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Lady Grimm

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Lady Grimm

by

Tessa Livingstone

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Abstract

Lady Grimm is a conceptual assemblage. A substrate of fairy tales, fables, and nursery rhymes provide a basis for transformative and macabre frames, specifically concerning a stillbirth in 1940s Scotland. The collection utilizes the folklore genre to navigate a world of uncertainty and realities too difficult for its speakers to face. It further critiques the assumption of voice being restricted to human cognition. Animalistic totems as sea lions, peacocks, rabbits, and iguanas are some of the spirits summoned in order to explore themes such as motherhood, irreversible loss, abandonment, and choice within choicelessness. The poems teeter between chaos and order, examining how turmoil can elicit involuntary, primal, and violent responses. The collection begins in tragedy but gestures toward redemption as it maneuvers through strange & haunting imagery, mystic & surreal narratives. Ultimately, *Lady Grimm* illuminates a path towards perseverance in a coldly indifferent world.

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I.

Glasgow, 1948

A bald sleek body
flows from me.

No fingers,
no toes.

Exposed spine
gaunt,
winding white.

I swaddle her
in newspaper:
little fish and chip:
neither fish nor chip.

We Like to Hear You

When it's dark,
and you're home,
and you're fed.

What was it
you wanted to say?

*I hadn't finished.
I wanted her more.*

*Many more fingers.
Many more thumbs.*

Let's say it out loud
before we go on.

Until the whole world hears it.
And the whole world knows.

Babymoon

The temperature drops,
and their heartbeats slow,

so the sea's ebbing body gives them up.

With every swell
a new scattering of jellyfish, tentacles

frozen stiff. Clots of seaweed,
clams coated in ice. Still starfish.

I gather the unmothered in my arms.

I can find more of everything,
stranded on the sand.

I can hear sea lions call out from cavernous caves.

Relics

Silver dollar fish
move through moonlight

pulsating in the tide.

With a gaze
distant and reflective

I hook two fingers
under each eyelid

and lift—

II.

What Does it Mean for it to Be Hard

The glass frog is a strange frog. It breathes through feathery gills. It lays eggs with jelly-like coatings. It has tiny teeth that line its upper jaw. But the strangest of all is its skin. You can see right through its skin, right through to its stomach, its liver, its heart. This is what it means for it to be hard. I can see right through to her spine. The flesh that couldn't cover bone. Every rivet, every knob bellowing. Bending. Extending out toward me. I want you to see it, too.

How Long it Takes a Finger to Grow

I'm standing at the kitchen sink
admiring the way my fingers extend
like a row of tiny timber

and how the knife presses down so easily
through ligament, tendon, bone,
revealing a rich center of heartwood—

and I am at the center of that spreading thick film:
dreaming of her missing baby fingers, wrinkled pink:
watching my red blood bloom in the garbage disposal.

Finger Games

*What did you put in our pocket?
What did you put in your pocket?
Your pickety pocket pocket,
early Sunday morning?*

I put in my five fingers.
I put in my five fingers.
Five finny funny fingers
early Sunday morning.

Traveling Along the Trace

I got lost along the Natchez Trace: a trail of pinecones, crags, leaf litter. Loose bark. It's not molting season. But the snakes are rubbing their arrow heads against rocks, and you tell me, *There are no snakes here.*

And I think, I think, I think,
you know, if it weren't for this snow cover,
the mountain lion, lioness, whatever,
would go away.

And when Lorraine goes away
he gives me a present, tied special with ribbons.
And it is mine to keep. And it is mine to be eaten
without milk or sugar. And it is mine to be pointed at
with a finger that almost touches it.

That night I let the horses out
I felt almost like a devil.

But here is the hunter with the gleaming axe,
and the full-throated firs
itching to meet its sharp edge.

If we had a window,
you would see them, too.

And besides.

Something's hissing.

Look—

Look behind you.

We are all around you.

We are close, and getting closer.

It's Not Always a Game

What would happen if you didn't resist. If you took your remaining thumb and pointer and middle finger and pushed them into each eye socket. If you gripped your eyes and twisted until they popped out. If you held them in your hands: two black eggs, cracked and seeping. They would make a dark stain you couldn't see. But we want to see how far you're willing to go. This is a Let's-Read-And-Find-Out book. So let's read and find out.

Bloodmother

They find me in the woods,
at the foot of a fir tree, squatting
over a spongy nest of moss. Blood
seeping. I rub it into my thighs,
onto my belly. Wildness, growing.

III.

High Priestess

Our mother gives birth
beside the stone barn
to a belly full
of dead goats.

No new wriggling creatures
but a heap of hooves
and limp limbs
buried beneath
the marigold moon.

We lift the white sheet
to see their bodies,
pale as peeled peaches.

Birthday

Even now their awful mouths
open wider and wider, it's true—

but she has nothing to offer their shriveled bodies,
naked necks lolling like worms.

Mary Killing Rabbits

Now Mary is a nun, and forgetting everything. *Don't do it, Mary.* But the rabbits have no regard for her fruitful labor. Never satisfied, always wanting more. Berries, babies. They burrow into dry hillsides. Multiply with ease. *Mary, don't let them get away with it.* Glossy-eyed thieves crowd around her berry bush. Kick up dirt, nibble on olive-buff rootlets. *Blessed, sainted Mary* in her all black hood, staining soft pelts. Mouths red wounds. White eyes rolling back.

Slaughter in a Small Place

Candles are dirty bulbs swaying in the dark.
The priest blesses squealing babies bound
in white, and remembers hogs hanging
from hooks: the vigorous strokes against
their throats. The flood of filth and fear.

Rat, Decaying

A farm rat nestled in newspaper:
tiny feet curled, bloated belly
full of garbage.

Wringing the Rooster

Hollow, like a tunnel-boned bird,
the cello is held securely by its neck
while one hand twists the tuning peg,

evoking a shrill, sharp sound.
From the farmhouse
an ill-fated rooster calls out,

ruffling its feathers bathed in dust
and inflicted with sickness.
The cellist envisions red, unblinking eyes,

the curling of armored toes,
the tangled tongue
swiveling in a limp throat,

saturated with red and rosin—
and plucks the snapped string
while it is still warm.

Killing the Pig

Listen: a pink pig learns to squeal
beneath a very big fir tree.

You had an accident there
when you were a child.

But in this story,
all the children are away.

Dundee, Dying

When you were twelve & your horse reared up, uprooting the wooden stake from soft soil & how she came down on it. How her belly split open like a great bag of feed. You were small enough to fit underneath her & you tried to push her spilling organs back into her, pushing up, up, up on loose hide, an attic door that would not shut. And the blood warmed your head & she shifted her weight & you were too afraid to move so you stayed like that, arms raised overhead & Dundee was dying, yes, she was going to die, her intestines tumbling, ribboning red & you tried not to look, eyes cast wide as fishing nets you tried not to look—

Say These Words Again

Mother

baby

babies

Mary

rabbit

farmhouse

rooster

listen

hogs

squealing

slaughter

stain

shrill

limp

pelts

worms

wounds

peeled

split

snapped

ribboning

Mother Rabbit Explains Again

Along comes Mother Rabbit, busily looking for her babies. “Have you seen my babies?” she asks Mother Quail. “Maybe they hopped away,” says Mother Quail. “Maybe they hopped away into the woods.” So Mother Rabbits looks all over the woods. Behind bushes, inside tree trunks. She cannot find them anywhere.

Then along comes Mother Toad. “Have you seen my babies?” asks Mother Rabbit. “Maybe they are in the pond,” says Mother Toad, “playing with my tadpoles.” Mother Rabbit looks under lilipads and behind cattail plants, but her babies are nowhere to be found.

“Maybe they are still asleep,” Mother Rabbit cries to herself, “Maybe they are still asleep in our warm burrow.” So Mother Rabbit hurries back to the burrow, stuffed with brown bodies and fluffy white tails. But when she calls for her babies, they do not move. Some of them are sleeping. Some of them never wake up.

IV.

Who Am I Talking About That I Miss So Much

Her name was Lorraine. She was a real person. She had no fingers and no toes. I dressed her in a doll's dress to hide her spine. I held her in my hands, surrounded by teddy bears. Toy trains. Stuffed sea lions. They don't know they're not alive. Their mouths are constantly moving. They cannot sing, or tell stories. But each time they tell me: *Whoever's inside you—: we want them out.*

A Fable for Lorraine

I.

From Neptune's rib
a planet grumbles, shakes loose,
and buoys into oblivion
like a great plum, purple and bruised.

II.

They say sea lions were once fishermen who disobeyed the gods, and were bound to blubber bodies as punishment. Now they have hairy fore flippers instead of toes. Now they have enormous eyes and can see all around them, all the time. They snack on sea urchins and small fish, tug on fishermen's nets for fun. And when they get bored of life in the water they haul themselves onto docks and broadcast barks in all directions. Sometimes their skin gets so tight from all that salt. Their skin gets so tight, they have to take it off.

III.

Neptune has been ignoring the sea lions for some time now. So up, up, up they go, and find a rocky beach swarming with tourists. The sea lions try to warn them about Neptune, how he sewed them into pelts and orphaned them at sea. But the tourists can't understand the sea lions at all. They're a chorus of grunts and gurgles, stinking of fish, wet fur, and feces. They push their barrel chests against the swell. They wash up on the rocks, choked by discarded fishing nets.

IV.

Look, look! Mother Sea lion is giving birth to teeny tiny seal lion pups. Out they come, one by one. Mother Sea lion builds a warm nest for her new babies to nap while she goes fishing. She makes a long straight path so she won't get lost. She holds her breath for many minutes then returns to the surface for fresh air. Watch her swim! She twists and turns and whirs along. But the current is so strong, and Mother Sea lion is having a hard time keeping up. Watch her vanish underwater, then pop up again, barking and sputtering. She can feel the current dragging her under. She is sure she is going to drown. The sea lion pups watch from the shore, pressing their warm bodies together. They are waiting for Mother Sea lion to come back. She does not come back.

V.

One day Neptune tells the sea lions, "I have to go away, far away. Maybe I will not see you again." The months pass and soon winter comes. The sea lions remember being human. They remember their fingers and toes and neckties. Their mothers and fathers, their wives and children, sausage rolls and pasties and cream puffs. The sea lions search for Neptune, hoping he will change them back. They dive 600 feet below the surface of the sea, their heartbeats slow, the temperature falling more slowly. They find their way across long stretches of open ocean. Until they hear faraway music, see bright colored lights.

VI.

The sea lions join the circus. It is strange here. It isn't like home at all. But there is a funny clown with a big red nose and a mustached man who takes care of them. He wears a tall hat and a red coat. He teaches them tricks for tin buckets full of fish. They ring bells and balance balls on their noses. They learn to clap their fins on cue. Sometimes, others give up and return to the sea. But the ones who stay sleep in barred box cars, listen to the rumble of trains pass by.

VII.

On the train, the sea lions listen to the radio and learn what has happened to our world. They learn about gas masks and food rations, about British trains raked by bombs. The swaying chandeliers. The mahogany lined seats. Through the long windows, the most beautiful countryside: wild glens and deep gorges, tall pines pinned along mountain peaks. Black trees growing straight up. And the soft glow of lanterns, bobbing beside the tracks, looking for the body that was seen to go tumbling out, turning over and over as it fell. The sea lions listen to the radio and learn there is no relief in being human. There is no relief at all.

The Story of Ed Ricketts on the Railroad Tracks

Ed went out for steak, got stuck, and now he's dying for it.

The *Del Monte Express* is coming fast, his car door won't open,
and his clams, his urchins, his abalones, his dusty eyed snakes, his mice,
his jellyfish and his worms, will never get to say goodbye.

Worse: They'll pack up his lab in Monterrey. They'll send away all his records,
all his poetry books, all his formaldehyde fetuses floating in jars.

"But this is 1958! And what will I have with my wine and my Whitman and women?"

Even, even worse: a bronze bust will take his place,
starfish in hand instead of steak.

I ask the sea lions, "What do you make of all this?"

They bark in my grandmother's voice. *Oh Ed Ricketts, we love you.*
There aren't enough sourdough bread bowls to contain our tears.

And Again

fishermen

bodies

skin

salt

tight

sea urchins

bruised

fingers

toes

current

pulling

drowning

orphaned

gas masks

bombings

sourdough

fetus

V.

Infinity is Full of Iguanas

There were once so many iguanas on the island of Santiago, Darwin had nowhere to pitch his tent. That is a true story. And later, during World War II, when the U.S. military occupied the island, the iguanas disappeared. Listen. Many of the stories in this book are not true. But I want you to know Lorraine was a real person. She was born in 1948 and died in 1948. I want you to know Lorraine's mother, Mae, is my grandmother. And if Lorraine were alive today, she would be 70 years old. When iguana hatchlings emerge from eggs they are immediately vulnerable to hordes of predators: hawks, owls, snakes, herons. But the ones who survive can go on to live, like a human, for more than 60 years. My grandmother was raised on red velvet offering plates and confessionals and crisp communion wafers. She does not believe in reincarnation. But if she did, I think she would believe in a strange island where nothing is ever finished or put away. Its curves that lend themselves to carving. Salt spray. Lava. Ash, and embers, and lumbering lizards munch-munching on cactus pads. And the finches that feed on their body ticks. She would believe in them, too. And she would look for Lorraine, her powerful claws clinging to igneous rock. Lorraine swimming through surf to graze on algae. Spending nights clustered with other cold-blooded bodies. My grandmother does not believe in reincarnation, that is true. But if she did, I would take her here by boat.

My Boat is a Pile of Blueprints

I call her the *RMS Queen Mary*. I fill her with ghosts. White-gowned women, bearded men in blue overalls clutching their swollen red throats. Blinking effulgent eyes under strewn moonlight. And the tourists who trip over heavy doors that won't stay shut, clicking cameras in the dark for orbs. I place them there, too. I watch *Mary* tug on tethered lines, coarse as umbilical cords. She is trying to shake the last of them out. She is trying to forget their voices, warm & unmoving. But what was it they wanted to say?

The Lobster

It fought its way up as a drowning man might, and lay for a moment,
motionless. No expression at all. *Cold blood to survive in cold waters.*
But the lobster has no blood. The lobster has no bones, or blood.
He's a red-robed monk murmuring to urchins, crabs, abalone.
A mechanical toy, tiny jaw operated by a spring. As I drew nearer
he looked over me. Over everything. Antennae twitching thin.
I began to loosen the knot, trying at the same time to put away
the polished wooden handle, gleaming blade between thumb and forefinger.

Special Laws Involving Zero

The truth is, I almost failed math. I *did* fail math. I had to repeat Algebra twice.

Or was it three times?

But when they found those wild orcas in Juneau—the ones with the slit bellies full of rocks, and anchors fastened to their tails—it all added up very quickly.

I know there are special laws for that.

Like, the product of two numbers can equal zero *if*—and *only* if—one of the numbers *is* zero. Like, $a \div 0$ is a meaningless expression.

—I know what you're thinking. I'm just trying to get this right.

So.

I don't know which captain gave orders. But did you know dorsal fins could be isosceles triangles, if two sides are equal, and twice as long as the third?

Or—equilateral triangles, if all corners are 60 degrees, just like the Pacific.

I've got a stack of math books from Long Beach State that tell me so. So tell me: what do you know about imaginary numbers? *That all numbers are real until you put an i in front of them. And then, they disappear.*

—Let's get one thing straight: I don't like magic.

This is a love letter to Math, who will never love me back, and to the sailors who cornered and netted, and cut into those clean white bellies, and cried during.

But did not stop.

For Heavy Doors That Won't Stay Shut

Please acknowledge my knocking on. Acknowledge an opening so small, at first you hardly noticed. Notice now, the smallness of Reykjavik. The smallness of harbors. Of fish, slathered in butter. How you can get lost and easily be found.

Consider the smallness of this room. The cold metal table. The dog, on the floor, in her bed. The vet on his knees. Consider how things are decided. Consider this the room where things are decided. Consider the IV in her leg. The shape of the IV in her leg. The shape of her skull. One side of the head is never exactly like the other. Consider your arm. How a limb is joined to the body. Glue, made from the bones and skins of cows. Consider the container ship, carrying cattle. Pens on the open decks. Their brown eyes, six times too large. Their bodies, to be opened at the throats. Their faces. The flies on their faces.

Consider what the captain fed you. The scraping of lips, of nose, of bone. And how long it took you to look at horses. After you saw Dundee's intestines, tumbling, ribboning red. All them lovely horses. Consider how you hardly looked at them at all. Get into the habit of looking at cows. Your dog. Consider her dying. Consider always someone touching her. Infinity as scientific fact. Consider the Egyptians, who carved their sacred cats in wood. Remember many things carved from wood. Furniture, plain and undecorated. Heavy doors that won't stay shut.

Consider the first sign of rapping, or splitting. You can arrange that it's cut away. Consider cutting away doors that won't stay shut. Their corners, removed by saws. Consider a sharp chisel when removing small pieces of wood. *I must not take too much. I cannot put it back.* Consider taking too much, and putting it back. Consider people with headaches or toothaches. The cows and your dog. The smallness of Reykjavik. The vet who got down on his knees.

VI.

Tell Us Again About Lorraine

Her inky black hair.

Her blue eyes,
all but shut.

How the nurse told you,
*There is so little we can do—
and even less than that.*

Ice Cutters

I couldn't find her heartbeat,
so small a line.

We're going to pull it up for you.

I listened for the flicker of silver fins,
the sawing of a silent circle,
the pulling & hauling of something wild,
unmanageable, struggling against the line,
against a backdrop of black sky—

In My Dreams There's No One in the Maternity Ward

I kept having dreams they took her from me
when I hadn't finished. I wanted her more.

I wandered halls in search of nurses. Babies.
Their open mouths, their franting chantings.

Nothing stirred here—only the peacock
who roosted in tall open trees, scratched at leaf litter,

preened blue plumage. A listless planet in orbit,
gravitating in and out of delivery rooms.

My own belly: Jupiter, swollen. I crouched down
to meet her ornamented head. To tell her,

I'm not supposed to talk to strangers.
Instead I followed her into a room

with eggs arranged on a cold chrome table.
A hum of voices. I could feel their fullness,

their tranquil trembling. *Tap, tap, tap*—
and the crack became a tiny hole.

Infinity is Full of Poppies, Not People

Then something else happened. The nurse showed you a baby that was not yours. You told her there'd been a mistake. That you were counting down the days until you'd meet your daughter. Your beautiful baby, coming any day now.

Listen. This is just what happens to seeds. A seed is a little plant that has not yet started to grow. A seed needs many things to grow. Food, and water, and sunlight. You can plant seeds yourself. You can plant them in eggshells or tin cans

or painted flower pots. Some seeds grow slowly. Oak trees grow very, very slowly. But some seeds grow fast, pushing up and up and up. You didn't remember your body giving her up feet first. Reaching down

and feeling her toes. But you remembered that underneath all those big sounds were very little sounds: new leaves growing on trees, and birds building nests, and laying eggs in them. You remembered the blooming wildflowers,

the cow and her ringing bell, the mice scampering into the warm barn. The twitch of their tiny tails. You remembered that infinity is not full of people but full of poppies. And the rabbit in the pasture. You remembered her, too. She was munch-munching on lettuce leaf. She was wearing the face of someone you love.

There is So Little We Can Do and Even Less Than That

Lorraine's body burning: a pile of embers. And I didn't know how to grieve her. So I cut a bear-shape from a piece of velvet and filled it with her ashes. I stitched the skin together. Sewed on blue buttons for eyes. Embroidered a snout and mouth, attached arms and legs that move. But after, they still weren't finished. They wanted her more. I could hear leaves beneath the hunters' boots crunch and crackle. The dogs crossing brooks, flushing deer out of tangled brush. But no one fired a shot. Not a single shot was fired. The deer fled into the thicket and all morning it was the same. They were looking for bear. They were looking for bear tracks behind boulders, at the base of trees. They were coming back for Lorraine. I pressed her embroidered mouth to my ear to listen for her small, sure voice pulling on teeth and tongue—and they were listening for her, too. They were listening for Lorraine squatting near the warm stump, swarming with termites. Lorraine right within their rifle range.

VII.

We Heard About the Woman in Kansas

who threw her bundled baby off a bridge,
into the blackened water below.

We look for her in fields of wheat,
through stalks of corn overgrown.

Visions in the Walls

A colony flickers behind the wallpaper of an abandoned house.

We can hear their high-pitched calls, and mafic wings
—wedged into tight crevices— twitch nervously in the dark.

A whole house swollen with bats.

My mother said, when I was born,

I came out of her body very easily. I caused no trouble at all.

But some things would love to stay.

Let's peel back the wallpaper.

Let them fall at our stumbling feet,
scattered with bits of torn strips,

rising in demon whips and whirls:

a feverish assembly. A vision that flutters
in the white flame noon.

Look Here

Here is something
for you.

Here is something big,
trying to get through.

Let it through.
Let it through.

The Mystic Explains

The Eight of Cups is a card of change.

The mystic lays down the image of a cloaked man descending into darkness.
His back turned on a stack of eight golden goblets. The moon frowning down.

She tells me, *When you get what you want, you must give it up.*
This card is not an image but a command.

I think of a prized racehorse. The wreath of leaves hanging from its neck.
Intoxicated shouts, the shuffle of winnings. Its copper coat, gleaming.

I think of Lorraine, without fingers, without toes.

I didn't get what I wanted, I tell her. Did you?

Prayer

Our Lady of Guadalupe,
Blessed, Sainted Mary,
finds solace in the olive jar

where the tight-skinned fruit
that once hung from a tree in Nazareth
now soak in ferrous sulfate, turning black.

Mother Mother

An alligator lurks in her sphere, the corner lined with bushes and isolated trees. Nostrils, ears, clear of the surface. Eyes looking upward from below. The muddy bank, imprinted with rubble, abrades her hide: the garment that will survive her. After a time she loses her breath and breaks the surface, wearing the look of every betrayed creature. She clears the ground of vegetation, uprooting reeds, piling mulch into a mound, filling its crater with great care. Each egg she lays slides out of her, hardly an effort at all. Eggs impregnated with inaudible sounds: the circulation of blood, the cultivation of bodily tissue, the unfurling of nerves and skin. She shields them with her snout, waiting for her young to hatch, to take them in her mouth, to baptize them in the moonlit Bayou, cleansing amniotic fluids and bits of brittle shell from their new bodies. Bodies that will come out of the dark, only to return to the darkness.

Torch Song or Self-Portrait as Flamingo

I want you to see me. *See me, see me*
floating under mangroves. Preening
tufts of stardust from pink plumage.
I want you to see my bill, how it drips
downward: black candle wax. And
the moon—I want you to see her, too.
See me raise my head to meet her light.
Tongue a lit wick. Bill burning violet.

References

Page 2: The lines “Many more fingers./ Many more thumbs” is from the children’s book *Hand, Hand, Fingers, Thumb* by Al Perkins.

Page 7: The italicized section is from the children’s book *What Did You Put in Your Pocket?* by Beatrice Schenk de Regniers.

Page 12: The High Priestess is a tarot card symbolizing higher power, intuition, mystery, and the subconscious mind. It is closely associated with Persephone, the queen of the underworld and goddess of fertility in Greek mythology.

Page 22: The symbol “—:” in the last line is borrowed from the poet Dana Levin.

Page 30: Edward Ricketts was an American marine biologist, ecologist, and philosopher. He is best known for his close friendship with writer John Steinbeck, which resulted in their collaboration on *The Log From the Sea of Cortez* (1952). The details of Ed Ricketts’ tragic death are accounted for in John Steinbeck’s Essay, “About Ed Ricketts.”

Page 32: Santiago Island is part of the Galápagos Islands. It consists of two overlapping volcanoes and is inhabited by creatures such as marine iguanas, sea lions, and flamingos.

Page 33: The *RMS Queen Mary* is a British ocean liner built in Clydebank, Scotland. She sailed on her maiden voyage in 1936, but officially retired from service in 1967, and is now permanently moored in Long Beach, CA.