

Transformed
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Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2020

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Part I
A Tale of Fairy Tales

A Tale of Fairy Tales: An Essay on Movement

Marina Warner begins her book, *Fairy Tale: a Very Short Introduction* by comparing the vast history of fairy tales to a map, writing that landmarks like the Grimm Brothers, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson overshadow smaller, but equally beautiful geography. While this comparison works, it leaves something to be desired. Maps are static and if one thing is for certain within the fairy tale canon, it is that fairy tales are constantly changing, being shaped by those who tell and consume them while also shaping those same people and surroundings.

Fairy tales began in the mouths of people who could not read or write. While the term fairy tale did not exist yet, these tales of magic, transformation, intrigue, and often adventure were told again and again, for the entertainment of what the Grimm Brothers called the 'Volk' or the common people (Warner 46). When they were written down, it was to capture the belief systems and voices of the people of a nation (Warner 11). Later on fairy tales were written and changed to further the belief systems that those in power wanted to see. And pictures, though now an integral part of the tradition, were not even introduced into the European tradition of fairy tales until the Victorian era when fairy tales were beginning to be used to educate children (Warner 78). Since then they have stuck and now no fairy tale is complete without pictures, woodcuts, and animations to go along with it. Even the term fairy tale is a literary term that instead came from a place of orality.

Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, writer of *contes des fées* or tales about fairies, coined the term fairy tales in reference to her own work and would tell her stories in salons

where similar jokes and fables were told (Zipes 22). D'Aulnoy wanted to give women another power to turn to that was not the church, much of the support she had received in her life was from other women, especially midwives, thus the fairies in her tales mimicked those kinds of roles; a sometimes older woman who offered advice and kindness to a young woman in need (Zipes 27). Older traditions and folklore like the fates, fauna, and other medieval and pagan female deities associated with sexuality and nature were appropriated to offer power to the women in these tales (Zipes 30).

Fairy tales were often originated and adopted by women of the time (France late 17th to early 18th centuries) as a necessity of spreading information with other women when information was power and women were not allowed power (Zipes 40). Telling stories became a way of operating outside of the patriarchal tradition that policed women's lives through legislation, marriage, and religion. As this information spread, the term outgrew its meaning and came to encompass the cultural exchange we view it as today. Fairy tales though entertaining, often hold messages of morality, common sense, and the bravery to go against powers that seem to far outweigh our hero. Just as science fiction is often used today to convey metaphors for society, fairy tales tell the reader or listener that no task is too great to be overcome.

Tales told by women are thought to be uncommon, and yet they are not, they have just gone unnoticed. When we think of fairy tales, the names of men pop to mind, but so few women do. In Aarne and Thompson's categorization of fairy tales, the types stem mainly from a tradition of male transcribers (Zipes 81). When looking at fairy tales collected by women, we see a drastic difference in not just the language, but the actual

tales that were chosen to be written down. Zipes looks at the Cinderella archetype and how tales that were collected and retold by women that resembled this type drastically shifted in meaning. Zipes looks at Nanette Lévesque, Rachel Busk, Božena Němcová, and Laura Gonzenbach. Their tales give the women in them agency, allow them to enact revenge, and reveal much more about the beliefs and customs of the communities they interviewed, and were a part of, for these tales (Zipes 95).

In the case of Němcová, she actually supported her family off of the tales she collected through her travels and published in newspapers and small pamphlets. It was through her writing that she was able to live her life separately from her husband and gain liberation (Zipes 99). Much like the heroines she wrote about, Němcová was a revolutionary of her time. Something that the likes of the Brothers Grimm wanted to actively reject and oppress in their own fairy tale depictions of women.

Gonzenbach's tales were gathered from lower-to-middle-class women around Sicily. Though she was an upper-class woman, she was able to gain their trust and the authority of these tales surpasses that of many of her male counterparts purely because she was not manipulating the tales to meet certain patriarchal standards of the time. She came from an educated and cosmopolitan background that was ahead of its time. Though certain aspects of the tales may have been altered, whether due to the language (the tales were collected in Sicilian, but published in literary German) or the self-censorship by the tellers (for fear of possibly affronting the upper class Gonzenbach) they remain some of the most authentic we have access to (Zipes 103). These tales did not always have a moral ending forced upon their listeners or readers, sometimes they just depicted a world that

people longed to live in. The importance of recognizing these tales by women is to reject the highly manipulated tales of Grimm, Disney, and Anderson, who all had their own agendas in how women were presented and see the discourse expand to collectors who tried to capture more of the culture of 'the common folk' and not just control it.

Where each tale originates from is often more difficult to pinpoint than when and who recorded or created them. That is not to say that original fairy tales did not come from an oral or cultural background, tales of violence against women have long been told and are often not based in fiction. *Arabian Nights* has a famous wife murderer and serial killers of women were not unheard of during or even before this time, they persist still today (Zipes 42, 53). Violence against and perpetuated by women seems to be a never ending fascination in mainstream media.

The paths of fairy tales are distorted through trade and travel, certain tales now remembered as being by this person at this time can often be found earlier by a different person, or more likely an anonymous one, in a different place (Warner 38). The so called founders of the modern fairy tale are Venetian Straparola and Giambattista Basile who influenced the later stories of Perrault and Grimm (Warner 39-42). Whether these tales were pure imagination or had oral influences is hard to say. Certainly many of the stories reflected realities of the time, and in the case of Grimm though they claimed to be purely taken from the mouths of the 'Volk', they were heavily edited and censored by the 'collectors'. Many of the tales that we so heavily associate with Europe in fact come from father East, especially after the translation of the *Arabian Nights* were brought over (Warner 46, 47, 66). Because fairy tales are found in almost every culture, first as belief

systems that then evolve to oral entertainment before becoming nailed down in the written form, their influences are a blurry array. If a fairy tale's nature is to evolve then could we even call a new iteration of one an adaptation? Isn't it just the next evolution, the next story being told?

Fairy tales have survived because of their ability to adapt and change based on the community's needs. They are alive, much like people. Take *Bluebeard*, a wholly original fairy tale written by Charles Perrault. However he is often not even mentioned alongside the tale or any of its remakes. In this sense it has outgrown its creator. This happens with many fairy tales that have taken on iconic roles in Western culture. The 2008 Studio Ghibli film *Ponyo* is a remake of Hans Christian Anderson's story *The Little Mermaid*. Anderson appears merely as a footnote on the Wikipedia page though. Would any author today allow someone to get away with such copyright infringement by claiming a work is merely "an abstract influence." I think not, but fairy tales are special.

When describing fairy tales and their cultural relevance Jack Zipes presents the fairy tale as a meme; a term coined by the ethologist Richard Dawkins which is, "a unit of cultural transmission" (Zipes 17). Zipes writes that fairy tales have a symbiotic relationship with the culture they come from, both receiving and giving influence on the world around them. If we were to go even further towards fairy tales in terms of base communication and language, we see how even that changes based on the previous factors mentioned. Colloquial language is shaped by references like jokes, idioms, and yes, fairy tales. Fairy tales not only are shaped by outside forces, but also shaped those forces (Zipes 10). Once they started to be written down the form shifted drastically as the

writer was suddenly shaping what language was used and which tales were even deemed important enough to be written down (Zipes 17). Suddenly the cultural transmission was transmitting over much larger chunks of time and place. The reason that the fairy tale as a meme is so important is because 'cultural transmissions' like these are what shape us starting at a young age and affect how we go about life and how we remember history. Because of its state as a meme though, each brain that it encounters changes it and passes it on differently (even the term meme has been memefied and changed drastically from what it used to be). This malleability is what allows the fairy tale to retain importance and shape us because each person is able to get what we require out of it (Zipes 19,20).

This basis of passing along fairy tales through word of mouth gives them one of their best qualities, which is their ability to change. Adaptations are often evaluated by the ability to remain faithful to the original and to reinterpret the original through a new perspective. Look at *Frozen*, *Clueless*, and even much of Shakespeare's works; all adaptations that have taken on lives of their own. If you are lucky and if the adaptation is very good, it will be forgotten that it is an adaptation at all and like *Clueless*, it doesn't necessarily need to reference the original to make sense. With fairy tales, these rules of how to make an adaptation, what qualifies as an adaptation, or even what is important enough to be adapted, are thrown out the window. For something to be a fairy tale adaptation it needs only to have a girl making a dangerous journey, a lover waiting to find their other half, or an evil stepmother plotting to ruin all of your plans! I bet you can name one or even a few fairy tales that those examples remind you of. That's how pervasive fairy tale iconography has become in our culture.

When we look at how fairy tales have evolved today, we see that the mopey princesses of yesteryear have been dropped, cut down to reveal heroines capable of much more courage, and in some cases bloodshed, than their past selves. This idea that fairy tales are the fodder of the patriarchy is wrong though. How could they be when we see that fairy tales serve a need, whether to entertain or escape the confines that society has set for you, they thrive on the underdog. And who doesn't love an underdog?

My own obsession for fairy tales came from an inability to read. Since I couldn't read, telling myself stories, looking at pictures, and having stories read and told to me became of the utmost importance. The Bedtime Story was a sacred time and never to be missed or skipped. I often tell people I have been a writer since before I could write. Since before I could read. It just so happens that my stories were written with a voice and not a pen. Up until fourth grade, it frustrated me to no end seeing all the other kids in my class pass their reading comprehension tests while I could not get past the first few levels. Stories that had magic, fantasy, or general weirdness were the best and despite the flimsy princesses that have become somewhat of a marker for fairy tales, the genre was nonetheless my favorite.

Choosing to do research on the genre and how it has evolved and shaped modern fiction in addition to writing my own adaptations feels less like a choice and more like a necessity. A culmination of a lifelong fascination. Being able to look at my own work and tie it back to tropes and markers that extend past the written language makes me excited. Oral story telling has always been important to me. It is how my family passes down their history, it is how I remember my own life and the lives of people who died long before me.

Looking at stories that began in the throats of washer women or traveling merchants is just another connection to the past that shaped my world.

While writing essays that chronicled their past seemed pretty straight forward, writing my own content seemed harder. Angela Carter, Helen Oyeyemi, Anne Carson, and Neil Gaiman, among others, have already been here and crafted fairy tale adaptations so momentous that it pained me to even try when I have the likes of them looming over me. Reading Carmen Maria Machado, Lesley Nneka Arimah, and Haruki Murakami really helped me. These are all authors who write in the fairy tale tradition without necessarily creating direct adaptations. Machado's most recent memoir, *In The Dream House*, has footnotes where aspects of her life resemble fairy tale tropes. Murakami and Arimah write about worlds where what is real and what is magic are blurred together. This is not just what I try to do in my writing, it is also how I see the world. People who say magic does not exist are blind to what is right in front of them.

Warner defines fairy tales as short, familiar narratives with simple and direct language where “the past makes itself felt through combinations and recombination of familiar plots and characters, devices and images” (Warner xxv). This is what I have attempted to do with my own writing.

In my first creative section, I write fiction that focuses on the aging process, capitalism and the natural world. I'm especially interested in wells and the fairy tale type categorized by Aarne and Thompson as Type 480 “The Kind and The Unkind Girls”. Wells appear in fairy tales like these as a place of transformation, both physical and emotional. The good girl gets a gift and learns that if she is always good she will be rewarded. The

bad girl is punished and the ugliness she has inside is brought out. Wells are a source of life, once upon a time they were a gathering place where people could gossip and chat as they got water.

In “Ashes, Ashes”, the protagonist is repeatedly placed into a dry well as a form of torture. Some would call it just boys being boys. The well that used to bring life and joy now brings pain and maybe even death. The torture of our protagonist transforms him and whether it is a good or bad thing is up to the reader.

In “The Well”, a more direct adaptation of Type 480, I wanted to play with the idea of what is good and bad and whether it is even possible to be good in a capitalist society where money is placed above the lives of people. Family has always played an important role in my life. I come from a close knit Irish Catholic Clan, who I love dearly even though sometimes it is hard. “The Well” originated as a story for one of my best friends to comfort him, but after finishing it I don’t know how comforted it makes me feel.

“The Smallest Mermaid” also came from a place of comfort. I watched my grandmother succumb to dementia and it was like watching a someone trapped in a horror movie. All of my characters in these stories are alone, trapped either in their minds or in a more physical prison. “The Smallest Mermaid” is my hope that there can be rebirth and growth from these endings.

My two poetry sections are separated by the voices I choose to use in each section. The second section of my project I use mostly the We perspective and the third I use the I. My poetry blurs the lines between the self and the world around them. As a young queer person I was always confused by what I was told and what I saw and how those two

things always seemed so different from each other. Nature has always been an important part of my life because as a city kid I clung to it where ever I could find it. Places like Long Island and Virginia seemed magical to me when I was young because I could run through trees without seeing their end. The world around me changed me and I watched as I changed it too. A lot of my poems come from dreams, things that I wish would happen or that have haunted me.

Transformed is the name of my collection because that is what I have seen happen as I have written this collection. My writing has transformed and so have I. My writing is an attempt at making sense of the confusion I feel and see around me. It makes more sense when a squirrel invites you for tea than when someone is cruel. I do not know how to describe what I write other than something fantastical, queer, and odd. Because that is how I am. My stories and poems are my children; they are as much alive as we are. Some pieces have been years in the making, others were scratched out hurriedly in the dead of night while the birds were asleep.

If I am to write about my senior project then I will have to not just acknowledge all I have learned and gained from working on it, but also what I lost. Pictures have always been a huge part of the written fairy tale. My plan for this project was to create a series of prints, both intaglios and woodcuts, to go along with some of my written pieces, after this I was going to combine them all together by binding an edition of the project. I had the cover fabric picked out and everything. Because of COVID-19 that is not happening. I have spent a lot of time (probably too much time) mourning what my project was going to be. How could I bear to work on something that can only ever be incomplete by the time it is

finished? All this means though is that one, this project will require a visit later on down the road when I have access to the materials I need. And two, now more than ever fairy tales are important. They shine a light on not just our dreams and fantasies, but also our realities.

Warner, Marina. *Fairy Tale: a Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Zipes, Jack David. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

Part II
Fables

Ashes, Ashes

Once there was a boy trapped in an abandoned well. It was his first day at boarding school. He had no friends and no family. How he ended up there was a mystery. But there he was.

Every day he was hauled by the many hands of older boys to the well on the edge of campus. Unspoken school tradition tasked them with teaching this new comer the same lesson they had learned when they first arrived. It said that you would never be welcome until someone newer or weaker came to take your place. And even then, it wasn't that you were welcome, but forgotten until you decided to put someone in the well. It was the middle of the year though, and none of the past tortured boys wanted to incur the wrath they had just escaped, so no one came to relieve him of this burden. Our boy was stuffed down past the stones to where it was only dark. Every day he waited to be dragged from its depths again by a passing teacher or grounds person. Occasionally one of the kinder boys would see him and when no one was looking they would pull him out and then leave quickly.

The dirt from the well was hard to scrub away and soon the boy stopped trying; he knew he would just be shoved into the well again. When he cried, silver streaks were made in the dirt caked on his face. The boys at school began to call him Cinderella, they sang it like their favorite song. *Oh Cinderella*. Even the teachers began to call him that, it annoyed them that he never came to class clean, that they started to take longer routes walking to class so they could avoid the well and the boy's cries for help. The boy found

himself responding to the name, raising his head to snickers and jeers when he heard it called.

One night, the boy decided he had enough and he set off to destroy the well that caused him so much pain. He walked out of his dorm as storm clouds started to roll over campus. By the time he reached the well, lightening flashed in the sky. The boy covered the well in propane and watched it burst into flames. While it burned, the boy watched silently. The boys at school would find another place to shove him tomorrow. He did not need to see through the smoke to know that in the deepest recess of the well there was a permanent place where his bottom had carved a perfect seat in the floor from constant crouching. The only water in the well was a small puddle that had developed from his tears. The boy watched the smoke rise and turn into animal shaped clouds. The flames licked at his hands and feet, but they couldn't quite catch hold of him. The stars twinkled.

The well was gone. He imagined what his future would be like from then on. The next time the boy would be picked on for being strange he would smile because the well was gone. The bullies wouldn't care, they would stuff him in garbage cans and lockers. Closets and desks would grow accustomed to his small frame, but still he would smile. The well was gone and so were his tears. When they called him Cinderella, he would only laugh and spin away as their hands tried to grab at him.

His shadow had jumped at the sparks of the fire, catching on and flying off, so now the boy didn't have one. And he felt like a weight had been lifted.

When the last wisp of heat burned into the sky and the morning was not yet light, the boy found that all that was left of the well was a hole full of ashes. He picked some up

and rubbed them on his arms. He took off his shirt and smothered his chest in them. The rest of his clothes slid off easily. On his skin, he drew animals leaping around a flame and made prints of his hands. He felt like an ancient cave come to life. Once he was completely covered he sat in the remaining grey. When the other boys found him, they laughed. *Cinderella's really lost it now.* But the boy just smiled. His eyes flickered. His hair smoldered. The other boys left him in the dust. It was no fun when he made it so easy.

At school that night, smoke drifted through the halls as the boy returned. Like an unstoppable wheel on fire. Even though he opened all the doors, and unlocked all the windows, all that escaped was the smell of smoke. When the school began to burn properly, the boy was already far away, looking at the stars. He smiled. The well was gone. And so was he.

The Well

Once upon a time there was a family of enormous fortune. Over the years they used their wealth to build an empire, and their reach stretched across the world until most people knew the name Hill. Despite this, their origins were far humbler, and in fact the first coin they earned (though earned is a disputable term to use) was made from a well.

Many great grandmothers ago there was a young girl who went to a well at the top of a hill near her house. She helped an old lady and for her goodness was given the ability to reach into the well and pull out gold, silver, and jewels. She and her family built their home on top of the hill and as many years passed, her story was told less often until the Hill family forgot where their wealth came from in the first place. But forgetfulness is dangerous.

Wealth makes even the most good natured greedy and as time continued, the well gave less and less to them. The hands reaching into her depths were greedier, more spiteful, and meaner with every generation. If it was not for some smart stock investments made by long dead relatives, the wealth of the Hills would have come and gone without remark.

At the turn of the century they built a tower around their well to protect it. No more gold came from the depths and so they turned the well into an elevator shaft to keep it away from prying eyes and hands. By now most of the Hills believed the story to be a tall tale, one not even good enough to pass on to their children, but their paranoia

outweighed belief and so they always stayed close to the well where it supposedly all began.

In recent years the Hills suffered losses, something that never before touched their family in all the time they could remember. The fraction of the money that disappeared was less than they gave the gardener, and the money left was ten times your wildest dreams, but it worried them nonetheless. The youngest Hill was the only one whom this did not bother, he would much rather be a gardener than pay for one.

The youngest of his seven siblings and many family members, Anderson Hill did not care much about the family fortune. His older siblings were the ones who would be in charge and he was quite content to putter about and spend time with his cousin, Calliope. Calliope was the same age as him and the youngest of her side of the family so while their parents and older siblings fought over who would control the dynasty, they kept to themselves.

The Hill family was a business first and foremost and like any good business that meant that they ran an orderly operation and were an opportunistic family. When Anderson and Calliope turned ten, they started working in the mailroom, delivering mail and coffee to their aunties and uncles who worked in the floors above. They were good employees and so when they turned thirteen, they were promoted to mailroom supervisors. It was fun telling their cousins and siblings where to deliver mail and what everyone got to eat for lunch. Sometimes, if they were short staffed, they would hire someone from the town, usually older, and they would come into the mailroom, confused and angry that a thirteen-year-old was their boss. Most times outsiders quit after a year,

unwilling to see how smooth everything ran in the hands of a child. Besides, it was always better to keep things in the family.

Anderson and Calliope actually had fun during that time. They would race down the halls to see who could deliver the mail the fastest. Calliope was often faster, but Anderson was more accurate with his deliveries. Once Calliope spilled coffee on some letters and they pretended the letters were ancient tomes found in a melting glacier and they delivered them dressed up as mountain climbers who had a terrible secret.

Anderson came up with the idea to laminate letters closed so the recipient would have to get a box cutter to access the contents.

Despite Anderson's best efforts though, he was a good worker and at fifteen Anderson was moved to an office. Calliope was left in charge of the mailroom and she said she didn't mind, but they had always been together and Anderson knew she did. Most Hills had their eyes set on somewhere and usually got there. Third floor was human relations, the seventeenth floor was finance, the thirtieth floor was a storage space for things that no one had thought about in years, and on various floors in between the family made their homes. Calliope wanted to end up on the forty second floor where building planning and interior design happened and working the mailroom in the basement of the building was not a route to vertical advancement.

There were seventy two floors in total, plenty of space to allow all those who wanted it power and meet any need the family had or thought they had. Everyone in the family had a role to fill that existed long before they were born.

As Anderson grew older the lack of family funds grew more and more noticeable. His father was the Hill in charge of it all and he did a poor job. One more bad investment and the bank they owned would own them. Anderson's uncles and aunts clamored for control, but Anderson's father kept his office door locked and had a mattress brought in so he could sleep there most nights. The only way they would be taking over would be if they got a battering ram through the door. Anderson had been moved to public school and it was looking more and more like he would be attending a state college.

Anderson's father was an even poorer father than he was a businessman. Growing up, Anderson hardly ever saw his father, who was either working till hours when only bars were still open or finding excuses to see friends and family that did not include his children and wife. His father only came home in the morning to shave and every time Anderson would rush to his side to see him perform this mundane task as if he were a god. But this meant little to his father, who would push him away. Nothing was ever right or good enough for him and it didn't take long for him to stop trying. When his father inherited the company, Anderson was grateful that it meant he would be out of the house. This absence would only be slightly greater than the one already felt.

Soon Anderson only saw his father on birthdays and at Christmas. By the time Anderson was fifteen, his father was just a figure who waved down at him from the topmost window of the Hill Company.

Sixteen was a most important age for the Hills because at sixteen they were expected to choose a career in the company. The job you held at sixteen would determine what you did with your summers, where you went to college, and the life you led till the

day you died. At sixteen, you had a purpose, and if you didn't have a purpose in the Hill family, the Hill family did not need you. Anderson did not know what his purpose was yet, but he suspected that it had little to do with the people he shared blood with.

On Anderson's sixteenth birthday he was one hour and thirteen minutes away from officially being sixteen. He and Calliope were by the creek at the bottom of the hill when he was told by his father's secretary that his father wanted to see him. This was the year he was going to become a full time member of the company and his father wanted to induct him himself. It had been two years since Anderson had seen his father in person, despite living just ten floors below the office. He and Calliope had been planning to spend the day at the bottom of the hill where the river ran shallow and they could find old arrow heads if they looked carefully, but it was not to be.

Calliope took his hand. "Don't worry," she said. "I'll go with you and afterwards we can come down to the river and burn old report cards." Anderson smiled. Going to see his father after all this time seemed daunting, but Calliope always knew what to do to make him feel better.

On the way up to Anderson Sr's office the elevator stopped between the floors for holiday decorations and out of date maps (twenty second and twenty third). The sound of the pulley grinding on the rusty steel cable sounded like a bullfrog's mating call. Calliope laughed and Anderson knew she was thinking the same thing. They pressed the call button, but after a few minutes realized no one was coming.

"We must be just below the twenty third floor, let's get the ceiling panel open and we can climb up, force apart the doors and just walk the rest of the way using the service

stairs,” Calliope said. After some pulling and a great deal of prying the panel was open enough for them to squeeze through. Anderson put his arm out to grab onto a wire and felt something cold and round fall into his hand instead. When he pulled it back, he found a gold coin in his palm. He did it again and then once more.

“There’s gold falling in the elevator shaft,” Calliope eagerly stuck her hand further into the darkness, but she felt nothing enter her palm. She held it there for a few moments, waiting to feel the weight of polished metal. This could save the family fortune. Suddenly she felt something, but this thing was slimy and squished between her fingers.

“Ugh,” she said. “There isn’t any gold in there, just frogs!” She dropped the bullfrog onto the elevator floor and wiped her hand on her pants. It croaked, surprising the cousins with its robustness.

Then the elevator jolted alive and they quickly climbed back inside before they began to rise again. Anderson pocketed the gold coins and set his mind on seeing his father. Calliope would have to wait outside. Enemies were everywhere, his father said, even their own family, so Anderson would be seeing his father alone. Nothing new or unusual, but the task was a draining one.

Anderson’s father was a tall man who wore suits so black that it looked like there was an absent space where his body should be, and his voice was soft and deep like the devil’s in movies. Anderson’s father was not frightening, but his power, and the lengths he went to keep that power, was.

The elevator bell dinged and Calliope gave Anderson's arm a squeeze. They were about to sit down in the waiting area outside of the office when Anderson's father flung open the door to his office.

Anderson's father had a file in his hand labeled *Children* and he looked down at it swiftly before saying "Anderson! My son! It has been too long! And," he paused, looking at the folder again, "Calliope! And you have brought a frog as well! Why are you going to sit down? Come in! So good to see you both! Today is an auspicious one." He seemed in a good mood.

The cousins and the frog entered the office and sat down. The ceiling was two stories high and the chairs were made of ginormous trees long since cut down and carved, it is said, in one fell swoop of a carpenter's blade. Anderson's father sat behind a bloodwood desk, with his legs spread like jaws ready to snap. He looked just as a powerful man should.

"Happy Birthday, Andy Boy." He smiled at the two with large luminous teeth. What big teeth, Anderson thought. They looked sharper than he remembered.

They sat in silence. Anderson and Calliope would be free to go down to the river soon, they just needed to endure this a little longer. They could take the frog with them too. It currently sat in Calliope's lap and seemed to be quite attached to her. Calliope squirmed under her uncle's gaze. Her mother only ever told her horrible things about him, but he seemed so nice now. His gaze was the only thing that put her off. He never blinked. "Aren't you going to tell your dad about what happened in the elevator?" Anderson's father blinked.

“What about the elevator?” he smiled again.

“Oh nothing. It stopped in the middle, we opened the hatch to climb up, and then it started again.” Anderson did not look his father in the eye.

“I’m glad you are both all right. Elevators are dangerous. Especially this high up. Tell me, is that where your frog came from?” Anderson’s father reached his long arms across the desk, as if to pet the animal before retracting his grasp. He tapped his pointer fingers together in a slow beat.

Anderson and Calliope grew pale. The frog puffed up a little before settling again in his mistress’ lap. Anderson’s father, though it did not seem possible, smiled wider.

“Anderson, where is your frog, you naughty boy?”

Anderson stuck his chin out and gripped his chair to keep from shaking. “I put mine back in the river where we found it. This one followed Calliope though, it seems to like her.” Anderson’s father gave them one more long look before smiling again and asking them where in the company they each saw themselves in ten years.

In ten years Anderson wanted to be far far away from the Hills. He wanted to be in a country where people were good and kind and honest. Maybe he’d work for a place that planted trees or helped people find lost things. Maybe he wouldn’t work at all and just wander the roads playing guitar like a minstrel. He didn’t tell his father any of that though. He said he didn’t know what he wanted. His father smiled and said Anderson was telling an untruth, the Hill’s kinder word for lie. But it didn’t matter, Calliope had a long list of things she wanted to do for the family. She had redesigned the whole entry way in her head and could talk about which kinds of carpets were more welcoming for hours.

Anderson's father cut her off before she could go too into it and said they could leave. She was disappointed to be cut off, but Anderson happily pulled her out and soon they were running as fast as they could down to the creek.

They spent days after that stopping the elevator. At first they only did it during off peak hours when they knew hardly anyone would notice the delays, but after a week of staying up late to stick their hands into empty magic space, they got sloppy. It was Calliope who caused the forty five minute delay when she held her hand out too long, ignoring the increasing weight as frog after frog gathered in her hand. Anderson told her to pull it in, but she ignored him. She thought if she just held her hand out a little longer then maybe just one piece of gold or even silver, heck she'd take a shiny stone, would drop into her hand. But all she felt was the cold wetness of frogs. Their weight growing heavier and heavier as each new one fell, but they fell too quickly into her palms. She couldn't bring them into the elevator in time before they fell from her hands. Falling down further into the elevator shaft.

When she brought her empty, sticky hands into the elevator, she knew she had messed up. "Maybe they'll just go back where they came from." Anderson said. But they didn't. They made dull thuds at first and then wet ones as the bodies piled on top of each other. The sound echoed up the building creating a confused chorus of croaks that Calliope would hear in her nightmares for the rest of her life. Calliope cried and cried while Anderson tried to start the elevator again, but all the little dead frogs had jammed up the gears down below and the fire department had to be called in from the second floor.

When all was restored Calliope and Anderson walked guiltily from the elevator, heads hung low while their relatives made snide remarks about how stupid children were, how nothing like this had never happened when they were young, how if these were the leaders of tomorrow then they hoped the sun would explode them all today. Anderson wrapped his arm around Calliope and told her it would all be ok. They'd find a way to make up for it.

"No more of that elevator." he said. "It's bad news and only causes trouble." But just as he said that his father's secretary appeared by their side and told them Anderson's father wanted to see them.

Under his father's gaze Anderson felt like a child again. His father did not speak, he just reached his hand out and Anderson pulled three gold coins from his pocket. His first three coins the elevator had gifted him. But they weren't his, he was stupid to think they ever had been. And stupid to think that these were gifts. Before Anderson could think of something to say, his father took one of the coins and bit it. He pulled it from his mouth to reveal dents made by unnaturally straight teeth.

"Don't feel like you have to hide anything from me." He said. He looked at the coins a moment more before telling his son and niece about their many great grandmothers and the magic well. Anderson looked at his hands, unsure of what to say and then his father was standing before them. He knelt at Anderson's feet and took Anderson's hands and held them as gently as Anderson ever wanted to be held. His father looked at his hands for a long time before looking into his son's eyes.

“It seems like you are a good boy after all. The well only works for good people, you know the fabled type; idealistic, honest, generous, kind, yada yada. Completely impractical if you are running a business and there has not been one in this family for a long time. We tried outsourcing for a bit, but it seems good people are hard to find everywhere. Go and bring me some more of these and we shall see if you have a place in this company after all.” He said this like it would be the easiest thing in the world and for a moment Anderson believed it would be. This was the moment he had waited for.

But before he could think about what pulling gold from an elevator shaft meant, not just for him and his family, but for the empire named Hill, Anderson’s father tightened his grip on his hands. Anderson had not replied quickly enough. His father’s gaze hardened and his smile disappeared. “I don’t need you,” he said, “I just need your hands.” He rose and returned to his chair, staring at his son. The conversation was over.

By the river, Anderson watched the frog jump away. He scanned the bed for arrowheads. Calliope sat next to him silently with her knees pulled to her chest. “I am a good person,” she whispered into her arm. Anderson still heard her.

“Then why did the elevator give you frogs?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know!” Calliope raised her hands in frustration, she and Anderson had the same hands, brown and soft; it was a long time since any Hill’s hands were hardened by physical labor. Calliope breathed in. “Maybe this can help.” She breathed out.

Anderson did not want her help, the sooner the company ran out of money the better. Anderson believed this, truly, but he also knew how good it felt, how frightening,

to be the recipient of one of his father's smiles. Growing up that smile, tinged with the smell of whiskey, meant that whatever happened next would make a memory that would sear itself into the brain, a reward and a punishment. His father could make you feel like his decisions were your own, and you felt so clever and guilty for making them. Anderson hated how easily his mind and will could bend to a man who could not keep his hands from shaking without a drink.

They stared at the frog, which stopped on a rock in the middle of the river.

"Helping family is good Anderson."

"But what if your family are bad people. Why do we have so much money, but live next to a poor town and never employ people from that town? What do we even do to make all our money?" Anderson turned to Calliope. "Let's run away."

Anderson said things like they were hard facts. Like there was no in between and like the consequences of a decision would not ruin anything. Calliope could not run away. She couldn't leave her parents and siblings, her home that she loved. Growing up in the place where her parents and grandparents grew up seemed magical. She could find carvings in the halls that her parents made on the day they were married, the arrowheads that came from the river were left by people who shared her blood, the job she held was fine-tuned by years and years of Hills. Calliope knew that the company was her future and she felt lucky that she had such an assurance when most people her age barely knew what they would be doing the next day, let alone the rest of their lives. She could not leave the home that was built for her. Calliope needed to be sure of things and she was sure in this, but Anderson was sure of nothing.

Calliope looked at her cousin like he was the weirdest thing to happen that day and not the frog or the gold or the thinly veiled threats from her uncle. “Why would I want to leave? Why do you? You could stay and one day you might run the company and then you can do whatever you want with it.”

Anderson’s hands were now the only thing tying him to a family he felt no connection to. That’s how Calliope saw it at least and she wouldn’t sit by while Anderson ran away with them and abandoned her.

That night when she snuck into the kitchen, the one only used when there were large events like international business deals or family reunions, she had to stand on the counter to reach the cleaver kept hidden in the top cupboard. When going to Anderson’s room, she took the stairs to be safe. It was easy to sneak in, the family did not lock their doors. Calliope tied two of Anderson’s old uniform ties around each of his arms, securing them to his bedposts. He moved his head, but did not stir. He slept deeply, breathing softly through his nose. Calliope recited multiplication tables in her head to steady her nerve and raised the cleaver over her head.

She’d played softball in middle school and had always been proud of her strong arms. She always teased Anderson about how skinny he was and made a show of lifting things for him or pushing open especially heavy doors. “Chivalry isn’t dead,” he’d say.

Calliope looked at her target and swung once, twice. The second time the cleaver got stuck in the wood of the bedpost. Anderson moved under her, but too late. She swung again and again, tears streamed down her face, and then Anderson did not have hands anymore. Blood gushed from his wrists and he held them up to his face to look closer at

his bone which was quickly turning from white to red. “Is this a dream?” he said. He still had crust in his eyes when he looked up at her before fainting.

Calliope wrapped his hands in towels and carried him four floors up to the hospital (located on the 66th floor). Outside the crickets were silent, but if they had really listened and strained their ears, they would have been able to hear the bullfrogs croaking faintly.

In the hospital Calliope hugged Anderson. “You can leave now if you want. I’m sorry” she said. She left knowing he would be safe in the hands of their medical aunts and cousins. He was with family after all. She rushed downstairs to clean up the mess she had made. She poured bleach on the blood already turning brown and picked up the hands from the floor, carefully brushing off some dried blood before laying them on a clean cloth. The nails were dirty from digging by the river for skipping stones and Calliope decided the hands needed a manicure.

She washed the hands in lavender soap and cleaned and cut the nails, she pushed back the cuticles and rubbed them with tea tree oil. She moisturized the hands with her mother’s favorite lotion from France and massaged them till the stiffness of death fell from them. Once they were limp in her hands, she dabbed the dried blood from the wounds and cleaned them before wrapping the stubs in fresh linen. Anderson’s hands never looked so clean when they were on his body, he was always digging in the stream, or biting his nails till they bled.

Calliope took the hands to the elevator and reached them into the abyss. She was careful to keep her fingers inside in case it could tell that she was an imposter, but it

couldn't. When she held them, she saw that the gold coins shone just as brightly in the wrong hands as they had in the right ones.

The next day she took the hands to her uncle. She didn't know what else to do. She had a plan and she had executed it and that was as far as Calliope thought. The first thing he said to her when she stepped into his office and he unwrapped his son's hands was, "This does not look like the work of a mailroom employee to me." And despite herself, Calliope beamed.

Everything was fine for a while. Anderson left the Hill tower and got on the first bus to flatter land. He was tired of living in the hills. Calliope didn't see him go, they never said goodbye. But their family prospered. Their uncles and aunts had questioned where all this new wealth was coming from. Some had tried to take it from Anderson's father, but as their wealth increased and life became easier and more comfortable, they quieted down and didn't question what how their bank accounts got filled. Even if they had, Anderson's father would not have given any answers.

Calliope barely spoke to her uncle even though she saw him almost every day. She was the one in charge of the hands. Her uncle refused to touch them. She took this as a sign of his humanity, but really he did not want to touch what was equivalent to the help in his mind.

He did not mention that they were no longer attached to his son. He did not ask where Anderson was. He just followed Calliope to the elevator and pulled the stop button when they got between the twenty third and twenty fourth floor. He pried open the hatch and stepped aside as Calliope reached her cousin's hands up into the shaft. When she

pulled them back, they held gold. She kept the hands in one of her drawers. They never seemed to deteriorate or change since they'd been cut off from their body.

Sometimes Calliope wondered if she did the right thing. She always told herself she did. That cutting off her cousin's hands served the greater good, the good of the family. Things were going smoothly now.

She tried several times to reach her own hands into the elevator shaft and every time she got a new toad that she would take to the river. One night in her bed, she realized that she could hear the frogs clearly despite being at the very top of the hill.

One morning she heard a rumble from above and something dropped from the ceiling. It was gold.

The gold began to melt. First the gold in the safe in the top office, then the gold that was put into banks all over the world. The gold melted through the safe, then the floor. There seemed to be more of it than anyone remembered. Soon it was sliding down the stairs, chasing the office employees outside. It melted through every floor, turning the tower into shining rubble. It filled itself in, the elevator shaft was gone, the well was somewhere at the bottom, nothing was left. Soon it melted down the hill and ran into the river, burning anyone it touched except for the frogs. The frogs just swam through it like it was the coolest water they had ever touched.

The Smallest Mermaid

The smallest mermaid is often the most lethal. She carries poison in her breasts that she lets poor prey suckle on when they think they have defeated her. Sea snakes, piranhas, and giant squid all fall to the deep sea floor. She wraps them in a net of seaweed and pulls them to her burrow to feast. She makes kabobs, soups, and the occasional sandwich.

Each part of her meal gives her something different. The eyes allow her to see better in the cold depths where light can't reach. The arms and legs give her strength and energy. The brain makes her head feel woozy and for the next day or so, she feels like she is floating on some unnamed current. The internal organs like the kidneys and stomach are the chewiest and saved for when she has almost run out of food. The heart is her favorite and eaten last because it allows her to see red. Red is the first color to leave when descending beneath the waves and without hearts, the smallest mermaid's world is mostly grey and blue. Hearts make her bones tingle with warmth and suddenly the octopus that is hiding in the sand is seen, with his great red body and glowing yellow eyes.

The smallest mermaid has never seen anyone or anything else like her. She keeps company with kelpie and selkie. Once she met a kraken that made her laugh. Air bubbles floated up to the surface and tickled the feet of children swimming. They screamed and ran to shore. "I swear it was a giant shark's tail!" one screamed. But no, it was only the smallest mermaid. She has been alive for so long that she doesn't know where she comes from or why she exists. Things like purpose or past don't bother her though. The future

doesn't exist without time. The smallest mermaid wouldn't know time if a clock bumped her tail as she swam by. That's what gets her into trouble. Even creatures that ignore time are subject to it.

One day the smallest mermaid wakes feeling tired, looking gray. She can't swim as fast as she could yesterday, and she can't lift her heavy prey. Her eyes are sunken into her skull and she feels fragile. Despite all these changes, she doesn't think of herself as changed. Why should anything change when things have always stayed the same? So she keeps going as if the white streaks in her hair aren't getting larger and her flesh isn't becoming more transparent with each passing day. When she looks in the mirror, she sees an old mermaid, but she doesn't feel old. This can't be right. But it is.

Soon when she looks at her hands as she pushes her bed to the center of the room, she often redecorates when she is bored, she sees they have dark veins pushing up against her skin. Her heart races as she completes this task that had always been done with ease before. Her hands shake and her nails look brittle. The lines in her skin seem like great valleys where rivers of sweat pulse and her bones make sounds when she moves her fingers. Her joints are knobby and large. Her fingers have no meat, her hands are just one layer of epidermis shy of being bone.

The smallest mermaid is scared. Why is she changing? Why is this happening? She goes outside to ask for help, this is always the last resort of a solitary creature like she, but she doesn't recognize where she is. The animals that she sees are unfamiliar and don't know her name or why she is scared. Why she stands in the middle of the ocean floor looking for creatures that don't exist. Some claim to know her, or have at least heard of

her, but she brushes them aside. She isn't going to be anyone's next meal. For once in her life, the smallest mermaid is scared of something and she doesn't know if it will pass. As the days go on, she only becomes worse. She opens her drawers to find a heart, but she doesn't know where it came from or how she can get another. She smells it, how good it smells. Like iron dipped in sugar. She licks it, then bites it. It is tough and old and slightly bitter. She eats it all and that familiar feeling of warmth and fullness floods her. Through her drooping eyes she can see the red octopus's body resting by her door, his eyes are shut. Hanging from her ceiling she can see pinks and oranges, purples, yellows, and red. So much red. Long ago someone must have decorated this house with sea shells and glass. She wonders whose home she had wandered into. She wonders where her home is. Someone has moved the bed to the center of the room and she thinks whoever has such a beautiful home will not mind if she lies down for a moment.

Years go by and the smallest mermaid's bones turn to sand. Her hair blows away with the tides and gets stuck in some fisherman's net. What funny orange seaweed, he thinks. Soon all that is left of the smallest mermaid are the sacks of poison that once lived in her breasts. They sit on the sea floor untouched, everyone knows better than to disturb her remains. Soon a stem begins to grow from one of the sacks. It grows and attaches itself to the other sack, soon they grow a protective shell and then a soft outer shell. The sacks grow hair and nails and teeth. One day the sacks cannot be seen. Instead on the ocean floor, a small poisonous mermaid opens her eyes. "I'm hungry," she thinks.

Part III
The We

The Second Manticore

The cub that the lion did not want starved the first night it was born. While his brothers and sisters frolicked at their mother's feet, he lay his head on the dewy grass and watched his mother's face remain unchanged at his death.

As the stars appeared in the sky a new face burst through his mane. It was the face of the child who had touched his body by the road. As she walked home she felt her face grow tight, but that was all she knew of her twin with a lion's body.

The first thing the manticore saw in his new body were the stars. They were so beautiful, how could the manticore look anywhere else.

The manticore walked across the plain and every night he would wish on the stars he gazed at. He would wish for a companion, a true love, a twin flame. One night a star fell next to him and it grew into a second manticore who also could not tear his eyes from the sky. He missed his home. The two animals never saw each other, they only had eyes for the stars above.

Over time, they drifted closer and closer. They staggered as they moved, but no matter how dizzy the circling galaxies above made them, they did not look away. They grew closer till one night they touched, fur brushing fur. Earth and sky meeting at last. How odd, the first manticore thought. How odd, the second manticore thought. I didn't know there was a bush on this plain, they thought.

The Midnight Socialites

We leave at 1AM and let the moon turn our faces to bone. We walk through the night to find the courage that daytime makes easy. We walk at night because we can never go home. Home is where our beds are, that lull us into feeling like change can wait for tomorrow. But change is best left for the night. When no one is around to tell if that is hair or fur growing from our legs. No one to tell us it is wrong to indulge in our animal delights.

The raccoons that make their homes in church pews and mausoleums listen as the neighborhood cats mewl for them to come out and fight. They howl as their ears are stripped of fur by crescent moon claws. They lock eyes with us while we watch them lick their wounds. Soon they will be animals again, more afraid than they should be after winning a battle, with furless ears that glow pink against the votives. When the cats return home in the morning, battle worn, we will brush the dirt from their fur and pretend we don't know that was the dirt of graves.

There is a horrifying beauty of seeing your face and not recognizing it. This is what happens when we smile into the puddle that has gathered by the gates. Our teeth are like scepters, our mouths are like kings. Raccoons are always good at picking up trash and when they see we've thrown our flesh faces aside for new ones, they steal them.

Now at night, it sounds like the raccoons are laughing. They dance over graves and towards the gate now, looking to expand their rule. We can see them coming down the road and so we offer them our clothes, we do not want them anymore.

As we grow up, we must learn how to move our faces in the right way so people don't mistake the things we feel. We only saw the faces of the raccoons and cats that fought in cemeteries, so forgive us if we look feral.

Two Sisters

If there were two sisters so close
that every summer when they went
on a walk they would find themselves
at the same end
even if they started off separately
at different times going
in different directions. Time would pause
so one could catch up to the other
and the road would turn in a new
and exciting way. The one who started in
the morning going East would find herself
suddenly facing West as the sun hit midday
and the one who went West in the evening
would feel the noon heat hit her back facing East.

If there were two sisters
so close that the world
always brought them together,
then when one died the live sister
would be forced to take the others name.
Just to keep it going.

If her sister died at age five
then she would hear her sister's name
called in the playground. Her teacher would
reprimand her in her sister's name.
Her friends would only know her sister's name.

If her sister died when she was thirteen, she would curse
her sister's name, thereby cursing herself,
when she was alone and in pain
from her first period and first heartbreak. She would wish
her sister to come back, whispering her name
at night when she saw her first shooting star. But
she was whispering her own name
and she was already here.

If her sister died when they were nineteen, she would hear
her sister's name mumbled in bed,
not by a lover, just someone who touched her right.
Her sister's name her sister's name her sister's name.
She would arch her back at her sister's name.

If her sister died at age forty, long
after they had grown apart. One living
across the sea. But they would see each other
when they went off on their walks. Until one day
one was missing at the end of the road. She knew
what had happened. And when she ordered take out
because she was too grieved to cook, she gave her sister's name
on the phone. There would be a pause and then
the waiter would say "Gosh
I love your name."

There is the slim chance
that one will die when they are
too old or too young to remember
whose name is whose. And one death
won't mean much now. Or maybe
they will die at the same time.
One facing East and one West,
calling their sister's name.

Palinopsia

The light that we can't see must hold some answer
we don't know we need. The mantis shrimp can see the most colors
out of any animal and they can also generate the most force with
their punch. If we were to look at the front door of our house
would it be able to see all the hands that had pulled it shut behind them?
Or know the year it had last been cleaned?
What makes a color? Our door is red, but can a mantis shrimp see
the caramel paint underneath? Does sadness make a color in the air?
Can it see how sad we are to leave?

One day, we had a dragon for dinner.
But who would gut our feast? Who
would take away her bones?
I took a knife to grate away her armor.
Scales hard and clear stuck to my fingers,
it is the skin that really shines. Up close you can see
the rainbow, the way the light from my knife
danced on her body. How fat her belly looked
in the distorted image on my blade.
Can the mantis shrimp see that her eyes used to be the color of lightning
before they faded to death? Does the mantis shrimp see where the color went?

Inside an animal is pink. The color of my sister's first room.
The dragon is still warm inside, but maybe from the sun and not
her life. The guts come out in my hands, her bones separate
from her flesh. It's all easier than you'd expect.
And there are other fish in the sea.

But the fish see that the dragon is missing. Will they
ready their knives. Will they call the Irukandji, stonefish, and
flower urchin to release their poisons? Will
we hear the furious screams of blue whales and tiger pistols
as they descend upon our shore?

Suddenly she has been robbed
of all her milder-mooned body's grace.
We ate well around the table and talked about the day.
I wonder if from the sea, the mantis shrimp can see
the pink inside of me?

White Rabbit White Cage

If we stuck our fingers through the cage
and you nibbled at our fingertips
would you break skin? Would you
like the taste of blood?

Brooklyn summers never used to be this still.
Never used to be this unmoving day
wondering if we'll sleep through the sunrise
and seeing that the dishes need to be
done and the floor needs to be cleaned and the clothes
must be folded and put away so we don't have to see them
again on the couch again and move
them for those unexpected guests that come.

When we were little we played dress up to clean our rooms
so we felt like hidden princesses, but now there isn't time for that.
The rabbit that tasted our blood has grown strong enough
to hop through the house with her cage on her back.
We hear the clanging of metal scarring the wood floors
before we see the white metal white rabbit hopping towards the fridge
where she knows the snacks are.

When she grows too big for her cage we move her to another
and when she grows too big for that one and asks
to be released we get her a bigger cage. She grows
fat on our blood, she licks our wounds clean, and fat
on our tears, she lets us cry into her fur, and gets high
blood pressure from all the salt.

One day we were silent, standing and watching the house,
trying to find where the sounds it makes come from.
We left the door open so the breeze would wash away the smell.
We still haven't cleaned the floors and the rabbit got out.
It crossed McDonald Avenue and went into the cemetery.
We found her later in the afternoon nibbling on some grass,
when I asked why she told me she wanted to taste death without dying.

The Factory Foxtrot

Every day at sundown
we hear the song of the clock.
Its long brassy notes carry down the river
and traverse the rocky road
till it reaches the ears of the factory.
It is time to release the men.

Our town was full of men.
They guarded us after sundown.
They kept running our factories.
They repaired the clock.
They paved the road.
Then one day, they all left down the river.

Now no one touches the river.
It is what took our men,
and soon our women leave to search for the men down the road.
No one touches water after sundown.
No one picks up where they left off, the clock
falls into disrepair, and we live in the shadow of an empty factory.

We have no water and no time, we live in fear of the foxes in the factory.
They dance in the moonlight and bring more creatures from the river.
One night, the bell chimes in the clock.
Foxes, tigers, bears, and alligators come from the darkness dressed like men.
They dance in whirling circles till long past sundown.
When the birds begin to signal morning, they all dance up the road.

We don't play like we used to, our eyes watch the road.
We would work, but we don't know what went on in the factory.
We would leave, but we don't dare be out after sundown.
So instead we drink from the strange waters of the river.
Every night we watch the animals dance Every night they look more and more like men.
No one knows what time it is, but when we are uneasy we glance at the clock.

We grow tired of waiting under the clock.
This is our fate, so we have nothing left to fear. Tonight we will dance on the road.
Up close we see the fur and teeth and claws of the animals, they don't look like men.
They tell us of how once all men were animals and there was no factory.
At the end of the night we are wet with sweat and unafraid, we dive into the river.
We sleep curled by the bellies of beasts until sundown.

By sundown, we have forgotten that we were supposed to grow up to be men,
instead we dance in the remains of the factory and make our own noises at the clock.
Some of us go down the river, others down the road, there are even those who stay,
but none of us ever look back.

There is and is not a Tiger

There is and is not a tiger in your room.
The tiger's fur looks so soft and sleek, it could be a dream
so brightly do the colors and sheen of her fur shine in the dull cream bedroom.
But your tears of fear drip off her like water from oil and you know
this is real.

“What are you so shocked by? There is a tiger in your room, but your room is a jungle.”

Her voice is the hot lick of flames at your hands
on a night so cold and barren of stars that the darkness
becomes a part of you. You lose sight of your feet and then legs, it
creeps up to your arms, soon the only part of yourself that
you know for sure exists are your ears
because you can hear the wind whipping around your head,
The wind becomes a howl, it's strong gusts created when you blink.

You blink and your room is a jungle. The tiger smiles, she steps
closer, her paws creating tremors in the ground
that ripple out through the dirt. The ground breaks open and
great trees rise up around you. Shades of green you didn't know existed, some so dark
they look black, some so bright, it blinds you to look at the glossy leaves.

“Jungles are no place to walk alone.”

She is closer than you thought and she brushes your side
with that rough fur of hers. You shudder to think where that fur has been,
how many nights it must have seen, how many days it has endured
and still not dulled. One strand might stab a king and kill him instantly.
His blood runs out from the wound like the finest wine and she laps it up
coolly. Beside the fallen monarch his children do not cry.
Their father did not love them. He was so feared that none
but the people he killed knew what the color of his eyes were.

All his children had different eyes and each was predisposed
to think that their eye was the color of their father's. But they were all
wrong. The tiger sees them before she kills the killer;
they are yellow. Not the gold of his crown or the brown of his hair
or the black of his heart or the blue of his robes or the green of his land
or the red of his blood that the tiger lapped up so slowly and with such pride.
They were yellow like a field of dead grass in September.

In this grass, which is so tall that men lose themselves in it and come harvest

the bones of the unlucky are pulled from the field along with the crop, there is a cow. The tiger is the natural predator of cows, but not this one. Her udders have suckled many motherless beasts, the tiger being among them. The cow wandered the field as a calf and fed on the grass and grew up knowing all the twists and turns. The grass kept feeding her till she was taller than the tallest blade and broader than the paths that men made to find their way. She found the lost animals and let them suck on her when they were hungry. The tiger stayed with her the longest of any animal and the cow only sent her on her way when the tigers teeth became so sharp they started to nick the cow's udders when she fed. The milk that spilled down her throat and on the ground was tinted pink with her blood. It was too much to handle.

You walk a long time in the jungle until you come to a great set of steps. They lead up to a great ziggurat. And while you walk up, the tiger sweats. Her fur becomes damp then dripping wet while we walk. Matted against her body, you see the sleek muscles and taut tendons that bind together her mighty bones. Soon, she is panting, spitting blood and flehm up from her throat. Her teeth begin to fall out and you pick them up and put them into your pocket. Her fur comes off in strips and you wrap it around yourself despite the heat. Her muscles are not red like blood, but brown like cake. They slough off, not in chunks, but strands. Like hair pulled out during a wave of anxiety, the molted sinew leaves a trail behind and follows you up the stairs.

By the time that you reach the top, so high the sky does not seem blue anymore, but a burning white, the tiger next to you is just bones and a tongue. And you whisper to the tiger, "We are not alone in the jungle anymore, what should we do?" The tiger turns her empty face to you and sinks her last teeth into your arm. It does not hurt when you become a tiger and her bones crumple into dust. It only hurts when you realize you are alone now in the jungle and your room is far away.

Part IV
The I

The Manticore

The insistence that I was a lion
went unnoticed by my uncles. So I roared in their faces,
but they never moved. They were watching the sky.
Reports had said that the stars would fall for just half an hour
after 10pm, but it was close to midnight and they were
still falling.

The first one seemed like a fingernail falling from
a God hand. It was just a quick sliver and we all debated
if it really was the first star to fall, or just a car's headlights
creeping up behind my eyes.

Now no one could argue that the stars were falling. They were
quick and hard and made undignified sounds
as they crashed onto the shore, just a couple miles down
from where we all stood. They glowed red now and the heat
from their fires burned our faces.

But it could have just been the sun rising.
How long had we stood watching the stars?
Now that the pink sky made their fires beautiful,
they no longer looked like stars, they
looked like soldiers riding into battle, pounding
into the earth.

My uncles did not move. The tears dripping
off their faces hissed as they hit the sand.
There was a rumbling and it came from the back
of my throat. I had wished I was a lion
on that first baby star that may have been headlights.

I grew and grew into a great lion; a manticore.
My face ached as it stretched
through fur and bone towards the surface
of the sky. How I could tear my eyes away
from the stars I do not know, but
I looked down and saw my uncles.

How slow they ran, their legs cramped
and asleep from standing so long. I ignored them
and looked up and opened my mouth and ate the stars that fell.
They burned like food fresh from the oven.

I swallowed them whole as the shore cooled down.

Dressed in All White

I once gutted a fish.
I cut so quickly
and with such sureness
that not one scale,
not one spot of blood
landed on me. I hosed out
the drive way after
and promised not to leave
the guts around. We had raccoons
and maybe bears. Long Island
is a mysterious place.

We took a dead fish, mostly rotted and calcified, home.
We left it on the front steps, to be collected
and cleaned later. It would become art.
I knew what would happen. We would bleach the bones
and meticulously lay them on a sheet of paper. We would
coat it in silver paint and press it on high quality canvas. We'd
do this project outside to avoid cleaning inside. We'd mount the print
and bones side by side above the couch we would get soon.

I wasn't surprised when I came home
and the fish wasn't there. And we still hadn't mounted the bones and print
side by side and we still hadn't gotten a new couch
to replace the one that is only comfortable for mom
because she lay on it for so many years.

We had been alone all day; lying
on our backs in the living room, on our beds
with the doors open, on the porch
with our legs spread, before the men came
back with a fish. The chicken was already defrosting,
but they wanted fish. The fish they had caught
after being out all day. They smelled like Montauk Ale
and their sun burns from that day
didn't leave till well into December.

No one was happy.
While the chicken cooked, we walked
to the backyard to watch the fish get gutted.
The men watched too. The tools were all there,
but they sat on the grass. I was wearing all white

and they laughed when I picked up the carving knife.
And even though they laughed at me, I did what they could not.
I got no blood on me.
And the scales covered the floor around me and stuck to my bear feet.

The Horse I Ride at Night Doesn't Stop for Passengers

In this dream I am on a horse with my eyes shut.
I can feel my fingers in my mouth,
That's the only part of the dream that I can sense,
I am gnawing off my fingers
slowly because my teeth are soft and dull.
It is wet inside my mouth,
it's almost nice how warm it is in there.
I imagine it's just as dark in my mouth
as it is here with my eyes shut.
I don't mind that it hurts. This
isn't the worst thing that can be done
in my mind. In my mouth.

Crepuscular

On days like this I decide to wear black so
That as I am wondering in the trees and a man walks by
He won't see me as anything other than an animal.
When the birds rise from the trees and talk about
Hunters, I keep moving into the shadows.
If a bear hunts me, I won't be able to escape.
They can climb trees and run faster than me
Even though the fastest we can go is just as fast as bear
I am not the fastest. But I have been fasting.
When I ate this morning I did not thank anyone.
The neon orange caps of the men bob through the sticks
On the floor under leaves and I watch them.
If a man hunts me, that would be impossible.
They do not know I am here until I am shot.
And then if I stay quiet and lie in a river
Where his dog can't smell me.
I will escape. And if a flood comes
Then I will scab on a rock at the bottom
And wait to heal.

The Girl Who Cosseted a Bear

one day in the woods
the bear met a human
she was flesh and warm

While i was walking
in the woods
i met a bear
who could have been my uncle
and i said,

“hey there uncle bear,
what are you doing in the woods?
It is late and your wife
is at home cooking for you
and she has made your bed
so that you can fall asleep
and she has promised to leave
the door unlocked
when you go out at night.”

winter had been
hard on his stomach and the fish had
stopped coming to his paws

*the twilight was green and cast go home shadows
go anywhere but here*

The uncle bear walked up to me
and rose onto his feet.

“uncle you have grown.
Last time I saw you,
you were skinny and in a boat.
You said you were going
to find happiness.
i assume she is brought back with you?”

i looked around for my uncle’s companion.
The sky was getting darker.

the bear opened his maw and roared

the bear could feel his parasite
inside of him

*the forest watched the girl and waited for her to leave
she was standing in a patch of grass
that they would eat and eat what had eaten it*

“I forgot the way home,
dearest niece.
I have been away for so long.
Can you point the way?”

uncle bear opened his eyes wide
and i could see that
despite his furry form,
his eyes were still brown

“Follow me. I know the way.
People are waiting for us.
But where is your boat?
Where are your crew?
Did you find what
you were looking for?”

i looked around again and then

the bear swiped the girl's face from her skull and she fell

the bear
did not understand
except that this is how things were

uncle bear was showing me
something. He held my face
to the sky and said,

“This is what I learned.
Can we bring this home with us?”

i knew we couldn't and so
i kept silent. At nights
i watched him from my window
leave and come back.

Now i knew what he was doing.
He took my heart from my chest
and then my stomach and liver.

“These are not yours anymore.”

but i wanted to be happy too.

the bear
didn't eat much
his claws were made for softer things

*no one came into the woods again
they heard the screams of eidolon
a banshee must live there
Someone must be lost
the woods were happy to go on without interruption*

i can go home if i make it to the path
and then
up the hill
and then
i will be
home
they must be wondering where i
am, but i am safe with uncle

Drier

A hook hung me up, still wet from the wash,
still smelling like yesterday's foibles.
I was clean, but looked wrinkled,
spent, used, just a sack of flesh that could
cry under the radar.

I was all the things that new is not
and now my mother teases me,
"Go wash your hands, I still see the red paint
caked under your nails,
from when you scratched at your door
to be let out."

How I long to be what girls should be
and let my family's fairy tale end happily.
Instead I crawl through the house pretending
I am a garish dog on the hunt for blood. But my only blood
reminds me that I am just a sheet waiting for a price.

So here I hang on the line, birds settle next to me,
but not for long. They see a kept thing and fly away,
in case I try to pin their wings on my back
and make them take my place. At least if I
had dryer sheets I would look crisp and straight.
The wrinkles on my forehead would be so smooth,
they'd take the wrinkles from my brain. So smooth
all thoughts slide off. How easy
it would be to fold nicely in a drawer. And to be
a smiling thing whose only age
is the hole from where a hook hung me.

I am a Slug

Lately I've been becoming aware of how terrible I am to myself.
Every day I take the poison in my mind and lick it like a wound,
I rest on a sun lit brick and let myself roast.

I was born without sex, sealed shut down there like an unbeautiful Barbie doll.
I had to be cut open, already unfit to wear white at less than an hour old.

My family wanted to know how I plan to have more of myself if I let
that brick burn me, but how was I supposed to make more of me
if I never moved? .

I used to find myself in the backyard
I thought I was human then and
grandma said, "crush them, they are bad for the plants"
So I crushed myself, my sluggish brethren under bricks, our hands
were slimy from the work, but we washed them under the watering can.

I used to pour my dad's beer into china bowls
so I could watch myself (the slug) get drunk and drown.
Grandma says, "don't be sad, they are bad for the plants".

I am not a human being I am not a human being.
This is what my friend says when he rocks back and forth
while he thinks no one hears him.
I wish I could tell him I am not a human being either

I am poison and the bird that eats me
will feel it slide down its throat before it knows
what juices it sucked up.

I have never been hit hard by a moving object,
I only accidently run into things and then forget,
Where did that bruise come from?

A Witch Abandoned*

Alone

in the pinkish reddish slip stolen from his drawer that may belong to someone else,
I can't remember, I don't want to.

The sun shines in after a slow, but methodical move to open the shades.

I made the bed to sit on, perfectly flat,
my throne of cushy mattress and sheets show no signs of wear
from the night before.

I dreamed I was not abandoned and tossed and turned for my lover,
but the spell did not last and I woke to see my shadow
teasing me on the wall.

It has been too long since I slept alone and all that that entails.

Waking up to no warm body is like waking up to a ghost.

I put my hair up
as if I'd get work done,
but then nothing caught my eye
and I haven't stopped looking.

The room only has the one window, and though tall and east facing,
so the mornings are always bright,
at night there is nothing to keep the dark away.

If I had more memories in this room,
the sun would heat up the empty walls
and release smells from its past
that would make me nostalgic for those old times.

Instead this is the time that will be remembered.

Outside there must be children,
this seems like a child's perfect day.

The air buoys laughter and birdsong from the streets
and conversations held in private that everyone hears.

The brown buildings seem clearer
and smaller.

The cars provide that subtle thrum,
that remind me

I am still here. There is still an out there.

How can sadness exist on such a day?

Like every other,
the intermingling of apathy and the need to feel linger on
my newly woken face.

Outside this room the shock of life makes me feel like witches must.

Just women alone.

So I will sit here,
the sunshine warming my poorly circulated hands and feet.
I will wait till I move, however long

that will take. At least I have the morning sun.

**After Hopper's Morning Sun*

Forest Ruminant

I lost my way a few footsteps ago
and have no breadcrumbs
to lead me back. The only light
is in front of me. A Gatorade machine
casts an orange glow that cuts
through the snow storm and trees.

Earlier that day a cat had lounged
just on the edge of sunlight
that warmed the top of the dispensary.
She watched birds fly low, their wings
almost touching grass. Dragonflies,
with wings like dried leaves, burnt in the sun.
Today nothing was afraid of anything else
and the cat did not move when a bird
settled next to her.

The snow was deep now
and filled in the hole where I had dropped
my keys. As snow collects on my ears, three deer
step through the trees and towards the machine.
Their long bodies and shaggy fur look
warm under the snow and moonlight.
They pause, at the unfamiliar sight in the forest.

One stands on her hind legs
and pulls three quarters from an unseen pocket.
She makes a selection and the bottle
gets stuck coming down.
I want my blue juice! Warm air huffs from her nose.

Her sisters shake the machine from side to side.
The deer head butt the glass, they let out screams that
sound like the subway on its tracks,
like the noise I would make if
a bus hit my sister.

Finally, the glass broke and blue, green, yellow, and orange
spilled from the machine. The deer descended from their legs
and lapped it up from the snow.

This is Where They Buried Her

The funeral home where my grandma was embalmed is now a Dunkin Donuts
I can hear her voice whisper to me through the fried dough
I tried to reply by sticking my hand in the fryer to become what she now is
But when I lifted it from the oil, there was a dog's head in place of my hand
It barked too loud when we passed old ladies on the street and tugged at my arm
when I tried to turn a corner it did not want to go. So
I ripped its jaw off clean with my other hand and it was silent.
You can shine a light at one eye and it comes through the other. I call this
doglight. The doglight makes you see things like how dog sees it.
My grandma's tombstone is not a medium sized gray thing. It is the size of
eighty years and very very yellow. The yellow hurts my eyes and so now
I wear sunglasses when I go to the cemetery. The dog on my hand does
not disturb me anymore. It only whines when we pass the Dunkin Donuts.
I missed all the signs on my way home and now it is two am and I am crunching
on the snow with half a dog face for a hand. When I saw the axe left in the tree I knew
what had to be done. When I chopped off my dog, in its place grew a bird's wing.
This wing always wanted to fly away, but it could not lift me. It would hope for the few
feet my arm could stretch and then struggle for a moment before it sank again. This was
a problem in class because it always flew when the teacher asked a question.
And I was stuck answering things that I did not have the answer too. Without my
doglight, I could not see the size of eighty years, I could only feel like flying.
This was worse. So I cut myself again. This time in place of a hand, my grandma's
face grew. I was so happy to see her. Now I could tell her the things I had whispered
to her grave, but she begged me to let her go. To make one more cut. She was not
supposed to be here. But I ignored her and told her all my secrets. Soon
she was quiet. Soon she did not even listen. Now she was of no use. I am so sorry
PLEASE FORGIVE ME. I will slice away again, I will try to find my own flesh and bone.

Listen, Hear the Rumble

We are having spaghetti for dinner.
Dinner means the grandkids set the table,
the women cook, and the men
are nowhere to be found.

I ran over the dog right by my house.
It was small and got caught in my spokes,
its small sandy frame blended in with the rocks
on the road. I carried it inside where it smelled
like heat and tomato sauce.

I can't stop crying. I am wailing, I
am choking on the spit in my mouth and
my mom tells me to stop snorting at the dinner table.
It's gross. I am still
holding the dog. It's limp
and broken and its little fat belly is leaking
intestines and blood and things I don't know the name of.
All I can hear is the sound of my screams.

Stop this, my mom says, we are at the dinner table.
She tells me to wipe the sauce from my shirt, but
it's blood. And it won't come out. I'm covered in it and
the more I wipe, the more it spreads. She tells me
to try dabbing at it lightly. She tells me
to eat.

Our neighbor comes to the door looking for her dog.
I am still crying when I hand it to her, I am so sorry, but
she doesn't care. She's just happy it was found. She
thanks me. When I catch my reflection in the door window
I am covered in blood. The light catches its sheen
on my cheeks, the curve of my neck, the tip of my nose,
the place where I held the dog against my chest
is reddest of all. Already turning brown.

We eat spaghetti the way my grandmother taught us.
We turn the forks full of noodles on a spoon.
We lift the spoon and fork to our mouths and
quickly chew and swallow. No one says anything
and I am still crying.

Some Kind of Forever

Don't kiss the mirror by the door when you go out.
Don't exchange a mischievous look with yourself when you walk in.
Don't cry at the glow in the dark stars on your ceiling.
Don't pray with your toes crossed before you go to bed.

Don't shake your mother's hand after you masturbate.
Don't cum on your father's couch.
If you see your brother, run.
If you see your sister, run.

If you see a cat in the reflection of the subway window,
hold your breath until the doors open and you can run.

If you really want to be bad
then be kind to your grandfather before he dies,
and stop saying god with a lower case G in front of your grandmother,
and apologize for the things you never even did, but thought so long about.

Now light yourself on fire and whisper their names so they have to bring their faces
close as you burn. The only forever you're ready for is waiting for the flames to go out.

If This Was a Dream

Wake up

All through high school my friends whispered in my ear.
It was supposed to be a joke, pretending that this was the matrix
and I was asleep inside. They'd pass me in the hallways and whisper,
"Wake up, Girlie, wake up." Then they would pretend they hadn't said
a thing. I grew afraid to fall asleep, fearing
I would fall deeper into this dream. They'd slip notes into my locker
"You've been in a coma for a year now and we are trying to send you a message.
We don't know if or how it will appear, but we love you
and want you to wake up." I would go home and cry.

I left those friends long ago, but today I got a note.
"We're turning you off now, we're pulling the plug. It's been
too long and it's too painful to see your eyes move behind your thin lids
and hope you will wake up at last." I didn't know what to do.
I ran laps around my block. I stuck needles in my arms.
I screamed and screamed and screamed and
then my neighbor knocked on the walls.
"It's 1 am, it's time to go to sleep."
I was tired, this was true, so I closed my eyes.