're sure you don't need help?" she asks, just to double check.

Mrs. F smiles back, showing her missing teeth, the scars on her face twisting. On anyone else, Zella thinks it would be ugly, but on Mrs. F it seems like Zella's own smile—something secret, shared only in safety. "I can finish this. I'm not so old yet, huh?"

Zella takes the out, drying her hands on a dishrag and making her way out to the backyard. The morning is gorgeous, day just breaking, all pale blue sky and fluffy white clouds, light breeze making the shadows of leaves dance over the lawn and garden. Smiling to herself and letting it linger, Zella lies on her back and lets herself watch the clouds pass. She starts to doze, just a little, just enough that everything feels soft and serene and time passes without scrutiny.

She's startled out of her daze by a loud bang. She sits up abruptly, wonders if Mrs. F has dropped something, if she's okay, and Zella's just opening her mouth to shout in and check on her when the blue of the sunny afternoon bleaches out to hot, blinding white.

—

6:17a.m., New York

thirteen minutes until whiteout

Ria stretches forward, hooks her fingertips around her big toe, pushes her face as close to her knee as she can get it. She used to be able to rest her cheek on it, but since the accident, she can barely get far enough feel her breath ghosting over the skin of her leg.

Her hamstring aches. Ignoring it, Ria tries to focus on the little television on the poolside table, where a blonde woman is tinnily reporting the day's upcoming weather.

"Following last night's beautiful clear skies, today we're expecting scattered storms across the tri-state area—" Ria's knee twinges as she tries a basic plié to loosen up, jerking her attention back to her body, back to the here and now.

"Just takes time," she tells herself aloud, trying not to cringe at the echo in the empty room, sound bouncing off concrete and water. Sighing, Ria tips her head back,

breathing into the pain of the stretch. Light ripples on the ceiling, shining through the surface of the pool, always moving—thin, flexing diamonds of light crisscrossing on the plaster. For all that the air in here reeks of chlorine, for a second, just a second, Ria could swear she's underwater again, surrounded by green-blue salty waves, looking up at the light dancing on the underside of the surface, lungs burning as she pushes for it, pushes through the cloud of her own blood in the water, and—

Ria eases her leg down off the table, rubbing her thigh, the tendons at the back of her knee, taking deep breaths, reminding herself of where she is. Pool, not ocean. Her parents' pool house, not Banzai Beach. New York, not Oahu. Alone, no Enrique.

That last part doesn't help the burning in her lungs, just makes her throat feel tight, reminds her what an *idiot* she is.

"No," she says, gritting her teeth, channeling Madame Lefebvre. "*Vous concentrez*, Ria. *Développé*." She lifts her leg, the bad one, bending and flowing gracefully through the passé, but before she can complete the position, the muscles spasm. Her foot slams back down to the concrete floor of the pool house, hitting so hard it goes numb. Ria doesn't bother to hide this cringe—there's no Madame Lefebvre watching, no audience, and it fucking *hurts*. She digs her fingers into the muscles of her thigh, pushing mercilessly.

She knows she should get in the pool, that the warm water would make this a thousand times easier; everyone has told her so, from her physical therapist to her parents. She knows they're right, knows that the only reason she isn't in that pool getting her leg back in working order is because the shrink was right about the PTSD. That's why she's out here at dawn, pretending to swim—to hell with the shrink or worrying her

family, PTSD or not, she's *getting* her leg back, she's getting it *all* back. Her form, her place in the company, her *life*. God, she was such a fucking *moron*, risking everything for a guy.

She blames him and hates herself for it—it's not his fault that she went, doe-eyed and giggling like a schoolgirl, following him to the islands for the weekend. It had felt like some spontaneous whirlwind thing, something out of a romance movie, letting him zip her into the wetsuit, helping her to paddle out into the water, showing her how to catch just the right spot in the wave. She'd felt so proud when she'd managed to stand on her own, briefly and wobbly-legged, as proud as when she'd done her first proper arabesque. Just for a moment. Enrique had laughed, face full of joy, as proud as she was.

And then he'd toppled.

Ria had waited, smile melting off her face a little more with every moment that he didn't surface. She was back down, belly on her board, paddling towards where his board was still floating, ankle line taut. She was halfway to it when the next big wave came, breaking too soon, crashing down over her, knocking her off her board and onto the reef, too close to the surface.

They'd lost track of time, absorbed in each other as the tide went out, leaving too little space between surface and the sharp spines of the reef below.

Ria hadn't found out until the other surfer had fished her out that the Banzai Pipeline was *dangerous*. Not even normal-ocean dangerous, but pro-surfer-killing dangerous. They hadn't even found Enrique, just part of his board. Ria had been lucky, the hospital staff assured her—the gash in her thigh could've killed her if it'd been a couple inches longer, a couple inches to the side.

Ria had thrown her jello cup at the first nurse who'd told her how lucky she was. Her mother had apologized on her behalf—"Dancers, you know, those diva ballerina types,"—while scowling at her over the nurse's shoulder.

Ria glares at the pool, recriminating in her own turn. The water continues to ripple, light wavering, delicate and perfect, unaffected by Ria's ruined ballet career, her injury, her pain, her *spectacularly* stupid decisions.

"—reports of lights in the sky earlier this week have been followed by a series of calls to our tip line about—" the reporter on the television says, now a handsome man, also blonde. Maybe the whole station is just staffed with beautiful blonde people.

Enrique had been beautiful. Stunning, really, all perfect teeth and perfect black curls. He'd looked like a gold-skinned Superman. He'd laughed like nothing she'd ever heard before. She wonders, not for the first time, if it'd been *her* fault—he'd brought her, sure, but she'd distracted him. If she hadn't been there, maybe they'd *both* be fine now.

Ria resists the urge to vomit and digs her fingers harder into the muscles of her thigh. The spasms have long since stopped; she's just punishing herself now.

"Alright, Ria," she mutters, quiet enough that it doesn't echo over the water. Like she can somehow keep the water ignorant of her plans. "Just the legs. Just for a minute. You don't even have to get all the way in. Just a minute, just to soothe it a little. Come on. *Vous renforcer*. Let's go." She forces herself to move, to leave the table and lounge chairs, to cross over to the edge of the pool.

She passes the stairs at the shallow end, makes her way to the ladder. She settles down between the handrails, legs crossed underneath her, hands tight around the metal pipes. Her bad leg is throbbing. Carefully, she eases it out from under her, letting it hover

over the bright surface of the water, the other stretched out behind her for balance, keeping her on solid ground. The pool water is nothing like the sea off Banzai Beach—all fake blue from the paint on its belly, not the glass-green of the Pacific, and smelling of chemicals, not salt.

"Not the same," she informs her lungs even as they burn again, fear crawling up her throat. "Shut up and soak it. Water isn't evil. It's not like you don't shower anymore. It's not the same. You're gonna be *fine*."

Ria's leg ignores her, trembling violently as she holds it out, extended over the water.

She's still poised just like that, a bizarre *jété* of fear and hesitation, when the world explodes into white light and noise.

—

4:46 a.m., Texas

forty-four minutes until whiteout

"—need you to take this seriously, Linda, I know what I'm talking about. I was *respected*, I was in the top of the field, I have *forgotten* more than those idiots will ever *know*—"

"I know, Papi," Linda says, as soothing as always, pressing a glass of water into one of her father's hands and his daily dose of morning meds into the other. The fear in his eyes is real; he *believes* it all so deeply that sometimes Linda is almost swayed into acknowledging that there's a slim, slim chance that he might not be entirely crazy. "If I promise to take it seriously, will you just take your pills, please?"

Her father *had* been respected. Professor Miguel Guerrero was at the top of his field, a tenured professor of Mesoamerican Archaeology at the University of Texas at Austin for nearly twenty years—until he'd spent the night stargazing on top of Coatépéc and taken a fall down the pyramid's steps on his way back down in the morning. He'd already been getting up there in age and clarity, but he'd come back to the University raving about how the star gods of the Aztecs were *aliens*, and, well, while pyramid/alien connections might get you a spot on television, it had meant an abrupt boot out of academia for Linda's father. Her heart hurts for him any time she thinks about it.

Her father narrows his eyes, fist tightening around the pills. "You have to know I'm right, *mija*. All these things on the news—it's just what I predicted. The ancient Mesoamerican civilizations didn't just *know* about them, they *worshipped* them—just—just—bring me the big Quetzalcoatl text, you know the one, right over—" he waves his hand and there's a tremor in it that isn't usually there. Linda takes his hand and squeezes it as she goes over to the end table where the tome in question is stacked under a half dozen other Mesoamerican history and mythology books. He squeezes back, hand weaker than it was before all this, but it's still a squeeze. He's still in this reality with her, at least sometimes. Her stomach roils at the thought of losing him—either to this obsession or to the medications meant to make him let go of it.

Linda passes him the book, a favorite reference since his tumble, dog-eared and thick with sticky notes in a rainbow of colors, tossing it—maybe a little less gently than she should—into his lap. Without a place to work or anything to focus on, it had only gotten worse—endless conspiracy theories, essay after rant after essay on the impending return of these aliens, and with the weird lights in the sky and geological issues on the

news the last few days, well. If Linda had already been having trouble getting her father to take his medication, now it's become nearly impossible.

"You're not allowed to tell me the Quetzalcoatl story again until you swallow those pills," she says, mouth a firm line. She doesn't like to be harsh with him, but the nurses have impressed upon her how important it is to have clear boundaries so she doesn't lose herself, her own sanity in trying to salvage his. "It's the middle of the night, and I have exams to study for, Papi."

Her father's face softens, just a touch. "You do such good work, *mija*." He looks down at his fistful of pills, then back up at Linda. "If I take them—" There's a sense of defeat, of helplessness there, one Linda is all too familiar with herself: the teetering between letting him rave on or making him someone he isn't, someone soft and stupid. He doesn't finish the sentence, just squeezes the handful of pills until his knuckles are white, closing his eyes and shaking his head.

The child in Linda's heart weeps at this display of fallibility, proof that even strong and brilliant fathers can be weak and frightened, proof that she won't magically lose her own fears and become wise and strong as she grows. Proof that the world is just an endless path of obstacles, complications, and loss.

Monstro lifts his head and growls, low and deep, from his place at their feet. The sound is somehow almost comforting, grounding.

"I agree, Monstro," Linda says to the raggedy Rottweiler, shaking herself out of her self-pity and scratching him behind his tattered ears. "Papi *is* keeping me from becoming a real vet by stalling us with alien stories. So many sweet things like you,

doomed to sickness and death without me, wallowing in their misery because I don't have time to memorize cockatoo anatomy..."

Monstro huffs and lays his heavy head on Linda's feet. She can feel a little drool drip onto her toes. Well, she's not a big fan of cockatoos, either—even the nice ones are mean.

"You're just being silly now," her father grumbles. "You know I support your dream, *mija*. I know how important your work is."

Sighing, Linda raises an eyebrow at her father. "Yeah? Good. Then take 'em."

Her father scowls, but tosses the pills back, downing the glass of water all in one pull. He opens his mouth, showing empty cheeks and tongue. "Happy now?" he asks, sour. "You and the doctors are destroying my brilliant mind, you know."

Linda grins at him, ignores the prickle at the back of her neck about how right he might be. "I know, Papi. It's a conspiracy of the highest order, *sí*? But until we finish our dastardly plan to end the world and feed it to the star gods, I have exams to study for if I want to be able to help horrible beasts like this one, yeah?" She nudges Monstro with her sticky, drool-covered toes. He rolls his one good eye up at her, unperturbed, and snorts. He'd survived three years in the dog fights in the warehouses down by the railroad tracks, a veritable senior citizen by their standards. He'd been violent and terrified when she'd taken him in, twitchy and quick to snap—not unlike her father has become on his slide away from sanity, really.

Now—well, now he's her world, a big, grumbling, drooling pillar of strength that loves her unconditionally, lets her cry when her father is asleep and it's all too much,

curls up and sleeps at her feet when she studies, licks her toes until she comes back to reality and remembers to eat, to sleep.

"Yes, yes," her father says, sighing and tipping his head back, his already wild white hair splayed against the high back of his chair. "You're so pretty, *mija*; you could at least be as nice as your face, you know." It's something his own mother, Linda's grouchy old Abuela, had used to say about mean girls—*if only she were half as nice as her face*.

Instead of it feeling like a scold, it just makes Linda smile wider. "You always told me it's much more important to be smart than pretty, Papi. Surely that applies to my attitude, too."

Her father's mouth quirks at the corners, and for a minute, he's just her father again, exasperated and fond, no rambles or other worlds in the space between them. "Too smart for your own good, you little fiend. You must be mine. Fine, fine, study, then—" he nudges Monstro with his toes until the huge dog stands up and puts his head on his lap so Linda's father can pet him. "I'll just keep your beast busy, then. The two of us, poor old men, victim to your whims..." he trails off, but Linda can hear the smile in his voice. "*Estoy bien, mija*; you don't have to worry about me."

She does anyway; her life has become a cycle of worrying about him, missing who he'd been before, studying for veterinary school, taking care of all the pets, and occasionally finding a moment to sleep or eat. "I'll just be in the study, Papi—just shout if you need me, okay?" She moves the television remote far enough that he can't reach it and get himself all riled up with more of the crop circle, lights in the sky nonsense they've been playing nonstop over the last day or two.

Her father flaps a hand, eyes already starting to close as the meds kick in. "The

beast will take care of me, don't worry." He rubs Monstro's head, soothing at the scar tissue around his bad eye, making the dog sigh happily, tongue lolling. "We'll be just fine. I'll be napping when the aliens come to kill us all and prove me right." He grimaces, and Linda feels that back-of-the-neck prickle again, that niggling feeling that the doctors might be wrong, that there's some way of understanding and knowing that's new and real in her father since that night on Coatépec.

Linda presses a kiss to his forehead as he starts to drift off. "I love you, you know. Even if you think I'm mean," she whispers, pressing her own forehead to his for a second, trying not to cry for the father that had raised her, nearly absent in the man in front of her.

Her father smiles sleepily, drunk on sedatives. "I'm mean, too, *mija*. We're too smart to always be nice about it."

Linda chokes out a laugh. "So that's how you justify it."

Her father just flaps a hand again, a silent, *Go, go*.

Linda goes, padding quietly out of the room on bare feet, followed by a small army of ragtag dogs and cats and a lone monitor lizard, all trooping at her heels into the study.

"You have to be quiet if you're coming in here," she warns the herd, waving a stern finger at them. This is a place of quiet in and of itself; in here, her worries and her father's fixation take a back seat to the sense of peace the books bleed into the air. Here, all the answers to all the questions in the world are at Linda's fingertips if she just knows where to look, and that near-mystical power numbs her fear, guilt, and indecision to the point that she can focus on school, at least a little bit at a time. "I have work to get done, you fiends."

Cervantes, a scarred-up Chihuahua, yips once, some sort of canine agreement, and trots over to Linda's armchair, settling underneath it. Cervantes is immediately joined by *all* the cats. The other dogs go to arrange themselves one by one around the room, circling and huffing as they lay down. Eddie, the elderly monitor lizard, creeps onto the arm of Linda's chair as she gets her veterinary textbook and settles into it, curling herself into the opposite arm so Eddie has enough room. They settle into a quiet music of breathing, turning pages, and the occasional soft snuffle of a dog caught up in dreams.

Linda is just getting to the end of the chapter, just settling into the rhythm of read-highlight-read, when there's a loud noise, so sharp and sudden that all the animals are instantly standing, Eddie falling right off the arm of Linda's chair.

"Papi," she calls, getting to her feet so fast that she nearly trips over herself, "I *told* you to call for me if you needed something!" She weaves her way through the roomful of animals with their perked ears and raised hackles, the hair on the back of her neck prickling yet again, a strange feeling of weightlessness rippling along her skin. "What happened, did you try to get one of the books from the high shelves again? I told you, you can't—" Linda stops abruptly.

Her father is still asleep in his chair. Monstro is on his feet, taking up a guard position over her father, hackles up, growl rumbling in his chest. He's not facing Linda in the doorway, instead growling at the window. Something primal in Linda's chest goes cold.

Swallowing her fear, Linda goes to join the Rottweiler, careful not to wake her father, putting a hand on Monstro's huge head to settle him as she cranes over him to look through the glass.

Linda has just a moment to think that maybe her father wasn't as crazy as he'd seemed—to understand to her bones that she'd been wrong, the doctors had been *wrong*, and her father had understood something beyond them—before the white light rushes through the room like a wave, hotter than hot, consuming everything.

—

3:09 a.m, Montana

one hour and twenty-one minutes until whiteout

Greta's dad calls it an art studio, but it's really a junkyard. It's a silver bullet trailer in the middle of a junkyard, and for all the weird, twisted spires of metal and vaguely anthropomorphic statues cobbled together out of old tires and toilet seats and who knows what else, it doesn't really look very artistic. At this hour, full moon still high, the sculptures and junk piles cast a forest of tall, warped black shadows that stretch out over the yard, crisscrossing the driveway, ominous and almost alive. Still not artistic, just creepy.

"This is such bullshit," Ansel complains, kicking at some anonymous piece of junk, sending it skittering across the dusty yard. "I don't see why we have to be out looking for more shit for him, it's not like he doesn't have enough. As if this garbage is even *art* in the first place."

Everything is art, their dad always says, usually while holding a welding torch and one or two pieces of useless, hideous crap. He'd even named both his children after artists—Ansel for his favorite photographer, Greta for his favorite old-timey actress. Their mother had *been* art, had been his *muse*, at least according to him—apparently, her beauty had been the impetus to create half the garbage littering the yard. He'd even sold a

couple of *those* pieces, so they must've been decent, even if it's all nearly indistinguishable to Greta.

"No argument here," Greta says, shrugging her backpack higher on her shoulders and digging her hands into her pockets. Distantly, she wonders why the hell the make girls' pockets so *small*. She lets the thought drift off, unimportant, as they reach the edge of the yard and start to make their way down the side of the road. "We could be sleeping in. Or, I don't know, *socializing*," she adds, snorting.

"Hey, *you* might be kidding, but I could be on a date right now," Ansel grouses. He's already wandering off down the sloped shoulder of the road, kicking at the high grass to see if there's anything interesting. It's not even light out, grass lit only by the moon and stars, but they have to go out at night during the summer if they don't want to end up with heatstroke. The full moon is bright enough to see by, anyway, on the long, flat stretch of road.

"Oh, right," Greta says, laughing. She heads off the other shoulder of the road, looking under scraggly bushes and brushing aside tall stands of dry grass. They live off a main trucking route, so they end up with a lot of little odds and ends on the side—bits of tires and things other people would call trash, but which will earn her and her brother praise and possibly the occasional bit of spending money if they bring them home. "Like somebody's gonna date *you*."

She really means *us*—they're the weird, poor kids out on the edge of town. Everyone knew the horrible rumor that their dad killed their mom. He didn't, of course, he's harmless enough, but he's an artist and he's *weird*, and in small towns, that's never really a desirable thing. Their country accents and the association of both artists and the

poor with drug use means that most people just assume right off the bat that they're crazy, tripping, or dumb. It drives Ansel up the wall, but Greta doesn't mind letting people underestimate her; it makes her feel like she's in control, knowing something they don't. She and Ansel are the offspring of the undesirable thing, and therefore *also* undesirable. Or at least that's the math she's put together; Ansel's a year ahead of her, in the eleventh grade, so maybe he's found some way around the whole thing.

"Like you know anything," Ansel says, bending down and rifling through the grass at his feet. He comes up empty, shoves his hands in his back pockets, and keeps going. "Jenna Morgan asked me to go to the movies."

"Jenna Morgan," Greta says, distaste heavy in her mouth, "is a rich bitch who is definitely trying to pull something over on you."

"Whatever," Ansel bites out, bitter. "Being pranked by a hot girl still sounds like a better way to spend a Saturday night than kicking around in the dirt on the side of the road."

Greta can't really argue with that, so she just keeps picking through the grass, searching by feel rather than eyesight—it's still too dark out to make out much, but she's spent most of her life looking for junk in the grass, she knows what to feel for, even through her sneakers. A kicked rock feels different than a kicked piece of metal or scrap of rubber. She hardly ever even has to look down.

"You hear about those lights in the sky?" she asks, looking idly up at the lightening sky as she kicks her way across the slope.

"The UFOs or whatever?" Ansel asks, wandering out over the road to meet her on her side. His side has tapered off into woods, dense and too dark to see through in this

light. "I think it's just one of those bullshit things the government and the media do to distract us, you know? Like how they pass all those sneaky, shitty laws whenever there's a big celebrity scandal or whatever."

"Hmm," Greta agrees, nodding, but still not looking away from the sky. The stars are faint, but part of her imagines that she can feel things out among them, the whole universe, so close she could almost reach up and touch it. Big sky country, they call it out here. Greta can understand that. Sometimes it's like living under a blue glass bowl full of lights, so close but so *infinite*. She feels small, but not in a bad way—small like maybe it doesn't matter where she grew up, how much money she has or doesn't have, she's just a speck among a billion other specks, just one light seen from really far away.

"Hey, I think I've got something," Ansel calls from up ahead, higher up the slope, closer to the road.

Putting thoughts of the vastness of the universe aside for the time being, Greta trots up the hill to meet him. "What even *is* that?" she asks, crouching down and squinting at the thing at Ansel's feet.

"No goddamn clue," Ansel says, grinning, self-satisfied, "but I bet if we bring it back quick, Dad'll let me go meet Jenna at the theater later."

Greta snorts. "Good to know you're focused on the job." She reaches out to brush the grass off the thing, trying to figure out what it is. It's a blocky metallic shape a little bigger than her head, with little lights in different candy colors, pulsing faintly—a part of a machine, maybe, or a toy that fell off a truck or out some unfortunate kid's window?

"Can we even carry it? It looks heavy."

Ansel makes a face. "We're carrying it. We'll put it in your backpack and each take a strap or something, I don't care, but I'm getting this home and then I'm gonna go have an actual *life* for once. Come on." He motions for Greta's backpack impatiently.

Standing up and shrugging out of it, she hands Ansel the backpack. "Whatever. I have to pee anyway."

"You're such a girl," Ansel says, rolling his eyes. He unzips the backpack, laying it open on the ground, and goes to pull the thing into it. It doesn't budge. "Give me a hand with this, will you?"

Greta rolls her eyes right back. "What, so first I'm such a *girl*, and then your *manly* self needs my help lifting something? Gee, Ansel, I don't know what to do with that."

"Ugh, whatever." Ansel shakes his head, pulls at the object again. This time, it scoots just a little, and he manages to roll it over and onto the open backpack. "I guess I *don't* need your—hey, check this out."

"What?" Greta crouches back down, looking where Ansel's pointing. There's a little button on the side facing upwards, just a little silver button like you'd see on an elevator or something. "Huh. Maybe that turns it on?"

Ansel shrugs, thumbing the button to check. The object whirs cheerfully, pale rainbow of lights brightening.

"Guess so," Greta says, narrowing her eyes at the bright, sugary colors. Maybe it *is* a toy. "Okay, come on, zip it up, I actually seriously do have to pee now." She shifts, uncomfortable, impatient.

Ansel straightens the backpack up around the object, zipping it up. Taking the straps in both hands, he goes to lift it off the ground and totally fails. "Damn, this thing really is heavy."

Sighing and putting Ansel's *girl* jokes aside in favor of actually getting home to a bathroom so she doesn't have to pee by the side of the road, Greta grabs a strap of the backpack and, on Ansel's count, *heaves*.

All at once, the backpack rips, the object and the bottom falling out, the rest of it coming away in Greta and Ansel's hands, sending them both sprawling backwards.

"Ow," Greta says, wincing.

"Shit," Ansel says, jerking his head at the object. "I think we broke it or something."

It's a few inches away from the ripped bottom piece of the backpack, lying button-side down. All the lights are an angry red now, blinking rapidly, and it's letting out a high, awful wailing noise, like a tornado alarm.

"I think you might have a point with that one," Greta says, scooting back on her hands, something in her gut telling her to get *away* from the loud, flashing thing.

A shadow falls over them, something huge passing between the open road and the moon. Greta looks up and immediately wishes she hadn't.

"Well, I'm definitely distracted," she says, swallowing hard.

Ansel makes a face at her. "What?"

"Like you were saying," she says, hearing her own voice like it's far away, "about the government distracting us. So that they can pass—" she takes a deep, rattling breath as she looks up into the belly of the huge spaceship, "—pass weird laws or whatever."

Ansel finally looks up. "Holy fucking shit," he says, slack-jawed, as the ship spins, lights blinking all over it in candy colors just like the weird little piece of junk—or probe, or bomb, or beacon, or whatever it actually is. "I'm not going on date with Jenna Morgan, am I?"

Greta sighs, closing her eyes with sisterly exasperation so intense it actually overshadows the terrifying alien spacecraft above them. "No, Ansel, you're probably not."

The belly of the ship opens up, a dark, vast void like a night with no stars. Briefly, Greta feels small again, the good kind of small, just one little light seen from far away. The lights above her spin and blink around the central blackness, almost beautiful. She could almost *be* one of those lights. *Everything is art*, her dad always says. *Art is anything that makes you feel something.*

Groping across the dark grass, she reaches for Ansel's hand, finds it, squeezes hard. He squeezes back. For a moment, Greta feels psychic, magical, feels her connection to *everything*. For that moment, she feels the complexity of herself, the beauty in it, in lines of DNA and hordes of bustling enzymes and blood that is pumping fast, way too fast. She feels the ends of every spiderwebbing capillary inside her, imagines how many there might be, how they work tirelessly through every bit of her without her having any say in it, having to do anything to keep them at it. She is aware of every tiny muscle that normally moves minutely in concert with the rest but is now frozen with fear, every nerve that sings discordantly with the wind and pressure and tactile darkness of the spaceship. Every breath tastes like dust and nighttime and a foreign, metallic thing that smells like danger and death, a smell that belongs to the impossible thing above them.

In that long moment, suspended and drawn out with that human desperation for one more minute, one more instant, Greta considers that she is, in fact, a spectacular creation with an unknown maker, considers it the way she realizes her father must consider it, a happenstance collection of marvelous machinery and grace. She clings to that thought, that epiphany of what *art* she is, Ansel is, every single commonplace thing must, under its surface, have the capacity to be. Her eyes water with the magnitude of that, or maybe they're just the tears of a scared little girl in the face of something that makes her own complexity seem dull, seem as simple an invention as the wheel, as the lever. She honestly doesn't know, and she takes a strange comfort in that, just lets herself spend those last few seconds tangled up in the recognition of herself in relation to a universe of unlikely but very real beauty.

Then the light comes, spilling out from the guts of the ship like a waterfall, pouring out over everything, burning everything away.

END

The House and the Hospital

Endometriosis

Of what did you fashion me,
you slapdash Pygmalion,
that I have ended up here,
a thing asymmetrical and anguished?
The things of which I have found in myself, maybe:
seafoam skin and red clay feet,
foot after foot of handspun green wool,
spent teabags, crumpled and dry,
one crumbling square of stolen bath house tile?
Or the more traditional route:
one seed, one egg—
drowsy red poppy and bumblebee quail, respectively—
or simple stone, cut down to size with shaky hands?
What sloppy work yields such things—
tree roots all through my insides,
woven through this thicket of bones,
overgrown with capillary kudzu,
contracting,
constricting,
leaving me full of too much of myself
with no room for more?

The MRI

The MRI is in the morning;
its constant magnetic heartbeat is the very essence of fear,
drumming in my ears, my throat, and I
don't sleep. I haven't seen myself
in three months now, a whole season of making nothing
at all. The blood they take is opalescent, beautiful; it can't be mine.

Nothing is mine.
The MRI is in the morning
and I am afraid of nothing
now—moment to moment the fear
shifts to irrational bravado and even I don't believe myself.
The wet-grey troll woman I have become glares at me each time I

shuffle past that bathroom mirror; I
can't imagine what she wants from me—what could I give when not even my blood is
mine?
I cannot make art with any of my limbs; without it, I am not myself,
just a moribund puppet woken every morning
with a flurry of needles and fear.
I am a shadow of clouds, moving and visible and yet nothing.

The MRI is in the morning and there is nothing
to be done about it. Sleep is a distant dream and I
am a golem of bruises and fear.
Not of the machine, the procedure, but the mine
field of possible answers awaiting me. I wait for morning
and try to remember myself.

I have always had such a strong sense of her, *myself*,
full of warmth and round, smooth marbles of delight and strength and this, this nothing,
this sticky-sagging-bleeding-oozing thing that greets me each morning?
She is a stranger that I
cannot claim as mine.
Before her? I bow to fear.

I have never been one to give way to fear,
but, as I've admitted, I am not myself
here, I am grey-woman and no part of me is mine—
they are free to take and take, I hold nothing
back, I would give it all for answers, I
swear, but. But the MRI is in the morning,

and I am no less full of fear, no more than the same—
no, never mind, nothing—
the nurses are coming and I forget myself, I
lose even the few thoughts I called mine as the nurses come to take more
blood and remind me not to eat because don't forget, honey, the
MRI is in the morning.

And She's Still Afraid of Basements

You can't trap the night sky
in a basement,
can't teach it to love red better than blue—
I'm here, I'm always here, but I've never
been much of a wolf, you know,
and the best one was hit at who knows
how many miles
an hour—you probably do,
I guess.
You know all those dark little things,
fluttering things in the jar of your belly
and they hurt you, edges of their wings sharp
like paper.
You pretend to like the hurt, but
you really just can't stand feeling hollow
and they just flock like moths to all that starlight
you're hiding in your bones.
You keep asking me to write us
a fairy tale, but the
more I dig in that garden, the more
bones I find, bones I piece together,
fragments rearticulated on
wires that cut my fingertips like we used to do—
blood sisters, Snow White and Rose Red in
the rose garden making
promises, promises.

The moon is always bigger on the nights that I'm with you,
some silver promise that there's a better life to come
but while the night sky makes promises,
you still can't go down to the basement,
any basement,
and I can't look your father
in the eye without seeing
red, seeing
black spots, digging
my nails into my palms until they drip war paint, getting
ready for a fight I am not
allowed to have on your behalf.
The word *molested* doesn't cover it;
abused makes you a victim
and that's the very last thing you deserve—
that big moon hangs heavy in your hangover sunglasses to remind me:
there is a whole side of you nobody's seeing,

a picture of a pipe is not a pipe and
a reflection of the moon is not the moon—
You are a whole night sky's worth of secrets—
you swallow them still struggling,
choke them down like bile, *own* them,
keep them trapped behind your teeth
just to have some control
over something.

I know you hate when people try
to take care of you
but I think it's just because you know they'll all
eventually go away—
there is nowhere to go *but* away;
you're going to have to come to terms with it, you know?
We don't get to skip out on death like it's detention—
but couldn't you let me try to do something,
something,
something vicious and righteous and which somehow makes me
feel like I've made up for not having known, not having
saved you?
I know, I know, you hate
the idea of being saved,
but I'm pretty sure that's just because, eventually, you
got worn out with the screaming and
realized that none of us were coming for you.
I'm here now, I'm just always
here now, thinking about
how you can't go into basements,
not even *my* basement, and there's no killing
the feeling like even as a five year old I
should've seen,
guessed,
known, but your teeth
were clenched tight around those
little papery wings
and I didn't even know to look.

This is my postscript, this is my
promise with bloody fingertips in the garden,
this is me digging up all the bones and unscrewing the jar
in your belly and holding your hand while you
read me all your secrets so I can hide them in poems
so you don't have to tell another soul—
this is me telling you unequivocally a few things that are true:
you *cannot* trap the night sky in a basement

and pricking your fingertips with rose thorns and
pressing them together *does* make you real sisters and
I will *always* be looking, now,
always.

The Bone Terrarium (I)

There is a spot,
just a little spot,
between my lungs,
and it's filled up with some evil thing
some living ache that reaches,
reaches
its fingers out into those lungs and
squeezes
every time I breathe deep.

I like to tell myself
that painful space is
growing flowers,
the pain is just from their growing, their greening—
a tiny terrarium tucked under bone,
full of damp moss and wet-beaded glass and
maybe just one thing that, even if it hurts,
will give me something pretty at the end—
like a tattoo, you know?

I wanted violets or pansies,
because you can eat them, they're *useful*—
or peonies, because they're like pink cabbages—
but these are no soft flowers;
only little fingers of cacti can grow in the dry gulley
of my throat.

From Under the Table in the Hallway

I dig my nails into my arms,
 push hard,
 drag them down,
long red lines of new flesh
 unveiled,
 again and again,
 more with each moment,
like Inanna
on her descent to meet Ereshkigal in the Underworld.

The first veil is surface skin—
 epidermis—
 easy to shed, easy to sacrifice.

My skin hasn't felt clean since I became a jar-jailed firefly,
 bottled up to light your way.
Small creature fashioned of yielding flesh—
 foolish, yes?
So easy to sink fingernails into—
 squish.
So easy to steal from.

The other veils are simple things, too,
valuable not for their rarity,
 but for their necessity—
things like
 sleeping without nightmares
 that you are in some corner of my room,
 driving past Shell gas stations
 without my ribs aching
 with something between
 rage
 and
 fear,
 hearing certain phrases
 without flinching.

I shed them here,
 naked,
even as I sit with my knees tucked up high under long skirts,
my twitching hands pulled up into my sleeves.

My insides roar like thunder to the oncoming rain,
mouth silent,

stomach singing
 off key, too loud,
like a dirty
 barroom
 drunk.
If I close my eyes, I see dark earth under my feet,
 path to a distant gateway,
 a distant gateway behind which
Ereshkigal waits.
 I wonder if she will be able to tell that I didn't shed my veils
 willingly,
that you stole the strength
 in my gut
 and in my fingers
until I could hold onto them no longer—
 what will I say to her
 to excuse
 my failures?

It's all struck me sideways now,
 years later,
seemingly
 unconnected
 to my summer slaughter in your jar,
but it sends me
scurrying
 like scattering rats
at a
 sudden sound—
Shrouding myself between table and wall,
breath sharp
like paper corners
in my throat as I tell myself
that I'm being stupid—

that it doesn't count if you didn't fight it.
It doesn't count if you didn't actually say the word
 no.
It doesn't count
if it was your best friend.

But the panic is proof plenty.

It counts
if it makes you feel sick.
It counts

if voices like his make the bile rise,
send tides of tears to spill
salt and sparkling makeup
down
your
cheeks.

It counts,
Even if saying the word
rape
makes you feel
like an imposter.

Imposters don't sacrifice their dignity to weep under tables.
(Dignity is the most precious veil,
the most beloved,
but the most diaphanous
and easily torn
away.)

Fireflies' lives are short,
but the memories of woman are long,
and I am being taught by eerily articulate tigers
how to clean you from my skin,
how to murder you
with words.

Perhaps it is you who should think of what to say to Ereshkigal.

Veins (II)

I've got violets in my veins:
diaphanous, innumerable, waiting to bloom—
 the very idea of it is so close to death
 I get nauseous thinking of it.
The nurses sedated me after they caught me
 trying to scratch them out.

I drift, half awake, half drowned in drugs,
and dream instead of a patch of moss,
oversaturated green filling up my eyes—
dream of its outrageous
 verdant
 softness
and begin to dream of other comforting things:

hot tea with cream and honey, drunk
 beneath a window with which I am still in love—
being love-drunk in that hidden alley
 where I kissed a boy with red hair—
and, not to be forgotten, a woman's lap
 on which to lay my head
while she feeds me ice cream
 made of elderflowers and rainwater—
like fairy stories made for children:
innocent and safe as houses,
 even in the dark.

But it's not, it's a promise,
a promise made over ice cream and
dotted with blood violets and
sworn fast with a cuppa and a hand rolled cigarette.
It's a promise holding back loneliness,
holding back tears but I—

I am alone with these little indigo traitors,
 flowers tasting of petals and meat,
looking to fill me up and spill out and over,
 growing,
 growing, even then,
even under that sacred window
where I slept easy, even with
my veins full of violets
and my mouth full of stars.

Grey ghost, you have no right to linger,
 no right to look at me;
 your eyes have seen too much of me already,
 your hands have skidded over skin
 sweat-slick from horror,
 not exertion,
 rot from your decaying lungs
 curdling my every inhale.

That smile, swamp-sweet with true love—
true love, you insisted,
true love—

I still taste death and decomposing dreams of rescue,
ectoplasm thick like bile in my throat.

Somehow, I still haven't learned my lesson,
still think escape is easier than exorcism,
fear still sending me scurrying,

scurrying.

My desperately collected charms keep you at a distance:

red string pulled from someone else's sweater,
tied in four guardian knots—

nine rings on my fingers, sacred circles of silver
guarding every knuckle but one—

forced laughter shared with strangers,
too loud—

a twig of holly clutched too tightly,
left-handed—

a penny in my shoe, holy copper;
they're all lucky, really—

but you endure:

a sick satellite orbiting,

a familiar flutter in my periphery each time I raise my head,

a familiar shudder-drop in my gut when I hear your voice.

I hate myself for the fear that keeps me moving,
moving,

keeps me hiding in conversations with strangers,
watching my own back in mirrors—

I was supposed to be a strong woman,

wasn't I?

As a sorcerer, you are a failed creation
but for the way you have taught my hands
to dream of vengeance,
to dream of wrath.

Dreams of brutality make fists of them,
 longing to dig in,
 short-nailed and feral,
no shadow of soft femininity in the act
 of breaking, rending:
 remaking a recurring nightmare
 into no more than bruised flesh
 and broken bone—
 would that make me feel strong again?
These clenched fists,
 tangles of tendons and better bones than yours,
 they have the capacity for strength,
 hunger to use it.
But the stomach-shaking fear in the rest of me screams
 that you are a ghost,
 a ghost,
 a ghost:
that I have no power over you.

I would settle for less than that,
 far less:
just power over my own trembling fingers,
 my own ragged voice.

Spring Cleaning

I start the music and begin the process of getting better.

It is not beautiful, it is

dancing frenetically and

doing long division in my head,

falling gracelessly in love with myself,

with all the mismatched cargo I carry—

half-finished stories,

kneecaps,

elbows,

children's songs—

keeping with me nothing lofty,

only things heroically mundane.

I let go every triumph and disaster

that made me into this desperate thing:

every old wound and silver scar,

all the heaped baskets of trophies

for winning fights that never mattered—

until there is nothing intelligible left in me,

only math

and movement

and a soul, half-starved,

waiting.

The Garden and the Rain

Braid-Words of the Bone-Burying Girl

My legs live sleeping,
weak and wobbling, painful pins
buzzing like insects.
I create beauty
in which I can drown myself:
weaving, gardens, clay.
I must not stop this
making, lest I remember
the girl that I was.
It is the garden
in which I hide my old self;
she is just bones now.
I blanket her bones
with tiny poems and plants
so that she can rest:

My mother taught me
as a child, out in the dirt,
their green mysteries:
sage: dry and bundle
with red or white thread; burn for
cleansing and comfort.
Phlox: both pink and blue
to spread out like an army
fighting to feed bees.
Hydrangea: reveals
hidden secrets in the soil
that its roots devour.
Peppermint: eases
tension and bad digestion;
also, it smells nice.
Lavender: for sleep,
rub its oil into the skin
or drink as a tea.
And Carolina
jasmine, poisonous-pretty;
we both like the cold.

Sometimes I find one,
a bone. I am forced to remember
the things I've buried;
the way my hands shake,
the way thoughts slip through my head:
diaphanous silk.

The way words clatter
in my mouth like dice, gravel,
the silver tongue now tin.
doctors say I'll heal.
I do not rely on them—
I bury the bones.
Here in the garden
they remain: full of echoes,
shadows of myself.

Violets

You can take off my clothes,
yes,
but you will not find the woman you are looking for.

No, under these skirts and sleeves are ragged organs,
pulsing like stars,
growing violets on their skins instead of meat and muscle.

The bones beneath them are freshwater pearls,
lumpy and asymmetrical,
but they shimmer no less for that.

And these violets and viscera love you—
fiercely, wildly, unabashedly—
but they are not soft breasts and a narrow waist.

I will understand if,
perhaps,
you do not love them as I do,

but they have swelled and burst
through concrete and convalescence to keep me alive:
infinite, imperfect, and utterly my own.

Regentrinketee

If she is curled up and sleeping in the belly of a storm,
 don't wake her.
Her dreams will be sweet,
 for once,
and when she awakens,
she will shuffle to the kitchen,
 pour herself a hot mug of tea,
 and tell you all about them.
You will see their lingering sweetness
 in the crows' feet
 at the corners of her eyes.
They will inspire you far more
 than your nightmares do.
Heart warm,
 heart beating hard and steady as rain on glass,
 heart beating in the bottom of the mug in her hand,
you will think:
 this sweet-eyed storm-sleeper,
 tea-drinker,
 dream-speaker,
 victim of nightmares
 and hero of rainy afternoon naps—
what is there to do in the face of that but love?

Predawn Song

For Kathryn

I'm having too many thoughts in these last months and I—
I can't sleep.
I can't sleep, there are ghosts in my room
and one of them's you and she's holding the moon
like it's fragile glass, like it's old, old paper,
and she's speaking in a language she'd chide me to remember and
I don't know the words but the tune is familiar—
she's saying that she's gone home.

Gone home to the summer fields found down the winding middle way,
dancing like a raindrop to the sea.
She shines
silver from the inside and she's drinking faerie wine like it's water—
like it's water—
and she still smells like amber, but now elderflowers, too,
and she moves like she's dancing and sets aside the moon
on a bookshelf in the corner of the room—
the little bookshelf
in the corner
of the room.

And she holds out her dancer's hand and she says,
"Hey there, my girl," and the world
shrinks down, folds close like moths' wings and old dreams
and other silky midnight things,
and for a second, for a moment, no time has gone,
we've just kept living on,
she never slid out of her body on that dawn and
away, away.

I take up the moon because I know that it's not fragile;
it's too busy beating hard between my lungs,
too busy giving life inside my breast,
putting light into my bones so I don't rest—
I know it's strong, strong as steel,
strong as dark, primordial clay—
so I take up the moon and I
take up her hand and I
breathe as she fades and I stay,
and I stay.

Bedtime for the Someday Child

Do you remember
when you were just a dream I held
 in my heart,
 in my belly?
Secret, waiting for the collision of cells,
the magic of atoms that create themselves
 from almost nothing.
In you, I gave birth to the universe:
 I dreamed until you were clear in my mind,
 clear as crystals,
 clear as the sea.
Nine days, nine nights I dreamt
 and then I manifested the dream of you
 from the softest dark, deep belly of the cosmos—
and you?
You were perfect.

Sleep now.
Breathe deeply—
 until your chest begins to ache with it.
You are still perfect.
You drift on the starstuff that made you,
 infinitely complicated and
 so, so simple.
Can you hear the rain?
It's always raining somewhere,
you just have to listen hard enough:
 slips off leaves,
 batters tin roofs,
 glides down car windows
 as they move through the night.
Your eyelids are heavy as velvet.
The moonstones in your eyes
and the stars in your spine blur,
 fade to dusky indigo,
 wink out until morning.

Song of My Matriarchy

Today
I can see into the hearts of men.

Today
I am plied only by the fixed dance of the firmament,
acquiesce only to the will
of this inhuman, ugly grace borne in like the tide—

Today
I am an instrument of chaos,
of consumption—
a figment of primordial muck given breath
sustained by raw moonlight, unpasteurized stars.
Disgusting, grotesque—
but stunningly, beautifully
female.

Today
my ancestors sing their songs on my tongue—
songs of women desperately crossing the Atlantic to meet a skyline they say shamed the
stars—
picked olives from frozen dirt in the village *vicino a Napoli* until their fingers bled—
raised three children while working three jobs—
suffered at the hands of men to raise a better one—

Today
I am generations of women
who moved and moved and moved and
moved *on*—
from Italy,
to the city,
from the city,
from Ellis Island to New York, New Jersey, Nova Scotia and on and on—
new, new, new—
wild women hunting a better life.

Today
I am the sum
of the eons of cumulative potential carried in my body cavity,
a question cyclically asked, answered, ushered away.
Every egg unfilled cracks its way out of me in time,
leaving sticky, salty red and the tang of iron,
an aching gut and the brief, tangible proof of what I am,
what I can make or unmake.

Today
I apologize for nothing—
no loudness, no grossness, no occupation of space—
because there is nothing
to apologize for:
I am perfect,
yielding flesh and fleeting memory something secondary,
tertiary,
forgotten, buried with no need of discovery.

Today, I see into the hearts of men
but concern myself
with the hearts of women—
those of the women I have been
and those I may yet become.

Origins (or: An Ode to Myself by Way of Being Mostly About You)

I cannot forget where I come from.
Slithering snake-hipped women
wriggling, writhing,
unashamed.
What is there to be ashamed of—
these thighs, these bellies, the way
they move?
Never,
never.
When I see you, I pull my shoulders back,
let my hips swing like Clay Mother, Copper Woman, Mama with the Ocean Eyes.
I hold my head like a queen.

I cannot forget where I come from,
but your hands are like birch branches—
winter-stripped,
white as moon-milk,
full of motions, full of words when
even I am out of them.
I am not the ivory keys of a piano,
I am not one line that goes from high to low;
I am a mess of questions in the nighttime,
asked and only half answered.
You do not really play
piano
anyway.

You still make music of me,
no hands required.

I cannot forget where I come from—
same as you, that glimmering dark,
too black to see, too deep to fathom.
Where we were split open with knives made
from the bones of ravens,
the bones of trees—
and we were filled heavy and stuffed tight with words, billions of them, until we
overflowed and poured ourselves right into this moment—
how many do we exchange in the dark?
How many are lost to imperfect memory but somehow perfect in the moment?
I know you from the ancient days and all their secrets;
I have more words for you than I do for the sea.

I cannot forget where I come from;
it is branded on every part of me,

even when I trap the words, hold them in my mouth like water,
keep them for myself just to know I can.
See my snake hips?
They were made to cradle you.
See my handfuls of curling birch bark like paper?
I have covered them in poetry.
See the last remnants of that deepest dark lingering in my eyes,
dancing around my fingertips?
I cannot forget where I come from—
maybe you should try to remember.

The Peony (I)

Can you honestly say
that you haven't tasted me
every time you've seen me,
a phantom thought on your tongue
but so close to real—
slick like cinnamon butter,
curves and curls like ivy on some hidden garden wall;
warm and soft, all tender meats and falsely fragile flowers—
What happens here
does not stay here,
and I have hungered for you in my sleep.

Can you say you haven't broken apart the pale pink peony of all my secrets and eaten the
viscera hidden at the heart of me?
You can't, but then,
I'm not sure you can say anything;
you weren't made like me. Do you even have a mouth?
If so, it is wasted,
wasted.
I was not made to starve myself—
and what unkind god made you,
no maw to devour with,
no teeth to leave bruises down my neck?
I was made for mouths,
made like fruit and fingers—
to be sucked at, lingered on,
dreamed about.

There are six fat finches in my chest, and oh, they sing of you,
of your perfect hands and unbroken lines
and the way you love
to look for all the wrong things, love to go nowhere and call that good enough—
call that certainty,
as if certainty were enough for anyone like you and me.
Like you and me, ha—
as though we were alike.
What sings in your chest when the door closes at the end of the night
and you're all alone,
one slim birch tree that knows nothing
and wants to know less?
Not fat and happy finches, that's for sure.

You know,
I talk big,

make it sound like I'm sex and honey,
sex and honey all the time,
something wild and unfettered and full of birdsong and magic and the ragged cries of
coyotes in the night and did I *mention* the sex?
but let's be honest—
I've grown up since I was that girl, and now—
now I'm an unfinished fairy story in a hospital bed,
IV put in crooked,
sickly, grey, and unappealing,
and the peonies don't grow here anymore.

The Peony, the Birch, and the Red Shoes (II)

Garden girl, lids and long, long lashes
hanging heavy as fruits on the vine in Babylon.
She wears old red shoes
stolen from an old folk tale
old red shoes that are always dancing,
dancing,
but she keeps up with them,
petals falling from her like sweat
as she rakes fingers through her hair,
head back,
laughing.

She moves as nature moves, unconstrained
by apprehension and social expectation:
she eats sunlight, devours it and grows—
moves dark and dirty to the drums of the old earth,
slide of her hips slick like cinnamon butter—
curves and curls like ivy on some secret garden wall—
she is warm and soft,
all tender meats and
falsely
fragile
flowers.

The birch tree boy watches her until she looks his way,
but her skin feels the gaze like sunlight
dragging the big black eyes of sunflowers,
unfurling the delicate petals of daylilies,
morning glories.
She dances near him,
never with him,
and he never asks.
That is not the way of his kind:
he is Charming, but
never anything more.
It rankles her: doubt instead of devotion,
hesitation that strangles the heart.

She blooms in the spinning lights
just to see his Charming face falter with wonder,
his cheeks flushed
as she spreads her arms wide,
lets the universe move through her,
sticky sap singing in her veins,

and the whole room drowns in scent of peonies.
He looks down when she meets his eyes:
a challenge,
asked and answered.
This is a dance between them that she knows, doesn't know
why this time it frustrates, irritates—
hurts.

The garden girl goes home on dancing feet,
but even the red shoes seem to understand
that this is a night for sad waltzes and ennui,
not their usual mischief.
Her bed is too big,
one lone flower
in an acre of tilled dirt,
and she hungers for him in her sleep.
In her dreams, birch bark fingers break apart
the pale pink peony petals that hide her viscera,
eat the photosynthetic secrets
hidden at the heart of her.

She wakes to remember that such things are not his way:
that his mouth is a lie,
just eyes on the backs of butterfly wings—
no maw to devour with,
no teeth to leave bruises down her neck—
just an illusory promise of passion unhindered
that never
comes
to be.

No, no, this birch boy is just made to Charm princesses and give
knowing, flirtatious smiles that mean nothing
while she—
she is made to know without smiling,
to devour without equivocation and bloom,
bloom.
She is a robust delicacy made for mouths,
made like fruit and fingers—
to be sucked at, lingered on,
dreamt about.
She was not meant to starve herself with acts
of politeness or self doubt.
On him, she is wasted.

Six fat finches sit in her chest as the morning breaks,

fat finches singing of him,
of his perfect hands and unbroken lines
and the way he loves
to look for all the wrong things,
loves to go nowhere and call that enough,
call that certainty—
as if certainty were enough for the likes of he and she.
Like he and she—she laughs
at herself;
as if he and she were anything alike.
What sings, she wonders, in his chest
when the door closes at the end of the night
and he's all alone,
one slim birch tree that knows near to nothing
and wants to know less?
Not fat and happy finches, she suspects.

Her eyes water;
she always cries when she is angry.
Angry at herself,
angry that he does not deny his nature,
angry that trees do not grow as flowers do,
do not bend and sway so easily,
do not spread and move with the whims of the earth.
She dresses for the day, decorates
herself in marvels, brushes
her hair until the bathroom floor is a carpet
of bruised pink petals and broken shoots,
scalp bleeding sap.
At the end, she sits, head aching, raw but cleansed,
and pulls on the old red shoes—
old red shoes stolen from an old folk tale,
shoes made for dancing,
dancing.
They twitch with a hint of last night's sad waltz, questioning,
but the garden girl tightens her lips, swipes
at her sunshower eyes,
and two-steps out the door.
She cannot deny her nature, either:
she is made to bloom.

Selkie-Mother at Midsummer

Whatever can die is beautiful—more beautiful than a unicorn, who lives forever, and who is the most beautiful creature in the world. —Peter S. Beagle, The Last Unicorn

I hear you singing in the dark,
little selkie-mother of mine—
your coat silver and salt-soaked,
your skin white as moon-milk, scattered
with freckles, speckled
with stars, smeared
with ink.

You are a memory,
 a mirage,
yet I can smell the salt-fish-seaweed
 of your coat,
the amber and patchouli oil
 on your wrists.

I hear you singing in the dark,
little selkie-mother of mine—
voice carried in the mouth
of the night, in the bellies
of iridescent abalone, ringing
with brass bells soaked
 in starlight,
the wind's fingers playing
accompaniment,
dancing on a harp carved from a great breastbone—
breastbone of the mightiest and most beautiful of creatures,
gone now,

 lost to myth and misremembering:
dragons fighting beneath the foundations of great castles,
turtles with whole worlds on their backs,
Entwives with gowns of moss and flowers,
 gone into the West,
and very small,

 dangerously persistent women
with boundless multitudes of words inside them—
women who were bigger on the inside,
who ate fearlessly of goblin fruits,
who were the last of their kind and
 moved like shadows on the sea,
the like of whom
shall never be again.

It is a secret song,

little selkie-mother of mine—
a song breathed on three breaths
from selkie-mother to child under the full moon at Midsummer—
a song that lets that child into the sea
 for just the one night, just the one night—
a song that only the sealfolk can sing,
that only their children can hear—
a song full of salt and sadness and
no regret at all.

It is the song in you that found me as a child,
 that called up the water and words in me
 to dance, to find their level—

but its refrain promises that selkie promise
 which I have always known
 but have been afraid to think upon:

We always go back to the sea.

 I should know better than to mourn you.
I hear you singing in all things,
 little selkie-mother of mine—
Rivers pounding down Appalachian mountainsides,
cold as anything and running hard.
Raindrops bleeding down a window in Dingle Town,
blurring gorse bushes and a church's steeple.
Blood thrumming through hearts like hummingbird drums,
 moving like a dancer
 until it doesn't.

Selkie-mothers, wrapped in their thick hides,
voices reaching between Here and There,
 singing back the dark at Midsummer.

Very small,
 dangerously persistent women
with boundless multitudes of words inside them—
women who were bigger on the inside,
who ate fearlessly of goblin fruits,
who were the last of their kind and
 moved like shadows on the sea,
the like of whom
shall never be again.

Jack

There is a man I love,
a wild creature of a man,
some leftover from the ancient days
with endless faces, endless names.
He lives in my shadow,
never far from me,
but my heart is bent and breaking.
As Lantern, he sits all night on my stoop,
keeping the howling dead at bay.
When he wears his coat of Frost,
he turns my shabby little home
into a postcard of serenity.
I know I must leave him.
He is not what I am;
I am growing papery and translucent,
an old sheet of paper or dried flowers that have lost every echo of their scent except in
memory.
He leaps Candlesticks, cracks Corn,
has one eye, two eyes,
blue eyes like cornflowers, like a September afternoon.
Everyone knows him, has a story about him,
but in none is he quite the same.
Everyone knows he climbed a beanstalk,
stole a harp and a golden goose,
but what then,
after?
I eat golden eggs soft boiled and say nothing to anyone.

I try to tell him I am growing old,
but I have chosen the wrong moment—
today, he is Green and boyish,
no cares catching on his sun-speckled shoulders
to weigh them down.
He is a playful fox amid poppies,
unfettered,
catching at my skirts with quick fingers,
smiling crooked and beguiling.
I am a dandelion in the instant before a child makes a wish and blows.
I try to explain—
the seasons age me,
change me,
but he changes himself,
seasons be damned,
and he does not understand.

He kisses me like there are secrets in my throat that he is dying to discover.
I let him;
I, after all, am only human.
After, he falls asleep on my breast—
the perpetual child, curled around me like ivy—
and I let my own eyes close.
I am weak, but it is so very easy,
after such a perfect piece of wild wanting and deliverance.

I drift in dreams as thick as honey.

When I wake, he is still sleeping, but
now there are autumn leaves in his hair,
and I can see his candle-heart starting to glow.
My heart aches;
I can feel the way my skin
is folding and unfolding, less taut
as Time steals years from me.
I am no playmate for this Forever Boy.
I go home, hands curled
into fists, nails digging
furrows into palms—
I will be brave; it is time
to leave him.
Let him remember me like this
before the crows come for the corners of my eyes,
before I begin to bend under the weight of human trappings—
memories, organ failure, regrets.

Home is no postcard now,
just a thing crumbling like old bread,
one more reminder.
My eyes are a thunderstorm,
cumulonimbus lashes and rain for days
and a roaring in my ears like thunder
every time my lids dip and rise.
At first I don't catch it,
but as I trudge closer on tired legs the glow becomes unmistakable.
A Lantern sits on my steps,
one eyed, two eyed, on fire from the inside.
I do not stop crying,
but the thunderstorm begins to roll away
and my heart is full of buzzing bees and hummingbirds,
raucous with the promise of joy.
He says nothing,
but his toothy pumpkin smile dances with light.

I nudge him with my boot to scold him for ignoring my fumbled attempts at nobility.
I can hear him laughing as I make my way inside,
a sound like bells or hounds at the hunt or
just a man in love,
free of human worry
and full of light and bees and hummingbirds and
late September sky.

Closer to Comfort, Further from Fear

These days, my mouth is always singing,
even when it is shut.
Even when it makes no sound,
my throat cries the songs my father sang to me as a child,
carving me closer to comfort,
further from the sun.

You will not find me in your Appalachian fields now,
nor in kudzu-tangled trees.
I will haunt you like the white crows,
though I am rook-eyed, glossy black,
knowing all the roads the beetles take
through your dark forests of viscera.

I eat spiderwebs, I am the weaver,
storm-singing, rain-bleeder—
I sat, bare thighs on grey stone,
beside the body of a dead ram
and gave myself, seamless, to the sea.

And the Rain

It's early in the morning, and Jilí is sucking on a small stone at Alexei's suggestion. She's sitting cross-legged on the big wooden table in her kitchen, flipping through old books, looking for some rain-summoning spell she might somehow have missed. Sonya is still asleep in the bedroom; Alexei is spread out on the floor of the kitchen, drawing.

"I don't think this actually works," Jilí mutters, barely audible around the stone. It tastes like dirt, hot and dry; it doesn't feel like it's doing a thing to keep her mouth from drying out.

The little boy has ridiculously good hearing, though, and says stoutly, "It works if you keep your mouth closed."

Jilí snorts. "You know that's just a ploy on the part of the adults to keep children quiet, don't you?" She spares a glance up from the book to raise an eyebrow at the boy.

Alexei raises a thin blonde eyebrow back. "You're the one told Mama you were so thirsty you'd suck the blood out of a goat."

"Well—" Jilí had, indeed, said something like that, prompting Alexei's explanation of the stone trick and his offer of one of the many smooth pebbles he kept in his pockets for just such purpose. "Fine," she grumbles, mock-buttoning up her mouth. "Mmmn-mnn-mnnn-mh," she says, through sealed lips, making Alexei laugh, big hazel eyes sparkling.

"It's gonna be fine, though," Alexei tells her, a minute later, soberly. He's already back at his art.

“Oh yeah?” Jilí says, not really paying attention, poring over her spellbooks again, flipping pages with little flickers of magic rather than actually using her too-dry fingers anymore.

“Yeah,” Alexei says firmly. “Mama says you're gonna find the right magic soon, and everything's gonna be fine. We don't have to be scared.” He says it like a practiced prayer, like he's heard it and been comforted by it many times before. It makes Jilí's chest ache and her eyes burn. She doesn't look up from her book, doesn't let herself see how thin his face has gotten in the last few weeks, see how long he's kept this conviction in the face of her failure. When he and his mother had first come to live with her, he'd been a gaunt little thing with a plum-colored bruise on his cheek Jilí couldn't bear. She'd pressed a kiss to it, careful, and he'd raised a tiny hand to the newly healed skin, mouth open in surprise, eyes shining with wonder. Now she's been doing it so steadily for so long, Jilí doesn't even have to spend more than an eyeblink of effort anymore on the protection spells around Alexei and his mother, around the house, keeping Sonya's former husband on the other side of town, making his eyes miss them in a crowd. That kind of magic comes so easily, flowing up out of her love for her little family, a separate thing from book magic altogether.

“I'm trying,” she tells him, ignoring the crack in her voice. It's just because she's so thirsty. “I'll—I'll find something.” This kind of magic, big and full of crackling power, bound to pages and hidden away, this is harder. She knows she'll find the right book, the right spell, eventually, but until then, there's so little she can do.

Alexei shrugs, not even looking up from his coloring. “I know,” he says simply, like his faith in her is just that easy, that *basic*.

Jilí picks up another book, trying to convince herself the way her stomach hurts is just fear of something as simple as death from dehydration or starvation. "Here," she says, holding out a small book of spells, "why don't you look with me?"

"You're sure?" Alexei takes the book, hands careful, eyes alight with a familiar curiosity—the same hungry look Jilí has seen on her cousin's face a thousand times, any time he's offered a new piece of knowledge, a new bite of esoterica. "I mean, is it okay?"

Jilí smiles at him, an easier smile than she's managed since the rains stopped. "I trust you." The book is such a small thing, unlikely to have anything too powerful in it, but it's still a vast thing to hand it to anyone who isn't a witch, who isn't schooled in matters of maintaining the balance, of following the careful laws of magic. Even the least magical person could be dangerous with the right spellbook at hand.

Alexei beams. "I won't let you down," he says, giving her a sharp, determined nod, all seriousness.

"I know." Of all the things Jilí is afraid of, that definitely isn't one of them.

—

The dirt under Jilí's feet is cracked and dry, kicking up dust as she and Alexei make their way through the stalls. The market is crowded with hungry people scraping their way to the bottom of every bin, every basket, looking for something that isn't dried out more than halfway to death.

People, mules, and wagons alike, the crowd parts for them—well, for her, for the *witch*, their stares heavy with blame. Jilí can hear them muttering to one another, a susurrus of suspicion. Alexei squeezes her hand a little too tightly.

Jilí makes her way through the market stoically, ignoring the stares. She finds some sad little potatoes at one stall, a bundle of withered carrots at another. She has enough herbs at home to make something like a stew, even if meat is a dream of the past.

Poring over a sparse array of miserable vegetables, Jilí is bumped, hard, from behind. Before she can turn around to face whoever did it, she's bumped again, knocked against the stall table. Alexei's small hand slips from hers as she's hit a third time, a fourth, then kicked, all too fast for her to turn, to react, to gather any sort of defensive magic to herself. She's down on the ground, hunched around herself, by the time the blows stop.

Alexei is nowhere to be seen.

Jilí forces herself to her feet, shoving past the crowd—their faces range from annoyed to indifferent, the people who just attacked her indistinguishable from the rest. Panic rising in her chest, Jilí pushes her way into each stall, looking for Alexei amid the ocean of people. She can't cloak him with her magic like this, can't keep him safe if she doesn't even know where he is.

"Jilí!" Alexei slams into Jilí's side, wrapping his arms around her waist, hard enough to make her new bruises twinge with complaint.

She doesn't care. "You're okay?" she asks, holding him at arm's length and looking him over. Jilí can't even imagine what Sonya would say if anything happened to him, not to speak of what Jilí would think of herself. "Nothing happened? No one hurt you?"

Alexei hesitates for just a second, barely a blink, barely enough for Jilí to notice. "I'm fine," he says, hugging her waist again, gentler this time.

Jilí wonders if the hesitation is because someone did say something to him, something cruel about his mother, about Jilí, about living with a witch, or if he just feels guilty for being fine when Jilí is obviously hurting. "You're sure nothing's wrong?" she presses, just in case.

Alexei nods into her side. "Everything will be fine," he promises—and there's that surety again, making Jilí's throat tight; that innocent faith in things turning out okay, even after he's seen the worst in people.

"It will," Jilí agrees, already planning her next foray into her spellbooks as she puts an arm around him, steering him toward home.

—

When it finally works, Jilí is stunned. She's not sure if it's the last spell she tries (an obscure little rhymed thing from one of the huge, more tattered spellbooks at the back of her closet) or one of the more powerful-seeming ones that just took its time getting around to working.

When the first cluster of townspeople come to the door a few days after the rain comes, Jilí ignores them, pretending the rush of rain is too loud for her to hear the knocking.

Sonya has more grace, though, and invites the drenched farmers and their wives inside. They hover just inside the doorway, eyes darting around nervously from the bunches of herbs drying amongst the rafters to the jars with animal organs lining the counters to the painted bone charms hanging in the windows. Jilí tries not to snort at their fear.

One woman holds out a basket with a hand that, to her credit, is only shaking slightly. It's full of various things—some slightly ragged-looking onions, a little tin of tea, an embroidered pillow. Jilí just stares at it all, brow furrowed, trying to figure out a way to explain that she doesn't actually want these people's gifts, just wants them to leave her and her little makeshift family alone and not immediately turn on her when anything bad happens.

Before Jilí can open her mouth and no doubt say something wildly counterproductive, Alexei comes forward and takes the basket, beaming.

"Thank you all so much," Sonya says as her son gives her the basket, gracious as can be. "We are so grateful for your kindness." She puts a hand on the small of Jilí's back, speaking without words.

Jilí does her best to smile at the townspeople. "So grateful," she echoes, knowing it sounds hollow. It's hard to be grateful to people she knows would've seen her quite literally dead just a week ago. "Thank you all, really," she adds, for Sonya's sake.

As the group shuffles back out into the downpour, Alexei leans his head against Jilí's hip, blonde hair dark with water. Jilí ruffles it a little awkwardly, never quite sure how to claim this little version of Sonya as her own child but always desperately wanting to. "We don't actually have to use their stuff, do we?" he asks, wrinkling his nose.

Jilí tries not to grin as Sonya frowns at her son. "Of course we do. They're just trying to show their thanks for Jilí's help."

Alexei makes a face. "They were talking about sacrificing her to appease the gods. For *real*."

Sonya's lip twitches. "Yes, well, their onions cook up just as well as decent people's. Food is food."

It's true, as it turns out. Later, when more and more people come with more and more of their conditional gifts, their potatoes, corn, and squash cook up just as well as decent people's, too.

—

"The worst part of not having water was not having tea," Jilí's cousin Donani says, clutching his mug like it's precious.

"You're a crazy person," Jilí informs him, sharing an eyeroll with Sonya. She heats her own mug with a thought, watching steam roil up.

"And you're a plebeian," Donani retorts archly, stirring honey into his tea. "Both of you," he amends as Sonya starts laughing outright. "Plebeians and deviants."

"That's us," Sonya agrees, squeezing Jilí's hand affectionately as she sits down. Jilí squeezes back, pressing a kiss to the other woman's temple.

"Terribly deviant," Jilí agrees. "Now, are you going to bore us with your new studies as promised, now that the madness is over, or should we talk about something interesting?"

"Well, *I* am curious," Sonya says. She's not, Jilí knows—Sonya couldn't care less about legends and folkloric studies, but she likes seeing people happy, and that alone makes Jilí stay quiet instead of poking fun at her cousin when he raises an eyebrow at her.

"Yes, yes, go on, tell us," Jilí sighs, settling back on the couch and trying to look like she's listening intently.

Donani huffs a little, pleased. “Well, so, you know there have been unicorn sightings in the mountains for decades, right—”

There are a bunch of rapid knocks at the front door, different volumes, like several people are knocking. Donani frowns.

“I’ll get it,” Sonya says, ever-obliging, rising from the couch.

“Thank you,” Donani says, and then plows right on. “Right, so, unicorns in the mountains? But now there are people saying they’re *deer*, white deer with one horn broken off, maybe from the autumn fighting between the males, and—”

It’s all moot then, anyway—Jilí is on her feet and running for the door the second she hears Sonya’s broken wail, Donani only moments behind.

Sonya is on the ground in front of the door, hands over her face, rocking back and forth, near-silent screeching noises slipping out from between her long fingers.

Something like a dozen children are all clamoring around one of the men from the town—Tom, maybe his name is?—all of them frantic and loud and babbling over one another.

Over Tom’s shoulder is slung a white cloth bundle, out of which is lolling one small, pale hand.

“It was a *monster*,” one of the children says desperately. “It was, it was *huge* and it came out of the water—”

“I saw it,” says another earnestly. “I swear, miss, it wasn’t us, it was a monster, and—”

“It just came up out of the water—”

“We were just racing leaves down the river that’s come up in the ditch by the main road, and—”

“He was leaning out over the water, and—”

“It just rised up, it got him and it just held him under ‘til—”

“*Enough*,” Tom says firmly, silencing all the children at once, Sonya's shattered little animal noises stark in the quiet. “She’s just lost her son, she doesn’t need to hear some nonsense about a monster.” He looks down at where Sonya is rocking in the mud, weeping, and then to Jilí. Jilí can see it in his eyes, the judgment, the ever-present seed of doubt that springs up whenever something goes wrong.

“Donani,” Jilí says hoarsely, speaking before Tom can say something thinly veiled and horrible, “take him inside.”

Sonya wails aloud, a horrible, raw sound, as Donani steps forward and takes Alexei’s body from Tom’s arms. Alexei's *body*, not Alexei. Alexei is gone; a body is a *thing*, hollow, empty.

Relieved of his burden, Tom starts ushering the children away immediately, shooin them back towards the road, away from the witch and her weeping woman in the mud. Jilí would scold him for his callousness, but now is not the time.

“Come on, love,” she murmurs to Sonya, crouching down in the mud beside her lover, her wife. “Come inside. You can’t do anything for him out here.”

Sonya looks up at her, lowering her hands from her face with a blank sort of misery. “Jilí, I—I can’t do anything for him at all,” she says numbly. “He’s dead.”

Jilí doesn't know what to say, because Sonya isn't wrong. Instead of words, she just drops down into the mud herself and wraps both her arms around Sonya's shaking shoulders, squeezing tight.

—

“Grindylow, kelpie, morgen, näkki, nokk, rusalka, vodyanoy, undine, naiad—” Donani stops, rubbing a hand over his face tiredly. They've been up for hours, sitting some kind of hapless vigil over Alexei's body. “All creatures—monsters of a sort—known to drown people, particularly unwary children.”

“Don't say it like that,” Sonya says sharply, voice rough from crying. “Don't. It makes it sound like it was his fault somehow. *Unwary* children, can you imagine?” She grimaces. “Like there's some justice to it. Oh, this child, he wasn't well-behaved, didn't stay inside and play with toys like a *good* boy, he deserved—” she breaks off, breathing harshly, and buries her face in her arms where they're crossed over her knees. She's a knot of suffering, back trembling as she chokes on sobs that wrack her whole body.

Jilí reaches out with one tentative hand towards Sonya's shoulder but thinks better of it, letting it drop back to the couch limply. Sonya is a foreign thing now, a brittle creature made of pain and rage, and Jilí has no idea how to bring back *her* Sonya, the soft one, the one made of warm cups of tea and afternoons with books on the couch and murmured midnight conversations in bed. Protecting Sonya from a husband who beat her, stalked her, threatened her—that was easy. But this—this minefield of death and broken feelings and unfixable wrongs? Jilí has no idea how to protect Sonya from this.

“That's not what I meant,” Donani says quietly. “I was just—my research—I didn't mean *he* was—”

“She knows,” Jilí says softly. “She’s hurting, Donani. We’re all hurting.”

“He’s my *son*,” Sonya snaps, voice cracking around the last word. “*You’re* hurting. I’ve lost one of my *limbs*, part of my *flesh*.” Her eyes fix on the kitchen table where Alexei is laid out under the sheet, body seeming smaller in death, somehow, more fragile. It doesn’t make sense, really; there’s nothing important left to break. Jilí feels sick.

Donani sighs, taking off his glasses to polish them on the hem of his shirt. “I’m sorry,” he says finally, staring down at the glasses in his hands. “I know I’m not helping.”

Sonya snuffles, rubbing both hands over her face roughly, wiping away the tears until her cheeks are red. “I know you’re trying to,” she admits. It’s raw, like her throat is torn.

Jilí caves to the need to do *something*, and, even though she knows it won’t actually help, she lets herself reach out and rub a hand over Sonya’s back. To Jilí’s surprise, Sonya relaxes just a fraction, leaning into Jilí’s side a little.

“The other children said it was a monster,” Jilí says softly. She knows she’s poking at an open wound, but it has to be said. “If we can figure out what it is, maybe I can—”

“No.” Sonya is shaking her head furiously. “No, no, I can’t lose you, too. Just leave it, Jilí, leave it *be*. I can’t—I can’t—” She curls deeper into herself, mumbling *I can’t, I can’t*, over and over, body quivering.

Jilí looks at Donani. He’s put his glasses back on and is looking back at her, waiting. She keeps rubbing her hand gently over Sonya’s back, but mouths to her cousin, *Help me find it*. If he’s going to spend his time buried in books of lore, he might as well be useful.

Clearing his throat, Donani crouches down so he's at eye level with the women on the couch and says, "Sonya, I'm going to go. I'll pick up some things for us and come back, since my cousin hasn't got anything but frog eyes and newt lungs. You should eat." His voice is light, gentle. "Do you want anything special?"

Sonya doesn't even look up, doesn't stop her broken litany of *I can't, I can't*.

"Maybe just some bread for her," Jilí says. "We'll have tea and toast, yeah, lovely?" she says to Sonya, not even really a question, just an interruption to the other woman's terrified loop.

Sonya hiccups, going quiet. After a minute, she lifts her face a little, resting her cheek on her arms so she's looking at Jilí. Her eyes are so swollen and red that Jilí can't even see the blue.

"Yeah," Sonya breathes, leaning harder into Jilí's side, eyes fluttering closed. "Alright."

Donani rises, brushing his hands together briskly. "Right, then. Toast and jam for the ladies, coming right up." With that, he's out the door into the evening, door clattering closed behind him.

"I never agreed to jam," Sonya says brokenly, like the idea of *jam* is so vast and overwhelming that it might kill her.

"Don't worry, love, the jam is for me," Jilí says soothingly, not even thinking of the jam, but of the potential answers in the books Donani will bring back with it. "The jam is for me." If she can find a way to fix this, she won't have to confront the grief rising up in her own chest, threatening to pull her under, drown her in dry air in her own turn.

“Okay,” Sonya agrees, the word coming out as a sob, and then she's weeping again, curling into Jilí's side and clinging so hard it hurts.

Jilí doesn't mind—it makes her feel solid, feel *real* in the face of something so horribly *unreal* as the dead child on her kitchen table.

—

After Donani returns with bread and a sack of books, after Jilí coaxes Sonya into eating a couple of bites of toast, after they move Alexei's body to the bedroom, after Sonya cries herself to sleep beside her son, Jilí and Donani end up at the kitchen table, flipping through dense texts on folklore and magic. Jilí tries hard to focus on them, mostly to block out the insistent image of the dead child that had been laid out on this very tabletop earlier.

"I thought I had something at home that might tell us something," Donani says, palming his face tiredly. "A book of spirits and elementals, some spell-breaking lore, that kind of thing, but I couldn't find it."

Jilí frowns, something flashing in her memory. "Small, kind of? The cover's hard to read?"

"That's the one." Donani keeps flipping through the text in front of him. "Did I lend it to you?"

"I'm not sure." Jilí pushes back from the table, goes to check the bookshelves. She remembers seeing it, just not precisely where. It's not there, so she checks the closet in the bedroom, too, tiptoeing carefully past the bed without looking at its occupants. She can't bear it.

The book isn't in the closet, either, and it's not like anyone would've broken in and taken it—there's far too much fear surrounding Jilí's magic for anyone to come to the house with ill intent; even those bringing gifts are still hesitant.

"I must've given it back to you," she says, shaking her head as she makes her way back to her seat in the kitchen. There's a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach; she assumes that it's grief.

Donani shrugs. They pass books back and forth all the time; there's nothing unusual about a smaller one being hard to put a finger on. "I probably overlooked it at the house. I'll check when I go back later. Can you go through this stack?" He pushes a tower of books across the table towards Jilí.

Jilí smiles grimly. "I can't do anything else, really, can I?"

Donani doesn't comment.

—

Hours pass.

"So," Donani says finally, looking up from a ratty old volume. His face is whiter than usual, and Jilí knows that whatever comes next is bad. "You can't summon it."

"Why?"

"I'm pretty sure you *already* summoned it," he says softly, lifting the book and turning it around to show her.

There on the page is a copy of an old woodcut—rough, choppy, but still clearly some sort of monstrous figure rising from a pool of water, hands outstretched towards a child. Below the illustration is the description, from which Donani reads aloud:

“The Restorer; a monster created as a byproduct of magic that interrupts the balance of nature or summoned to restore said balance.”

Bile rises in Jilí’s throat. “The rain spells.”

Donani just shoves the book at her and buries his face in his hands, glasses jammed up against his thinning hairline. “Keep reading,” he says miserably.

Jilí draws the book toward herself and reads, “The creature cannot be killed, only bargained with. Some stories suggest that it can be bribed to leave the afflicted place with the lives of—oh, *no*, Donani.” Jilí cringes. “With the lives of *children*. It will seek out victims near any local bodies of water until its maker appeases it with a sufficient bargain.”

“How many do you think you need for a sufficient bargain with something that kills children?” Donani asks sardonically, looking up from his hands to glare at the book. “Five? Ten? Twenty? All the children in town? If they hated us before—”

Jilí pushes her chair back from the table so abruptly that it screeches on the floor. “I’m not going to offer it more *children*,” she says, nauseous. “I’m going to figure out how to banish it.”

Donani rolls his eyes, “Right, because magic has been *so* helpful in this situation so far.”

Jilí glares. “It’s all I *have*,” she snaps, the last word rising a little too loudly. It’s too true to keep it quiet; magic is what made Jilí different from the beginning, what made her able to survive all the other little differences she discovered in herself as she grew. It lets her keep herself safe, keep the people she loves safe, and she can’t—

“What you *have* is a grieving mother cradling a *corpse*,” Donani argues in a heated whisper. “What you *have* is to figure out how to tell her.”

“Tell her?” Jilí echoes, lost.

“You can’t not *tell* her, Jilí, dear gods,” Donani says, aghast. “You can’t keep this from her. She’s your *wife*.”

Jilí just stares blankly at him for a minute. “No,” she says finally. “How will that help anything? Then she’s lost her son *and* her wife in two days, and what does that leave her with, hmm? Half the town already thinks it’s her fault for bringing him into my home, for getting involved with a woman, with a *witch*. The other half think I bewitched her, lured her into my bed, or that being mistreated by a man somehow turned her, like that’s how it works. She lives under accusation and suspicion *every day*.” She puts her hands on the table, leans toward Donani, eyes narrow, and even as she says it, she’s not sure if she’s trying to convince him or herself, “I will *fix* this. She has faith in me. They both had faith in me. I’m not—” she breaks off, gritting her teeth. “I’m going to fix this,” she says again, more firmly.

“But—”

“Shut *up*,” Jilí says, eyes flashing, fear getting the better of her and coming out as rage. She regrets the words even as they come out of her mouth, but pushes on. “No more. I’m not just your cousin, I’m a *witch*, and you *will* hold your tongue.”

Donani snorts and shoves his own chair back. “Right,” he says, pushing his glasses up on his nose. “Right, of course. How dare I?” He snorts again and starts collecting his books, shoveling them haphazardly into his bag. “Far be it from me to keep you from lying about *killing your lover’s child*, Jilí—”

“I didn’t *kill* him,” Jilí hisses, actually flinching backwards in horror. “Do you honestly think—”

“No,” Donani snaps back, “but clearly you *do*, or you would tell her what’s happened and trust her to still love you.”

Jilí can’t even say anything to that, doesn’t say anything else at all as Donani finishes packing up his things and storms out the door.

Jilí makes her way to the bedroom, leaning against the doorframe. “I do love you,” Jilí tells the sleeping woman on the bed softly. “And I’m so sorry.”

Sonya, one arm over her dead son, doesn’t even twitch in her sleep.

—

Jilí doesn’t know how long she stands there, staring at Sonya, at Alexei, at her own hands. She listens to the thunder rumbling and imagines it to be the growls of a monster, blurry in image but solid in purpose. It isn’t until Sonya starts to snore properly, finally slipping into a deep sleep, that Jilí makes herself go outside.

Donani is already there—Jilí has no idea if he’s been waiting there since he stormed out earlier, or if he realized what she’d do and come back. It doesn’t matter, really.

“You shouldn’t do it,” he says helplessly. Jilí can see him shivering. “No good can come of making a deal with something that murders children.”

Jilí shrugs, helpless in her own turn. She isn’t cold yet; the violence of the deluge feels cleansing rather than painful. “Maybe not. Nothing else to do, though, is there? Alexei was only the first, Donani, and it’s only going to be so long before the town turns to me with blame again—turns to *us*, and I can’t risk them turning on Sonya. The spells

can only do so much—if the whole town comes for us, Dmitri will, too, and he's already always sniffing around the edges of my warding like he's *hunting* them—what else do you want me to do?”

Ever the academic: “You could do more research, I suppose. Study it. Go in prepared.”

Jilí can't stand the idea of even one more hour of this, of the ache blooming in her chest when she looks at Sonya; when she lets her mind skirt too close to thoughts of Alexei's little face, his wry observations, his loyalty; when she raises a hand to do a casual bit of magic like heating the tea or opening the jar of jam. Even little magics feel heavy now. “Yeah, well, I'm not going to. Every minute it's left to itself a child could be taken. Every child it takes is one more reason for them to come after us. This time, they wouldn't even be wrong.”

They end up sitting silently on either side of the doorway, door still open, wrapped in afghans from the couch, sipping at hot tea and watching the rain pour down. It's not a solution, just a pause; some things have consequences that simply have to be endured. Jilí supposes that raising the dead is probably among them. Nonetheless, the steady fury of nature provides a little comfort.

—

Finding the monster isn't a question of invoking or tracking it—not that she'd be able to; the evidence of something massive and destructive is everywhere like the aftermath of a hurricane, no single path to follow. There's no chasing this thing down, no fighting it. Instead, Jilí gets a safe distance into the woods and away from the house, somewhere Sonya won't be in danger or able to see what's going on, finds a good old stump soaked

with rainwater, and takes a seat. She crosses her legs and tucks her cold, muddy toes up into her skirts, just to trick herself into feeling a little warmer, but the rain is blinding and the cold that comes with it is the kind that bleeds into her bones.

Tentatively at first, Jilí closes her eyes and reaches into herself with her mind, finds the pool of her magic under her breastbone, thick as molten gold. Family magic, magic from her mother and grandmother before her, stitched to her soul and her shadow from the day her mother died. More confident as she goes, she digs into it, *breathes* into it, lets it expand out past her skin.

This is no spell, not something made powerful in its own right and then amplified by a witch's intentions, no—this is raw magic seeking raw magic, ancientness seeking ancientness. Moving in an ever-widening spiral out from herself, Jilí nudges her magic's glimmering tendrils into the water table, lets them electrify every pool, every puddle, filling them up with her presence. She feels Sonya at the edge of her consciousness, asleep with the weight of grief, still curled around Alexei as though her body heat might warm him back to life. Jilí feels Donani, too, pacing her kitchen in his version of standing guard, his hapless contribution to an overwhelming moment. Worst of all, her magic touches on Alexei himself, his brilliant spirit a scattered puff of little lights in her mind's eye, untethered to his body, buzzing like bees with the shock of death.

Lost in Alexei and considering the difference between a person and a spirit and a body, Jilí reaches her magic into the water still lingering in his little lungs, too, feels, just for an instant, the terror of drowning, not alive long enough to have a life flash before his eyes, the sheer weight of water just as damaging as inhaling it.

Back of her neck prickling violently, Jilí pulls back from the dead boy and her home, pushes more of herself through every other thing in which water flows. The blood of trees, the water-filled prints of a big man's rain boots, the droplets clinging to the undersides of blades of grass.

It's not long until Jilí feels the monster notice her. Rivulets and raindrops coalesce, puddles and pools draw together, swirling like thunderheads or the sea. Even before she opens her eyes, she can feel its massive presence before her, a whorled column of pure pressure, movement, sound. Jilí resists the urge to scrunch her eyes closed tighter and will it *away*, knowing it will do no good. She forces herself, nearly eyelash by eyelash, to open her eyes and face this thing that she created with her carelessness, this thing that broke her family in one swift instant of retribution.

It's surprisingly calm, dispassionate; no rage boiling through it as she'd expected. It seems almost disinterested in her despite the way it towers over her, its green-blue glassy insides trapping and warping the light into something that feels deadly despite its graceful smoothness.

-*witch*- the monster says without speaking, rattling the words through Jilí's bones from the inside outward.

"That's me," she says shakily. "I'm told you like to bargain." She tries to sound light, unconcerned, a woman of power. Instead she feels like a small child, terrified that offering her own life won't be enough, won't be worth however many children this thing would like to take instead.

-*yes*- it says simply.

Jilí steels herself against the tremor in her voice, against the irrationally recurring thought that just a month or two ago, her life was beautiful, perfect, a tiny little family doing nothing terribly important except loving one another. That all it took to destroy that life was a few weeks without rain; that all it took was a drought to take a life of tea and toast and falling in love a little more every day and turn it to this impossibility, this moment in which every breath seems to deepen the disaster.

"I'm the source," Jilí admits to the water creature. "I cast the rain spells."

The water says nothing, just makes a noise that might sound considering from a being with a mouth or a voice box.

"You took my wife's son," Jilí tries next. "Alexei, he—"

*-what is done cannot be undone; true witches know this-*The monster judders in place, water rippling up and down its sides as its shape shifts constantly, faceless and ever-moving, a wall of force.*-balance must be restored-*

"That—that's what I'm trying to do. Me for the children. You take me—you take me and you leave them, leave this place. Without me, the balance is, you know—it's restored, but Sonya is safe, still."

-a witch is a lot to offer for the children of your enemies- the monster says, making Jilí's stomach lurch with the weight of its not-a-voice.

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm tired of them thinking of me as the enemy," Jilí says, too tired, too cold, too afraid to be respectful. "Maybe I want to make things right, make them think well of me so Sonya's safe when I'm gone." She holds out a trembling hand like she's about to handshake with the monster on a deal over some chickens or cattle.

-a bargain is struck- the water agrees, disregarding her proffered hand entirely. The monster's shape implodes, all the water in its body dropping at once to the ground with a loud *boom* that threatens to make Jilí's eardrums pop.

"Great," Jilí says distantly to nothing at all, her stomach sick as she lays aside her life with all the ceremony and consideration of a game of cards. She may think little of herself, but some part of her feels disappointed that such a deal can be made with so little regard.

Standing on numb and frozen feet, Jilí turns toward home.

—

Jilí tells herself she's made peace with the bargain. Tells herself all the way through tea, through looking in on Sonya, through coaxing her to eat a bit of toast.

It's only as she waves her hand to summon a blanket to cover Alexei's body where he's still clutched in his mother's arms that she realizes she's made peace with entirely the wrong thing.

Hoping desperately that she's wrong and that she's merely going to die as anticipated, she gestures for the blanket more firmly. It doesn't come. Panic does, though.

How long will it take for Sonya to realize that Jilí's magic is gone? That she can't keep her safe anymore? How long until Alexei's father realizes the exact same thing and comes to call? How long before Sonya runs—or worse, stays?

"Jilí?" Sonya asks softly from the doorway. She looks tired, but the shadows under her eyes are benign ones. Bile rises in Jilí's throat at the memory of the bruises that had been in their place when Sonya had first come to her, one arm broken and dangling,

the other one carrying her young son. She'd looked so fierce, chin jutting out, teeth gritted as she swallowed her pride and asked the town witch for help.

"Kitchen," is all Jilí can manage, shoving herself to her feet and barely making it to the kitchen sink before she vomits.

When she stops heaving, Sonya is rubbing little circles over her back, holding her hair out of the way.

"What's wrong?" There's no fear in Sonya's voice, just gentleness and lingering hurt, making everything so much *worse*—she trusts Jilí so implicitly to take care of everything.

Jilí can't bear to say it, just makes the little gesture that she usually makes to put the kettle on for tea. When nothing happens, she looks pointedly at Sonya and then away, unable to make herself keep the other woman's gaze and see the realization dawn.

"How?" Sonya breathes, hand going tight on Jilí's shoulder. "What did you do?"

"I did what I always do," Jilí says miserably. "I tried to take care of you two."

Sonya shoves herself away from Jilí, wrapping her arms around herself. "So you what?" she demands, looking wounded and confused. "You just—you traded your magic?"

Jilí chokes on the little hysterical laugh that bubbles up out of her throat. "No. No, of course I—" she shakes her head vehemently, like that can somehow shake the thoughts out of it, "of course I would never. If my magic is gone, I can't protect you—I would *never*."

Sonya's shoulders relax, just a fraction. "So—so what, then?" she asks, rubbing a hand over her eyes. "Grief, maybe—it drained you? Of course, I should've thought..." her voice peters out as Jilí shakes her head harder.

"No," Jilí says, hating the sound of her own voice in her ears. "No, I just—if I died, you know, my magic would stay. This is a witch's house, if the witch dies, the magic lingers. But if I'm *not* a witch anymore—"

"So you thought you were trading your *life*?" Sonya demands, understanding, voice rising. "How is that *better*?"

Jilí cringes, looking at her feet. "Sonya, I—"

"How? How could you just throw your life away? I can't even—what makes you think so little of your own life that—"

"Because it was my *fault*," Jilí rasps.

Sonya just stares at her like she's an idiot. "What?" She shakes her head. "No, Jilí, you always do this. You think everything bad happens because of what you are, of what *we* are, and I know the people in town just make it worse, but you can't just put everything on yourself and just decide things are—"

"My fault?" Jilí snaps. "It *is*." She waves her hand in a motion that would normally produce a wisp of light, but now is just a mocking pantomime of the very idea of magic. "It's my fault. *My* magic."

Sonya's brow is furrowed, mouth open to argue, but no sound is coming out. She looks numb.

Jilí plows on. "It was me, okay? It was my rain spells. The monster is a—a byproduct." She gestures again, this time just a vain attempt at conveying what Donani's

book had explained. “I disturbed the balance of nature, I did too many spells—or the wrong spell, or something, or just me *doing* the spells in the first place was the problem, I’m not sure, I’m not—” she stops, breathing hard, making herself look at Sonya’s face, meet her eyes. The other woman is still just staring. “It doesn’t matter, Sonya. It doesn’t—you have to go.”

Sonya jerks back at that. “What?” Her arms are still wrapped around her middle, hugging herself like a child, and Jilí’s heart is breaking even before she makes herself say the next thing.

“It’s my fault he died. It’s my fault he was in danger at all, Sonya—if you weren’t with me, he would’ve been—”

“Dead,” Sonya says flatly, unwrapping herself from her arms to glare at Jilí.

Jilí blinks. “What? No, that’s the opposite of—”

“He would’ve been dead,” Sonya repeats, practically spitting the words. “Without you? We would’ve both been dead by now. Dmitri—” she flinches as she says her husband’s name, a thing that’s gone unspoken since she first explained her situation to Jilí, years ago, “—Dmitri would’ve killed us both by now, and if you don’t know that, you weren’t paying attention when we first came.” They’d both had internal injuries, broken bones that had healed over more than once, and healed *wrong*. The bruises were ugly, but they weren’t even the half of it.

“Sonya—” Jilí tries, splaying her hands out helplessly. “Even if that’s the case, I’m no good to you now. I can’t protect you anymore.”

“Because what? I’ve only stayed here so you can protect us? I’ve spent three years in your house and your bed because—because I pay for safety with affection? Is

that our bargain, Jilí?” Her voice is hoarse. “Is my love just a pretended thing? A game I play in exchange for not being beaten every day? Is that how you think this works?”

Sonya sounds so wretched that Jilí is hard-pressed not to turn to the sink and vomit again.

“That’s not what I was—Sonya, please,” Jilí says haltingly, burying her face in her hands so she doesn’t have to look at her lover. “That was never what I meant. I just—I just—” she clenches her hands into fists, nails biting into her palms as she struggles with a way to convey that she has no *value* now. “It took my magic, Sonya,” she says pleadingly. “If I don’t have that, if can’t keep you safe, what even am I? I’m all the dangers of a witch with none of the good.”

“You’re not just a witch,” Sonya snaps. “You’re a *person*, Jilí. Why can’t you ever see yourself the way you see me? A wife, a mother?”

Something like a sob works its way out of Jilí’s throat. “Because I’m *not*,” she cries, chest nearly caving in with the weight of it. “I’m not *anything*. I can’t be a *mother*—gods, and a wife? What kind of wife would I be, Sonya? Useless and drawing all eyes to you, the *witchwife*, putting you in more danger than you were in before? What kind of wife is that?” She looks Sonya in the eyes, some kind of desperate challenge in her chest that won’t even take proper form. Everything just *hurts*.

“You’d be *my* wife,” Sonya says simply, shrugging, with the same simple faith in her that Alexei had broken Jilí’s heart with in the first place. “Why do you have to be anything but that?”

Jilí struggles with the thousands of words that riot on her tongue, trying to wrangle them into something that makes sense, but all that comes out is, “Because without my magic? Sonya, I’d just be your widow.”

Sonya sucks in a breath, closing her eyes with a grimace. “What, then, Jilí? What am I meant to do with that?”

Jilí grits her teeth and makes herself say it one more time. “You have to *go*. You have to go before the town realizes I’ve lost my magic. Before Dmitri realizes.” She looks at Sonya, and her heart only sinks further when the other woman won’t meet her eyes, just turns on her heel and makes her way back to the bedroom, back to the bed and the body of her dead son. Jilí watches her go, gutted and wordless.

—

"I can hear him," Sonya says, voice brittle, when Jilí finally works up the courage to go into the bedroom. There's no talking about the fight, just a thick tension with flickers of desperation and forgiveness and misery all fighting to be brighter than the others. Her eyes are swollen and red and runny.

Jilí says nothing, just sits beside Sonya on the bed, bumping their shoulders together in a small, awkward gesture of comfort that she knows is not enough.

"I *can*," Sonya insists, scooting away to look Jilí dead in the eyes. Her motion jostles Alexei's body, his little blonde head lolling to a bizarre angle, his legs—pudgy legs, still jiggling with baby fat—wobbling like a poorly-attended marionette. Sonya doesn't seem to notice, just clutches him to her tightly, cheek pressed against his hair.

Jilí flashes briefly to a memory of the first time Alexei had fallen asleep in her own lap, the way she'd rested her head on his, the way he'd smelled like something mystical and wonderful and entirely new to her, the way children smell to mothers who love them.

Sonya waves a hand at the window where rain is still falling brutally.

Jilí snaps back to the here and now, shaking the memory away even though she would have preferred to stay in it a moment or two longer.

"Out there—it's like he's lost, Jilí, like he just—like he can't find his way back to his body." Sonya bites her lip. It makes her look too fragile, too young. Jilí's stomach roils. "We have to go out there, find him. You—you're a witch, so I mean—" she gesticulates with one hand, holding Alexei to her with the other.

"He's not out there," Jilí says, blunter than she intends to be. "He's right there, love, and he's not going to come back no matter how mad we drive ourselves chasing down visions made from grief."

Sonya's mouth tightens, the area around her lips going white. "I'm not insane; go to the window, at least, just *listen*."

Jilí isn't sure whether it's better to humor her or keep her grounded in reality, but she's not liking reality too much herself at the moment, so she makes her way over to the window. It's open a crack for fresh air despite the rain; Jilí has to use a good bit of strength to move the water-swollen wood and open the pane wider. Rain blows in, cold and sharp.

Deciding that, if she's already there, she might as well at least make Sonya feel a little better by doing what she asks, Jilí stands up on her tiptoes and looks out into the rain-battered world, listening, just in case.

There's a quick flurry of noise behind her; even as she turns, Jilí knows it's too late. Sonya is up and off the bed and making for the front door, Alexei's body still clutched tight to her breast.

"Don't," Jilí calls after her, letting the window slam shut and making her way after her wife, knowing it won't do any good. "Please; it's wet and it's *freezing*, and you have to believe me, if he were out there, if there were a way to get him back, I'd die to get it done, you *know* I would." There's a thready note of desperation in her voice, cracking it as Jilí splay her hands as if she could hold her helplessness out for Sonya to see, to understand.

Sonya pauses at the door, back still to Jilí in the bedroom doorway. A brief flare of hope rises in Jilí's chest, hope that Sonya will come back and lay down beside her and get it out, cry herself to sleep or break dishes or tear at her hair—anything but choosing this path toward obsession and insanity, anything but going out into the living flood with the body of her son. Something in Jilí knows that if Sonya starts hunting for a way to bring him back, she'll lose herself to it, will never stop, and Jilí will have lost her, too.

"Please," Jilí repeats.

Sonya's shoulders stiffen and square up and Jilí *knows* that move, has seen it in a dozen arguments she had no hope of winning. "He's calling for me," Sonya says, like it's simple and not at all a grief-induced hallucination or some byproduct of this tangle of monstrous magic.

Jilí doesn't have anything to change Sonya's mind, so she stands there, heart thundering to rival the rain, as Sonya tucks Alexei's body under the protection of her shawl and walks right out the door.

—

Jilí wakes up with her face stuck to her forearm with drool. It takes her a few moments to pull herself into reality—she must have fallen asleep waiting for Sonya to come back, to come home. The rain outside has gone slack, just spatters blowing here and there

occasionally, and there's patches of thin sunlight coming through the window. She's been asleep all night. Sonya's been *out* all night.

"Here," a voice says. A mug full of steaming cinnamon tea thumps down in front of her, a little of the liquid sloshing onto the table. Donani puts a hand on her shoulder, squeezes. Their family has never been good with comfort, with apologies, with affection. "You look terrible," he adds, sounding like their grandmother more than a little.

"Thanks," Jilí croaks, pulling the mug towards her. "For the tea," she clarifies, rolling her eyes, "not the insult."

"Observation," Donani corrects her, sliding into the seat cattycorner to hers. "It's only an insult if it's not accurate."

"Academic," Jilí says, making sure it sounds quite thoroughly insulting. "How long have you been here, anyway? You were gone when I came back."

Donani pulls a face, but he sobers quickly. "Just a few minutes ago. She's been out all night?"

Jilí nods in confirmation, lifting the mug of tea to warm her hands while she waits for it to be cool enough to drink. "She took his *body*," she says, bile rising in her throat. "He was all—" she shakes her head, makes a hand motion to replace the word *floppy*, and then goes back to clutching at her mug of tea like a lifeline.

Donani stares down into his own mug, nodding the vague sort of nod he gives when he doesn't know what to say—a distant bobbling of his head, no real meaning to it except to acknowledge that he's heard what she's said.

"I should have gone with her," Jilí says, mostly because she knows it's what he's waiting for her to say. "It was dangerous and cold and wet and I should've gone out with her."

Donani doesn't disagree with her, but he is kind enough to give her something like an out: "It's obvious your powers are gone. All that would have done was have the both of you catching cold and chasing ghosts, and all without wards against Dmitri. Word is that he's been making himself all kinds of dangerous."

Jilí closes her eyes and swallows the bile down hard at Dmitri's name and the word *ghosts*. "I still should've gone. At least she wouldn't be alone."

Donani isn't *too* kind. "You were scared," he says simply.

Jilí scowls at him. "Yes, of course I was scared. It's like I've suddenly gone deaf or blind; I would've been more hindrance than help and, quite frankly, I didn't *want* to wander the freezing, flooded landscape with a hallucinating Sonya and a dead child without any way to protect us. I know that makes me a weak or terrible person or something, but—"

"Anyone would be," Donani interrupts her.

"Anyone would be what?" Jilí snaps, shoulders hunched up around her ears defensively.

"Scared," Sonya's voice says from the mug between Jilí's palms.

Jilí yelps and jumps back instinctively, sloppily, dropping the mug as she goes. It hits the floor in the blink of an eye, scalding tea spilling over Jilí's feet, clay shattering on the floor.

"That's—" Donani starts, eyebrows high, eyes wide with some mix of surprise, concern, and academic curiosity.

"Unexpected?" Sonya asks from the puddle of tea on the floor, her voice sounding just a little muffled and far away, like she's talking to them through a door. "I told you, Jilí. I told you I could hear him."

Jilí is very suddenly empty of feelings—there are too many, too many racing and roiling around for her to keep them inside her, so they escape and leave her staring down into a puddle of improbability—one that, for that matter, can't mean anything good at all. "You're dead, aren't you?" she asks her wife, voice as cracked and hollow as a crow's.

Sonya—Sonya's voice—is silent for a moment. "I had to go out," she says eventually. It sounds like both *yes* and *no* and *I'm sorry* and *I can't regret it* all at once. "I had to find him, Jilí. I *heard* him, clear as you know my voice is real now."

"I'm not sure how clearly that is," Donani says, still looking gobsmacked.

"Where are you?" Jilí asks, feeling entirely separate from her body, from this moment. Panic is hovering just outside her skin, waiting to take over, but she pushes it back. Maybe Sonya has found some small bit of magic somewhere, a Deep Well or a kindlier water spirit or—

"The water. I think—I think *all* water," Sonya says. Jilí can feel the shrug in her voice. "I don't—it's dark and it's cool and it's wet, but he's *here*, Jilí, he's here and I *did* hear him, he *was* calling for me."

Jilí squeezes her eyes shut, pulls her still-burning feet up onto the chair with her, hugs them to her chest. Tears wet her knees, salt stinging the places where the hot tea has left welts. "Tell me," she says, throat tight. Again, a little more clearly, "Tell me what

happened, Sonya. Everything. Maybe—maybe I can find you." *Save you*. She doesn't say that part out loud, partly because she knows Sonya would never leave Alexei even if Jilí somehow found her and pulled her back from whatever she's done, partly because she has no way to do it without her magic, even if she were to find Sonya. She checks again, reaches down into herself to feel for a glimmer of power, but her magic is as gone as if it had never been.

"Jilí—" Donani tries, reaching out a hand as if to say that it's better not to ask, not to know.

"No," Jilí says, firm even as her voice wobbles with the threat of tears she knows aren't far away. "*No*, if I've lost you both," she looks sternly down at the tea pooled on the floor as if Sonya could see her, as if it were some magic mirror. "If I've lost you both in a single day, if you've left me *alone*—" her voice chokes off on a rough sob, a precursor to those oncoming waves of panic, of tears.

Donani doesn't even correct Jilí on calling herself alone, just takes her hand and squeezes it hard enough that she can't pull away. It's both comforting and useless in the face of missing her wife and Alexei, in the face of feeling like she's made the wrong decision at quite literally every turn.

"I wandered for a while," Sonya says, voice soft, the way it gets when she's reading Alexei a story at bedtime. "It took a long time for me to understand, but his voice, it got fainter when the rain eased off, louder when it rained harder, when I stepped in a puddle, when I got—"

"Close to the river," Donani finishes, sounding as sick as Jilí feels.

Sonya doesn't apologize for it, doesn't make any excuse, and Jilí loves and hates her for the strength that takes. "I was leaning down to hear better and the bank just *went*," she says. "I wasn't even cold anymore; it was okay once I realized it wasn't too deep there. And I could hear him, Jilí—if I went under, kept my ears and mouth under, you know, I could talk to him and he could talk back to me. So I kept going under." She hesitates, but Jilí already knows what she's going to say.

"Longer and longer," Jilí says for her, some tight and burning emotion flooding the space between her ribs like cheap whiskey downed too quickly. "And then you decided not to come up."

Sonya makes a sound like a kicked dog, the broken sound of a creature hurting and confused. "What would you have had me do?" she asks, voice thick with tears. "He was fading each time, he was getting further and further away, I couldn't just let him *go*."

Jilí reaches down to the puddle of now-cool tea with a shaky hand, presses her whole palm into it like it's a window, like Sonya can press back from the other side. For a moment, Jilí imagines that she does, a faint shadow of real, physical touch. For just that moment, Jilí can understand why Sonya went out after her son's voice alone, why she followed it out and down and *down*. "So what am I supposed to do?" she demands, voice weaker than she would like it to be. "Just let the both of you go?"

Sonya bites out a bitter laugh. It's the laugh of a woman who learned to keep herself quiet so as not to draw a dangerous man's attention and then unlearned it—the urge to laugh bubbling over, then quelled, then released very purposefully as she remembers that Jilí is dangerous, too, but never to her, only to *protect* her, that laughter is a *good* thing here. Jilí wonders if it will change, in whatever dark and watery place Sonya is now,

since she's neither protected nor in any greater danger, presumably. Jilí wonders if she will get to find out, or if Sonya, too, will fade more and more as the rains fade and the risen river resumes its normal flow.

"No," Sonya says, sighing deeply. It's not an exasperated sigh, just a release of emotion that there is no concurrent facial expression to display. "No, love, never."

Jilí rubs at her eyes with her fists, tries not to let the tears start properly. "If I go down to the river—"

Donani's hand tightens on hers, his knuckles going white. He doesn't bother to tell her not to; he's known her since birth, knows that if that's what she decides to do, there's no stopping her.

"Don't you dare," Sonya says in her best motherly scolding voice. It only wavers a little. "Don't you dare waste your life, don't you even *think* it."

Jilí gnaws at her lip. "You did," she points out—reasonably, she thinks, but Donani glares at her.

Sonya sighs again. "No, I didn't. I love you," she says like an apology. "I love you, I *love* you. But Alexei was a child alone in the dark, calling for his mother. What could a mother do but go to him?" She hesitates, then, "But I am not a child. I am a woman, I am a *strong* woman, and—" Jilí can hear her crying, can hear her trying not to, "—and I do not love you just for having saved us. I love you *and* you saved us; the table is made of wood and geese are very mean creatures. Both true, but not related."

Jilí doesn't know how to hear this, doesn't know how to even begin to assimilate into her vision of herself the idea that her worth isn't determined by her usefulness to people

she cares for. "How can you think I'm not coming after you?" she asks. She's starting to shake. "How can you *ask* me not to come after you?"

"Not asking," Sonya says, correcting Jilí in a way that makes it clear that she's spent too much time around Donani. "Telling. We're here, Jilí. We are here in the dark and the water and we are in *all* of it. You *will* live and we will be in every bit of blood in you, in every tear, in every rainstorm you endure and every kettle you boil. We will wait—" she says, sniffing and gulping down tears.

Jilí keeps her eyes squeezed shut so she can imagine that she can *see* Sonya, that she's not absurdly saying goodbye to her wife through a puddle on her kitchen floor.

"We will *wait*," Sonya repeats. "We will watch you live your beautiful life and when it comes time—naturally time—for it to be over, we will be holding our hands out to welcome you home."

Jilí can't keep the tears back anymore, can't pretend that any of this isn't improbable or horrible or ridiculous. "You're a puddle, Sonya, you're *dead* and a *puddle of tea* and it's not fair to ask me to keep being a real person in the face of that, alright, a person *without* you." She swipes at her runny nose with the back of her sleeve like a child and just lets the tears keep running.

"Come outside," Sonya's voice says, stronger, louder, echoing up from the floor and from the salty droplets on Jilí's cheeks and from under Jilí's skin, making her bones tremble. "Come outside, love."

Jilí just goes. Donani doesn't even try to stop her, just turns in his chair to keep watch.

Jilí turns her face up to the smudge-clouded sky. "And?" she says, still crying, holding up her hands in a gesture of emptiness and expectation. "What? What can there be left to say? To do?"

The clouds darken, bellies the color of bruises, of plums. Rain starts to drizzle, then pour. Drops land on Jilí's face, in her eyes, her mouth. She sobs, a wretched, ugly sob, even as the rain soaks her with the memory of Sonya's hands on her cheeks, of her lips on her forehead, her mouth, her shoulder, her hand.

"It's going to be alright," Sonya says from everywhere.

Jilí shakes her head, wild and vehement as a child refusing to hear something. "It's *not*."

It's Alexei's little voice that breaks her. "I'm sorry," he says, quiet and reverberating through her all at once. "It's my fault. I gave the book—"

Jilí covers her face with her hands, tries to press the need to cry back into herself and pretend to be a real adult so she can say the right thing, the thing the ghost of a boy needs to hear even as she begins to understand. "To your father, lovely, I know," she says after a few more moments gathering composure, realization unfolding and unfolding. That day in the market, their separation must have been arranged by Dmitri, Alexei just a scared child still secretly hoping that his father could be better than he was. Dmitri had called in the drought with a layman's raw, unhindered magic, driven and made alive by his hatred and persistence, knowing the townspeople would blame Jilí as they blamed her for anything out of the ordinary, that they would likely do his dirty work for him; the little spellbook just gave him a way to strengthen and prolong the drought, to end it when *he* was ready. The rain, when he finally let it break, nearly drowning the town—reins of

control handed to a man willfully blind and deaf to rules or consequences. The Restorer had come to right *his* sloppy spellwork, should have taken *his* magic. "It's okay, lovely, it's not—it's not your fault. It's okay. It's going to be fine," she adds, promises in the way that parents have to promise, in direct opposition to her own absolute certainty that nothing will ever be fine again. She starts to loop in on herself, shivering and thinking through the sheer amount of hatefulness Dmitri must have boiled up in himself as he circled his wife and child, lingering and sniffing like a rabid dog just outside Jilí's wards. Thinking about how little she has to keep him at bay without the bright well of magic inside her. "I love you, it's okay, it's—"

"Go inside before you catch cold," Sonya interrupts gently. "We're here. Go, love, go get warm and get into bed and—" she falters a little, keeps going, "and prop the window open. We'll sing to you until you fall asleep. Everything else can wait until tomorrow."

"No, no, I—I have to find some way to deal with Dmitri—to call back the Restorer—maybe even get my magic back, maybe then—"

Sonya's tone is that of a mothering sort of woman, the Sonya that Jilí knows best and loves most, and it's a tone that brooks no argument. "*Tomorrow.*"

Jilí swallows her tears as well as she can, rubbing at her eyes as the downpour washes the salt from her face. "You're pretty pushy for a dead lady," she jokes, too flat to be funny.

"Watch it, you," Sonya teases back, tears evident in her voice, too, "or every bowl of soup or cup of tea you ever have is going to start shouting and getting onto you about looking after yourself. Don't think I won't do it, woman."

Jilí laughs weakly, ignoring the snot and mud and beginning her trudge back inside to do what Sonya's asked her to do. She squeezes Donani's shoulder as she passes him but explains nothing—tomorrow, it can wait for tomorrow.

Her eyelids sting from crying and her throat is cottony and dry, but she props the window open with the stick they keep on the sill and climbs into bed.

"You better sing me a good one," she says to nothing and everything, feeling ridiculous and miserable at the same time.

"All the good ones," Sonya promises from everything, smile evident in her voice.

Jilí curls into herself, snuffling into her wet sleeves and the quilts on the bed, and tries to quiet her breathing so she can hear Sonya's soft voice as she starts up a lullaby. After a moment or two, Alexei's wavering voice joins in.

Jilí lets the tears go, silent as she can, and buries herself in the lullaby, the next one, the next, until she drifts off. Mercifully, she doesn't dream. Now and then she'll float to the surface of unconsciousness and, hearing Sonya's steady stream of slightly imperfect singing, Jilí lets herself sink back down, crying just a little less each time.

END

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