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The Myths They Make of Us

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The Myths They Make of Us

by

Kaitlin Stone

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
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Abstract

This thesis seeks to examine the relationship between myth and personhood. The societal constructs placed on us all, but specifically women, appear throughout cultures as mythology. How do these myths impact our identities? How can we utilize mythos and storytelling to reject, disrupt, or complicate those myths?

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Hunted

PART ONE: THE SEARCH

“Let’s play pretend,” I say, reaching my right hand out the passenger side window so it waves through the air like a flag.

Pete looks over at me and takes his left hand off the steering wheel to do the same. “Alright. What’s the story, Little One?”

I’m quiet for a second, looking around for clues. The dirt road ahead is bumpy and curvy and reminds me of the book I checked out at the library yesterday with Mom. “Got it!” I say, sitting up straight on the toolbox Pete uses to make me tall enough to be up front with him. It hurts my bottom, but Pete tells me only big girls get to ride up front and I don’t want him to think I’m a baby. “We’re explorers, okay?” Pete nods at me, so I keep going. “We’re explorers and we’re going up in the mountains to look for dragons.”

Pete seems to think about this for a second before telling me, “I don’t really know how to be a dragon hunter.”

I don’t like the sound of that, but he’s already playing more than any of Mom’s other boyfriends did, so I think I can work with it. “Well, firstly, we aren’t *hunting* dragons, we’re just looking for them. And also, don’t even worry because I am an expert and I’ll teach you.”

Pete smiles a crooked little smile. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, because for sure I’ve read more dragon books than him.

“First, you have to find their scales. We can’t find actual dragons because humans have been really mean to them, so they hide from us now, plus also they’re wild and Mom says not to touch wild animals. But so then when you find the scales, you gather them up for proof. We gotta prove that dragons are real – that’s our job.”

Pete’s smile widens and he raises his eyebrows. “Ohhhh-kay, I get it now. The arrowheads are the scales, and we’re going to bring them home for proof?” I nod. “Who do we have to show them to?” he asks.

I frown – I haven’t gotten that far. I think for a minute and say, “We gotta show the President of Animals so that she knows they’re real.” Then, whispering, “Mom is the president, okay?”

Pete laughs a little. “Sounds good to me, Little One. But you know, if I see an actual dragon while we’re out there looking for scales, I’m going to have to shoot it. No way I’m leaving that score for someone else.”

My cheeks burn hot and I look over at him. “You can’t shoot a dragon, that would be crazy.”

“Why, because they aren’t real?” he asks.

“No! They’re really real, and they breathe fire, and they’ll burn you up!”

“Well, I’m a hunter, Little One, and that’s what hunters do.”

“They get burned up?” I ask, staring at him.

“No.” His eyes are dark. “They see wild things and they shoot them.”

I think about how in Bambi, the hunters are the bad guys. “Well, if you try to shoot a dragon, I’m gonna have to stop you, because I’m a dragon expert and they’re en-en-endangered.” I try a few times to get the word right since before now I’ve only ever read it in books.

Pete gets a sort of funny look on his face when I say this and turns back to look at the road as he pulls the truck off next to an old, dried-up creek bed. “We’ll just see about that, won’t we, Wren.”

I frown, staring hard at the compass in my lap pointing north, away from home, and wish I could call Mom to come get me.

“Planning on going somewhere?” Pete laughs, pointing at the compass.

I just look at him, cheeks still burning, with a weird feeling swirling in my tummy.

“God, you look just like your mom, you know that?” He shakes his head and leans over to ruffle my hair.

...

Back home, we empty our bags onto the kitchen table. Mom goes to get the toothbrush and dish soap while Pete and I check out our finds. Before now, I’ve only ever watched this part – this is the first time Pete has let me come with him and it’ll be the first time I get to help sort the treasures.

Pete picks up a kind of oval-shaped rock with sharp edges. Smiling just a little, he turns to me. “Now, this here is a flint scraper. The Indians would use it to clean the hides of deer they killed so they could turn them into things like clothes and teepees,” he says, balancing the weight of it in the palm of his hand. Before I can tell him that he’s supposed to say Native Americans, like I learned in school last year, he reaches the scraper over and drags it down the side of my arm. It burns like the rock is on fire and I cry out, jumping back and holding my arm.

“Mooooom!” I cry as the blood wells up in a few spots along the line Pete drew. “Mommy!”

She runs back into the kitchen, her arms full of the cleaning stuff. “What happened?”

“Relax,” Pete laughs, still holding onto the scraper. “It’s a thousand years old, it can’t hurt her too bad.”

“Did you do this to her?” Mom asks Pete, pointing at him with the toothbrush still in her hand.

“Mommy, it really hurts,” I whine through my tears, holding my arm out so she can fix it. Seeing the blood is making my tummy even more upset than it was before.

Mom drops the cleaning stuff and grabs a kitchen towel off the oven door handle. “What the hell were you thinking, Peter?” she snaps at him. She runs the towel under the sink for a few seconds and then starts to wipe my arm. It hurts when she rubs at the blood, but the cold water helps the burning feeling.

Pete has already moved on to other rocks, completely ignoring me and my arm. “She’s just fine. It’s not bad, just a tiny scrape. She’s been banged up worse running around outside like a wild animal, right Wren? This is nothing.”

I don’t say anything, but Mom looks at him, pulling away from my arm when she sees that the bleeding has slowed. “I don’t know what the hell you were thinking, but you can’t just do shit like that to my d—”

Pete cuts her off with a loud slap, *crack*, right across her face.

Mom brings the towel up to the already reddening mark, not seeming to notice that she's getting my blood all over her cheek. She doesn't say a word, just looks at him with wide eyes. I look back and forth between them, hiccupping a little as I try to stop crying.

After what feels like a million years, Pete is the first one to speak. "Don't you have something to tell your mom, Little One?"

I'm frozen like the raccoons are when we turn the porch lights on to scare them out of the garbage cans. I can feel all the different parts of my body at one time, the way it feels to shuffle around the living room in sock feet and then touch the lamp, except all over. "I thought you said not to tell her about that."

He puts his hand on my shoulder and squeezes hard. I look up, up into his face and think he must be as tall as a tree. "I'm talking about our dragon hunt, remember? You haven't shown your evidence to the president, or whatever it was you said."

Oh. That. It feels like a whole different day, it was so long ago. I look up at Mom, who wipes at her eyes a little and then smiles a little. "Were you two playing pretend? Show me what you wanted to show me then, Wrenny."

I don't really want to, but if Mom is acting like everything is okay, I guess that means it is. I grab a handful of the flat rocks, ignoring the places their sharp ends prick my hands. I pull a little away from Pete, but he just moves with me, still gripping my shoulder. "These are dragon scales, Mom. We brought them back to prove dragons exist." I hold them out to Mom, who takes them with the hand not holding the towel to her face and stares at them for a minute.

"Yep, that's definitely proof right there." She hands them back to Pete, who doesn't let go of my shoulder even as he takes them from her and sets them on the table with one hand, even as he leans back into Mom and kisses her right on the lips. His big tummy pushes me into her, and smelling her perfume at the same time as Pete's stinky sweat makes my head hurt.

"Can I go to my room now?" I ask, and they pull apart.

"Just a second," Pete says, kneeling down so he's looking right into my eyes. "I want you to keep this, as your own evidence," he says, pushing the scraper into my hand.

I take it, turning it over in my hands and watching the light catch on the edges. I just look at him, and then at Mom who has a really funny look on her

face. Sort of worried, I guess, and something else I can't figure out. "What do you say, honey?" she prompts me.

"Oh," I say, turning back to Pete. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Little One," he says, finally letting me go and standing up. "Just be careful with it, alright? I don't want you to hurt yourself again."

"But I didn't do that, you –" I start to say, but Mom comes over and gives me a little push in the direction of my bedroom.

"Why don't you start getting ready for bed."

I go, confused and still upset Pete said I hurt myself when he's the one who did, but then I think maybe I did something wrong and that's why he did it, so maybe it really is my fault. I put the scraper all the way at the back of my desk drawer and close it, hard, before flopping down onto my bedroom floor.

Laying on my back, I shuffle my sock feet back and forth until they start to feel tingly and warm, and then I reach a hand out to touch my metal bed frame. The little stars stuck up on my ceiling are glowing, and I watch them until my eyes get sort of fuzzy. I hear Mom and Pete out in the kitchen, laughing together now, and I remember how Mom used to say the best thing about my dad is that he made her laugh all the time.

“This is what happy is,” I say out loud. The stars on my ceiling hear, and I think they believe me.

PART TWO: THE AIM

The air at the top of the mountain is thin and misty, and it feels like even the act of shivering leaves me out of breath. I pull my coat closer around me, but it's three sizes too large and the chilly air sneaks inside anyway. I'm tired of being cold.

“It feels like we've been walking for like a year,” I say, looking sideways at Pete. “Is it time to stop yet?”

Pete stops in his tracks and stares at me. “It's time to shut the fuck up,” he growls, adjusting the bow slung over his shoulder and walking on.

“That doesn't answer my question, though,” I mumble, and just as Pete turns and I begin to regret talking back, I hear a quiet rustle in the woods to my right. Before he can say anything, I point to the right. The glare disappears from his eyes, immediately replaced by gleaming excitement. This is the moment I live for – this silent excited moment between anger and victory. The moment where I've done something right.

He nods to me and I quietly loop around to the backside of where I heard the rustling, moving slowly, taking my time. When I feel like I've got the right spot, I grab a rock from the ground and toss it, eyeballing the distance between the quaking pines and the shrubbery at their back. I hold my breath, afraid I've miscalculated somehow, but then I hear it. Crashing, sprinting through the trees and undergrowth of the forest, running straight at Pete. Once I'm sure he's got it in his sights, I squeeze my eyes shut. I hear the twang of the bow vibrate out, and then a staggering run. I open my eyes to see Pete crashing through the trees, his lumbering form chasing the dying animal. I move more slowly, following the trail of blood left behind, and before too long I find Pete standing over the now-dead body of a buck.

"Nice work, Little One!" Pete calls across the body of the deer. I grin, trying my best to quell the squeamish feeling in the pit of my stomach as I walk over.

"Thanks," I say, breathing in a few deep lungfuls of the crisp mountain air. "Should I hike back down and get the truck ready?"

Pete chuckles. "Nice try. I shot the damn thing; you get to carry it down."

My mouth drops open. “Are you kidding? I can’t carry him, he’s like a hundred pounds heavier than I am!”

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” he says, staring pointedly at my chest. I cross my arms and hunch my shoulders self-consciously. “If you had taken hunter’s safety like I told you to, you would’ve been able to shoot it, but no – you had to take choir instead like a little bitch. Now you’ll know to listen to me.”

“Pete,” I try to reason with him. “I’ll do it next year, I promise.”

He slings the bow back over his shoulder and hefts his pack. “Well now that is great news! Next year, I’ll pack it down. I promise.” And with that he’s off, hiking down the trail before I can say anything more. It doesn’t really matter, though; even I’m not stupid enough to keep arguing with Pete when he’s like this.

I look around, anywhere but the buck’s dead eyes. “Shit,” I whisper. I drop my pack to the ground and dig through its contents, finally pulling out a bungee cord and the rolled-up tarp I brought to make a lean-to if we needed to camp out for the night. I walk over to the buck and take a deep breath before kneeling to the forest floor beside him and closing his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I say. He, of course, doesn’t respond. I rub at my face with the sleeves of my coat. “Shit shit shiiiiiiit!” I yell into the forest.

I stand on jello legs and shake out the tarp, rolling my shoulders a few times in preparation. Then, I bend over and start to push the deer’s side, but he is warm – warmer than any dead thing has the right to be – and I have to run for the bushes to puke.

“Okay, Mister Deer,” I say once I’m done throwing up. I’m all alone up here, so I don’t care how dumb I sound. “Let’s play pretend.”

I examine the tarp and the deer and wish for a second I had committed myself a little more during P.E. class. “You and me, we’re wilderness explorers searching for dragons,” I say, coming back around him and sitting down on the cold ground. “You’re my partner.” I use my feet to shove him and he slides over, bit by bit, as I inch my butt forward. “And we come across an evil wizard.” The pine needles dig into my hands as I push myself forward, but he’s now partway on the tarp. I can do this. “The evil wizard put you under a spell, and now you’re in a magic sleep.” He’s almost there. We’re almost there. “So I’ve gotta bring you down the mountain to break the spell.”

Finally, the entirety of the buck lays on one end of the tarp. “We did it!” I shout, sending a flock of birds airborne somewhere to my right. I heave a huge sigh and stand, brushing the dirt and debris off my jeans. I lift the buck’s side of the tarp and use it for leverage as I start to roll what ends up looking like a burrito. I finish it off by wrapping the bungee cord around the bundle a few times. I take stock of my creation, pushing the burrito simile out of my mind as my stomach turns over again.

“I think I’ve just become a vegetarian,” I tell the deer, but the game is over and I feel stupid and sad talking to a dead body rolled in a tarp.

I slap my cheeks a few times to pump myself up, the stinging sensation bringing me back, then I loop a new bungee cord through one of the straps of my pack and secure it back to the bundle. I grab the other strap and square my shoulders, pulling the pack slowly but surely down the mountain.

When I finally reach the truck, Pete has the seat leaned back with his hat over his face.

“So glad you’re nice and comfy in there,” I mutter.

I about jump out of my skin when he rolls the window down. “What was that?”

“I said I’m glad I finally got this down here.”

He gets out of the truck and helps me lift the bundle up into the bed of the truck. Pete pats it once and gets back into the driver’s seat. I suppose that means he’s ready to go, so I climb in on my side.

“You know,” he says, laughing. “I didn’t think you’d be able to get that damn thing down the mountain, but you figured it out. You’re lucky you got your looks from your mom, but you’re even luckier you didn’t get your brains from her.”

I hate when he talks about Mom like this, but I’ve learned not to question it. Pete seems to have found himself a better mood during my trek down the mountain, and I know I should make the most of it. I know I should savor the laughter, not question it.

On our way home, we stop at Booze and Bullets and I run in to grab a couple of burritos, a coke for me, and a beer for Pete.

“One of these days, honey, would you just take a little sip off the top?” Sandy says as she bags the beer and rings me up.

“I’m twelve, Sandy.”

She looks over her glasses at me. “Live a little, honey. Besides, anyone who puts up with Pete deserves a little extra zip in their zap.”

I laugh and take the bag.

When I get back to the truck, I crack the top off Pete’s beer on the edge of the rolled down window and hand it to him as he starts to drive. “Sandy told me I should take a little sip off the top before I give it to you,” I tell him. With his good mood, he’ll think it’s funny.

“Oh yeah?” he grins at me. “She tell you to get some zap in your zip?”

I snort. “Something like that.”

Pete is quiet for a minute, watching the road. He looks over at me, and with the sun setting right behind his head, the cab of the truck takes on a warm sort of glow. “Want to make another pit stop?” he asks.

I pull out the two burritos. “Let’s do it.”

When we get to the lake, Pete backs the truck up so the bed is looking out over the water. While I gather his beer and our food, he drops the tailgate and spreads a blanket over it. I hop up next to him and scoot close. It’s colder the darker it gets, and besides that, sitting next to the rolled tarp is giving me the creeps.

For a moment, Pete and I eat our crappy gas station burritos in silence. Sitting there in the dusk, looking out over the still surface of the water, it feels like a moment I could live inside forever. After a while, Pete puts his arm around me, and I let him pull me into his side like I'm still a little girl.

“I love you, Little One.”

I take a deep breath, savoring the quiet and the peace and the air and the endless, endless stretch of water before us. I would do anything to make this last. I will do anything. “Love you too, Pete.”

This is what happy is.

...

Mom slams a cabinet shut in the kitchen. “I just think,” she whispers, “that if you're not going to be home for dinner, you could give me a heads up.”

“Mom, it isn't like we planned it ahead of time. We stopped at the gas station to grab something to drink, and they had those burritos Pete likes, so we decided to stop at the lake to chill out from the hunt. Relax.”

She drops a plate of cold food on the table in front of me. “Don't tell me to relax, and don't take that tone with me, Wren.”

Pete walks in and looks between our red, frustrated faces. “God, you two look just the same.”

Mom huffs out a breath and stares pointedly at the two plates of cold food before turning to the sink.

I roll my eyes at him because it was that kind of day, and he tries not to laugh. Mom hears his chuckle and whirls, face blazing and tears in her eyes.

Pete ruffles my hair. “You have the kitchen under control, right Wren? Your mom and I have some things to do.”

I open my mouth to tell him that I most certainly do not have the kitchen under control, but the words die on my tongue when I see his face. Our night has clearly come to an end. “Yeah, you bet. Got it covered.”

“That’s my girl,” he says, giving Mom a slap on her ass on his way through the doorway. She follows him, of course she does, but not before giving me that look. That look that makes my stomach turn a little, like when I know the answer to a question in class nobody else does and Trina turns to glare at me from the front row. I look down at the ground until they’re in their room, then I pull out my headphones and get started on the kitchen. Everything will be fine in the morning.

PART THREE: THE SHOT

I smile brightly, fakely, at the last customers leaving the lobby. “Thanks for choosing the Indian Paintbrush! Enjoy your stay!” They smile back at me, tip their brand-new hats like cowboys in a movie, then they’re off for a day of adventure. I turn and knock on the door to the main office, and Frank jumps a little before standing and stretching. I think he was sleeping again. “I’m heading out, see you Monday.”

He comes out to take up my post at the front desk. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he asks, looking me up and down while I trade my uniform shirt for a bulky cardigan, barely showing a flash of my undershirt in my haste.

“Just some family stuff, nothing big.”

“I don’t know why you always wear crap like that,” he says as I gather my bag. I look up quizzically. “You’re hiding yourself under all those layers and it’s a real shame.”

I pull my cardigan around me despite the summertime heat bearing down, even here in the air-conditioned hotel. “Oh. I guess I’m just always cold.”

As I walk past him toward the employee exit, I feel Frank graze my ass with his hand. I look down at the ground and say nothing, shoulders hunching, shrinking, escaping to my car as fast as I can.

I drive home with nothing but the rattling sound of my car for company. I barely notice Pete's truck as I park beside it and make my way inside.

"I'm home," I call. I hang my work bag on a hook by the door and pick up a pack I'd prepared before work and left here, waiting. Mom comes down the hall to say hello, maybe give me a hug, but Pete barrels past her and puts his arm around my shoulders, turns me back toward the door, and guides me right back outside and down the porch steps to his truck.

"Bye, Mom!" I call over my shoulder, but I don't hear her response.

In the same dirty truck in the same dirty front seat, I gaze out the window as Pete drives north up our mountain.

Like I'm a child, Pete coaches me. "What are you gonna do if we get pulled over?"

"Cry."

He nods. "And if they ask questions?"

“Tell them we were coming back from a hike, and I saw it dead on the side of the road and begged you to pick it up so we could bury it. Then cry some more.”

He grins at me, but I just lean against the window, barely noticing my head banging against the glass with every bump or turn.

As we park behind a copse of trees, I steady myself. After all these years, I wish hunting had gotten easier. I reach for my pack and turn to Pete, but he stays in his seat. “Ready to go?” I ask, knowing the answer.

He looks back at me, and without meaning to, I pull my cardigan tighter around my body like a blanket.

...

When we finally grab our packs and get out of the truck, it’s dark outside. “Aren’t you cold, Little One?” Pete asks, looking back at me as I follow him.

I have to think about his question for a moment before I can answer. “Not really.”

We walk on in silence until I see something out of the corner of my eye. I whistle, low and fast, and point ahead with two fingers to signal Pete. He whips a rock past me, barely missing my head, and a buck bolts into the forest.

“What are you doing?”

“It wasn’t the right one,” he replies, so we move on.

We walk for what feels like miles, sometimes following paths and sometimes veering into dense clusters of trees, doing our best to push through the undergrowth without making much sound. I’m trying to track our route so we can find our way back to the truck; Pete doesn’t seem to know where he’s going. He’s feverish in his movements, erratic and undeterred.

The air grows thinner and colder the higher we climb, and we’re both starting to breathe hard. I slow my pace, and when Pete doesn’t tell me to hurry up, I look around and really take in our surroundings. At this altitude, the trees are taller and sparser, making a sort of skeletal forest in stark contrast with the dense greenery lower down. I don’t mind, though, because it gives me a better view of the moon hanging low and full above us. Looking up at it, I’m reminded of the glowing stars I used to have stuck on my bedroom ceiling. I felt like I was close enough to touch the galaxy, back then, and I feel that way a little bit now, too.

Finally, we stop. In the far distance, I see a white blob. As I squint to make it out, Pete fishes the binoculars out of his pack. He gasps at what he sees, startling me, then hands them over. I raise them to my eyes and scan the inky

horizon, trying to make out whatever he's deemed worthy of this strange night's hunt. Finally, I see it. I drop the binoculars.

"Pete, what the hell?" I whisper. "You don't mean to shoot her, do you?"

"Little One, that's the kind of thing men spend their whole lives hunting. No way I'm leaving that score for someone else."

I pick up the binoculars and peer through them again to buy myself a moment to think. The glowing white lump comes back into focus. There she is – standing there, ethereal in the dark. A pure white doe gazing up at the moon with an almost human expression on her face. I've read about deer like her, deer born with genetic conditions impacting their melanin production. Seeing her, though, pushes the biology textbook out of my mind, replacing it with awe. Awe in her existence, awe in her ability to have lived this long despite her glowing white skin serving as a beacon to predators. Awe in the way the moonlight shines on her, blurs her edges with a kind of glow that spreads out and makes it seem like she spreads out into the entire forest – into the very mountain on which we stand.

I am suddenly so aware of my heart beating in my body, and it seems like she and everything else starts to pulse along with it, moving with some rhythm of nature I have somehow tapped into, if only for a second. I think I can hear her

breathing. I think this is the closest I will come to seeing magic. I think I have to protect her, this unearthly and innocent miracle of nature, however I can.

I drop the binoculars once more. “Pete, let’s be smart here,” I say, matter of fact, pushing emotion out of my voice. “It’s bad enough we’re here outside of the season, but to kill *her* would be... it would be...”

He stares at me as I trail off, eyes hard. “What would it be?” he asks coolly.

“I don’t know, like a sin against nature or something. Evil, I guess. It would be evil.” My hands are lifted to the sky, in prayer or in plea, moving as if on their own.

Pete reaches out and grabs my wrists, pulling me so I stumble closer to him, and squeezes like a vice. “I don’t know what you think you’re pulling here, Wren, but you’d better cut it out before you get yourself hurt,” he breathes into my ear. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I know that I’m in deep shit. “Now we’re going to keep moving until we’re close enough, then we’re going to kill that thing, and you’re going to keep your pretty little mouth shut, got it?”

I don't see a way out of this one. Hoarsely, I choke out, "Got it." He drops my wrists. We walk on.

When we reach the tree line, we both realize we won't make it any further without spooking her. Pete drops his bow to the ground and unslings his rifle to use instead. He stands there a moment, feeling the weight of it in his hands, considering something.

"You do it." His voice is absolutely serious, terrifying, still as the surface of a lake.

I back up without meaning to, almost tripping over the roots of the tree behind me. "Oh no, Pete, no no no. I can't do that. I can't."

"Sure you can." His animal eyes gleam in the night. "Do it for me."

"What?" I breathe.

"Shoot it, kill it for me. Show me you love me."

My blood is ice water. "I do, Pete, I love you. I don't need to do this to prove that to you. I'll do something else, anything else. I'll —" but he grabs my arm to keep me from kneeling, takes my hands in his own and in a sickeningly familiar gesture, wraps them around the rifle.

“You do this for me, Wren,” he growls, and I realize then that I’m stuck. I always have been, and I always will be. If life is made of moments, mine is this moment on repeat – a jammed record playing the same tired song over and over again.

I look at the doe, blinking back tears. She looks clear, focused even without the scope, charged with electricity like when you shuffle around a carpet in sock feet and touch the lamp or a bed post.

Let’s play pretend, I think.

“Fine,” I say, and I surprise myself by speaking with my own voice.

You are a dragon, the last of your kind.

Pete folds his arms, victorious, and I bring the rifle scope level with my right eye.

A hunter is on your trail, the same hunter that has driven you to near extinction.

The doe stands there, silent and glowing, no idea what is about to happen.

The only way to keep yourself safe,

I stare down the barrel. I’ve got a perfect shot.

to keep him from killing you...

“There are some branches in my sight line,” I tell Pete, backing up several paces behind him.

... is to remember what it is to be wild...

He stares at the doe with such intensity that I don't think he even hears me speak.

to be free...

He watches her, waiting with almost childlike excitement for the moment my bullet brings her to the ground.

to let go completely...

I bring the scope back to my eye and line up my target perfectly in the center of the crosshairs, narrowing my focus until it is the only thing in my mind.

and do what dragons do best –

“Come on, Wren, we don't have all night,” Pete whispers, not once moving his gaze from the doe.

breathe fire.

I take a deep breath, place my finger on the trigger, and shoot.

Somewhere in the distance, I sense the startled doe as she rockets through the forest, off to meet the sunrise someplace else.

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Ears ringing, I drop the rifle to the ground and step over Pete's crumpled form.

.

I push him onto his side, feeling the warmth of his body against my hands.

.

I reach into his pocket and carefully remove the keys to the truck.

.

I retrace my steps down the side of the mountain, sure of the path, marveling at the clear night air and the freshness of the breeze.

.

I arrive at the truck and open the doors, pulling out his old toolbox and throwing it to the muddy ground before climbing into the driver's seat.

.

I back out from behind the trees and drive to the highway, turning east the first chance I get.

.

Ahead of me, I see the sun break the mountain open into morning.

.

This is what happy is.

My mother was a river.

Which is to say, she was made of peaks and eddies, of treacherous rapids.

I am seven years old, itching my left shin. My socks have a delicate lace ribbon around the top that reminds me of a wreath of ivy, and today, it feels like poison ivy. I itch and I itch and I itch until my pale skin turns tomato red, and then when every itch is extinguished I move to my right shin. I am not itchy on the right, but things have to be balanced. Even. Equal. I do not want the right side of me to feel lonely. My mother walks in and smiles at me, bends down to smooth my tangled whiteblonde hair. I gaze up at her as I itch, itch, itch my right shin, counting precisely to ensure I give both sides of me the very same treatment. Her soft eyes crinkle at the edges and she whispers *If you don't figure out how to control this weird shit, nobody will ever want to live with you.*

Which is to say, you never meet the same version of her twice.

I am seventeen years and thirty-five days old, freshly driving, bad day crying. I let the screen door slam behind me as I enter the doublewide trailer. My mother stands in the kitchen like an island in a storm of dirty dishes. I tell myself I

cannot smell them. I tell myself I do not see her pupils. I tell myself I will not ask her if she is okay, because I am too busy not being okay and that *has* to be okay. She sees me, though, really sees me. She is in the eye of the tornado, crystal clear, not withdrawn or withdrawing, not spinning like a top. She nods once and walks to the couch, flips a cushion, and starts digging. In five minutes, we are driving to McDonalds to order dollar menu hot fudge sundaes, blasting Pink from the speakers, laughing at things that once made us cry.

I am seventeen years and thirty-six days old, freshly driving, cautiously optimistic. I close the screen door gently behind me as I walk into my home to greet my mother. She is in her bedroom. I see towels nailed to the wall above the windows. I see her eyes, her fingers, her knees. I do not know which side of the mountain she is on today, so I cover her over with a blanket and sit beside her, holding her close as she shakes and she shakes and she shakes.

Which is to say, her lifespring nourished a forest.

I am thirty-three hours old, bundled in blankets and hats and all manner of clothing despite the fact that the heat of August is still covering us all with its own thick blanket. I am smaller, thinner than I was when I entered the world, which I

have heard is the wrong direction for growing at this age. My grandfather pinches my jaundiced cheeks and says *KW*, *you better fatten her up*. My mother quips *She's not a steer, Dad*. She laughs, but she takes this to heart, my mother, and she opens her body in the way only a mother can and she feeds me. Twenty-seven years later, I am able to report that I am sufficiently fattened up.

Which is to say, a person could drown in less than six inches of her.

I am five years old and I want to be president when I grow up. My grandfather tells me I can be the first female president, make history, and I tell him I hope it will have already been made by then. He laughs and asks me how old I am, and I tell him I am five and also a hundred. My favorite color is pink, I love eating raspberries off the bushes that grow behind my grandparents' farmhouse, and I believe in fairies more strongly than I have ever believed in anything. When I'm bored, I spin in circles until I am dizzy and I roar like a lion and I have no fear. My mother tells me I am *something else* and the way she says it fills me up with sunshine.

I am nine years old and my mother is my hero. I tell her I want to be her, a mom, when I grow up. She laughs, and I laugh, too, because her laughter is the

sound of the safety and the calm before a storm. I carry a water baby everywhere in the crook of my arm. It is missing the left ear because the dog got ahold of it, but I do not let this shake my confidence in my ability to mother well. Accidents happen. My favorite color is blue, because by now I have learned that there are only two kinds of girl I can be and I have settled on the not-quite-right tomboy. When I'm bored, I read quietly in a nest of dirty clothes on the floor of my closet. When a man tells me what I can be, I say *thank you*.

Which is to say, crackling ice covered her surface for over half the year.

I am ten years old and I think I might be a bear. Towels cover the windows to keep the heat in and the light out. Sometimes when I feel afraid, I eat and I eat and I eat to insulate my body from the world around me. I am preparing, but for what I do not know. My mother growls sometimes. Her upper lip curls in one corner when she is angry, and I imagine long fangs growing out from underneath it. She says she will destroy anyone who hurts me because she is my Momma Bear. When I try to tell her who to destroy, she covers her ears with pillows and tells me she is hibernating.

Which is to say, her fingerling brooks stretched out for miles in every direction.

I am twelve years old, and my mother is crying. She cries because she is sad, the aching absence of her once-growing womb felt painfully. She cries because she is angry at the world and a man and a raised fist and a flight of stairs. She cries because she cannot numb the pain she is feeling because she is out of money and out of friends and out of schemes. She cries because he has stolen her riding lawnmower, and this is one injustice too many to bear. I try to collect my mother's tears in the palms of my hands, but they slip through my fingers and salt the earth at our feet. *Fuck it*, I say, and I cry, too, for all these reasons and for the suffocating weight of this watery confusion pressing me into the earth, and for having shoulders too small to hold these burdens but being asked to, anyway, and for being too young to understand and understanding all the same, and because damnit I wanted to try driving that lawnmower someday.

I am nineteen years old, and I am still crying, too.

I am twenty-four years old, and I am still crying, too.

I am a hundred years old, and I am still crying, too.

The earth is still too salty for anything much to grow.

Where Your Growing Happens

Gran always said that your growing happens in the place that knows you best – the place that makes you happiest. I grew up in a log house by a great wide river, smack in the middle of two old cottonwood trees. I also grew up in a trailer park, but I don't really care to get into that. Weeks were long and loud and dirty there, so I didn't ever get much growing done anyway. No, all my growing happened in that log house by the great wide river, guarded by those two old cottonwood trees, and so that is where I grew up.

A funny sort of thing happens when you do your growing in a place where fields of sugar beets blanket the earth like a smelly, patchwork quilt for miles in every direction. It's almost like, with each inch, a bit of the world around bakes into you. I sprouted three inches the day after my ninth birthday, and suddenly I could tell the difference between a Meadowlark and a Robin by their call alone. When my hair started to turn strawberry the summer after seventh grade, I discovered that I knew how to hop across the river to the little rock island in the middle without getting my good shoes wet. And the week after my first real fight with Mama, I started waking up at exactly midnight anytime there was a full

moon. Mama might say that nothing good happens after midnight, but Mama says a lot of things that turn out to be wrong. Bad things can happen any time of day. Gran always said to find things out for yourself, to make up your own damn mind about the world, and so that is what I say, too. I say that the most magical things happen after midnight, because that is when the world belongs only to you.

Gran was a person you wanted to listen to, being that she was something of a local celebrity. People talked for years about the time she dusted off her Miss Rodeo Queen 1958 sash and led the Independence Day parade after Miss 2010 caught a bug and bowed out. Not a spot of dust on that thing, even after all those years sitting in the back of the closet. I remember watching her ride down Main Street and tugging on the shirt of the man standing next to me and tell him, beaming ear to ear with pride, that she was my Gran. But of course, he knew that. I told him and everyone else who would listen how she'd promised to teach me how to barrel race, how to flip a pancake up and catch it behind my back. I showed off the firetruck red cowboy boots she'd handed down to me, pretending that I couldn't feel the wadded-up tissues stuffed into the toes. When Mr. Simonson told me I was her spitting image, I wasn't even pretending. My bright red feet left the ground.

Mama, of course, hated the attention. “Look at them all encouraging her,” she’d mutter under her breath. “Like they don’t know every second she’s up on that damn horse, she’s liable to fall off.” I nodded along, because that’s what you do when Mama says something, but deep down I knew something Mama did not: Gran was too big for us to keep for ourselves.

Mama never did want to share her, though. Mama didn’t much like to share anything. Gran told me once that there are two kinds of people in the world: the hungry and the full. Me and Gran, we were full, because we’d learned how to swallow the way the air smelled after a long summer rain, or the little drops of morning dew that slept on blades of wheatgrass. We’d learned how to stay satisfied by life. Mama, on the other hand, never did learn the trick of drinking in all the things that make your heart sing. And so Mama was hungry, and hungry people try to take bites out of everyone around them.

Once, in science class, I learned about a thing called *island dwarfism*. That’s when all the living creatures on an island grow real small because they don’t have the room for growing big. That’s sort of what I think happened with Gran and Mama. Out there on all that open land, Gran had nothing but room for growing. And so between those two old cottonwoods, Gran grew and grew until

she was larger than life. By the time Mama came to be, there wasn't much room left to grow big, and so Mama grew small instead. Maybe that's what made her so hungry, but I don't know for sure.

What I do know is that just like me, the land baked into Gran with every inch of growing she did. Mama says things don't work that way, and that I need to keep my head out of the damn clouds, but Mama says a lot of things that turn out to be wrong. I know things work that way because when they came to take Gran to the home, the second the ambulance passed under the old railroad overpass every Meadowlark within earshot wailed out together, and all the lilac bushes browned, and the ground under my feet thumped like a panicked heartbeat. Gran always said that the best living things know when something ain't right, and that place was brim full of all the best living things.

When Mama called out it was time to go back to the trailer park, she couldn't find me anywhere. But that's because the secret of getting to the rock island in the middle of the river never baked into her, and so she didn't know where to look. I heard her calling my name, but I couldn't leave. The beavers had left their dams half-built and the swallows had stopped nesting. The river cried itself right up onto the rock island and pooled like a puddle in my lap. The land

needed me, and so I stayed. I held it in my arms all night long, and it held me right back.

Mama didn't worry too much, because when someone has their head in the clouds, they're bound to wander on home eventually, so the car was packed and waiting for me when I made it back to the log house in the morning. I asked her why we couldn't just stay there between the two cottonwood trees and wait for Gran to come back. But one thing I knew deep down was that Gran wasn't going to come back, and another thing was that Mama wanted to be where she was doing her growing, which meant the trailer part with the little pink singlewide that was walking distance from Duck's Bar and Grill. I don't know why she saved all her growing for that sort of place when she'd been born in the best spot on earth, but there are a lot of things I don't know about Mama, so I nodded along and we got in the car, leaving the log house behind. As we drove down the winding, gravel road, I turned around in my seat and watched the two cottonwood things fold in on themselves. The very earth that baked into me opened up a gaping hole and swallowed the entire place up, from the rock island in the middle of the river to the lilac bushes behind the log house. The two people who best breathed this land had gone, and so it didn't know how to keep on staying there.

I never stopped thinking about it, though. It crawled right up into my dreams, that little log house. I'd dream that I would step back across the property line and *wham*, the ground would spit the whole of it right back up where it belongs. Except the logs would be painted yellow and sky blue, and there would be blackberry bushes, and the chicken coop would move over to make room for a nice little vegetable garden because the land knows those who are made of it and it would know what I'd need to come home to. But you have to wake up from dreams, or else nothing real would ever happen to you, and those real things were long and loud and dirty in the trailer park.

For all the wrong things in the trailer park, though, I had one right thing – my box of miracle rocks. As I wandered around the land growing up, I'd pick up all the best rocks I could find, and I would concentrate my wishes into them – one for each rock. I called them miracle rocks because I was always wishing for a miracle. Whenever I woke up from a dream about the log house, I'd take out the shoebox from underneath my bed and shake it, just to make sure all the wishes stayed awake. I would hear them whisper their miracles to each other as they bounced around, and I'd know that some things were still listening to me, even if

Mama wasn't. I'd know that some things still wanted to remember Gran and the log house, even if Mama didn't.

The rocks remembered everything, even the things I wished they wouldn't. They remembered the saltwater tears I cried down on them when the things I missed filled my heart to overflowing. They remembered the words shouted up out of Mama and into me like knives when the darkness started to creep over her. They remembered the pieces I tried carving out of myself when the hurting seemed too big to bear. And most of all, they remembered the nights I crawled down there under the bed to sleep with them, to hold them in my hands until they grew warm enough to stop the shaking and sing me off to sleep. Rocks hold memory, you see. They'll carry it for you when you don't feel strong enough to do it yourself.

...

My mother once told me that there are two kinds of people in this world: victims and survivors. She neglected to mention the third kind, the ones who deal with being victims by making victims out of others, but then again, she neglected to mention a whole lot of things. Standing here in the wreckage of my childhood bedroom, that thought won't stop swirling around my mind. That question I

remember wanting to ask – if the act of surviving means that nobody victimized you.

“The woman swore she hated me, so why’d she keep all this goddamn shit, I wonder?” I ask aloud, just to the room, just to myself. The last thing I want to do is spend a day in this room, this house, this trailer park, sweeping up old memories and dust and sadness. But Gran always said one thing about being grown is that it means doing shit you don’t want to do, and so here I am.

Unsure of where to start, I slide open a closet door to assess the full damage. I am greeted by a cough of dust and a wave of something that smells like reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* in the back of Miss Livingston’s third grade classroom. The corners of my eyes prick, and I wonder if I’m more allergic to the dust or to the memories. Once the dust clears, a pair of dirty red cowboy boots catch my eyes.

“I can’t believe I actually wore these,” I say out loud, turning one boot over in my hand. There’s some cow shit stuck in the seam where the leather meets the sole, and I pick at it absently. It’s no use, though; that shit will be part of the boot for the rest of its life. I frown, toss it behind my back, and scare myself half to death with the *thunk* it makes hitting the wall behind me. I turn and see a patch

of brown peeking through the sunny yellow paint where the heel of the boot has hit the wall. It's one of many patches, creating the odd feeling that I'm standing in the middle of a decaying banana, and I remember how my mother warned me that paint doesn't stick to wood paneling.

I sigh; I'm here to clean, not to destroy, so I get down on my hands and knees to find the boot. It's hit the wall above the bed, so I resign myself to a lifetime of coughing up dust bunnies and crawl underneath the metal frame, trying not to scratch myself on a spring. I probably should have gotten a preventative tetanus shot before coming here. I see it in the back and reach for it, but I have to turn my head and press my cheek against the side of the mattress to get my arm extended long enough to grasp it, and without being able to look at my target, my hand touches cardboard instead. I pull it out anyway, figuring I've got to start somewhere.

"Oh my god," I whisper, my voice reverent. I wonder if this is how religious people feel at church, this surge of chills and memory and pure knowing that I am somehow not alone. I sit down, hard, on the dirty carpet and cradle it in my lap. The box. *My* box. A small hiccup of startled laughter escapes my lips and I hold my hand up to my mouth, startled by the sound. The corners of the shoebox

are weather-worn and whatever brand once marked the sides was wiped away by eager hands long ago. I inhale deeply, wanting some air in my lungs – to anchor me or balloon me away, I have no idea. When I breathe, I smell lilac bushes, dirt after a long rain, and birdsong.

I give the box a tentative shake. I don't know what I'm expecting; I'm a grown woman for christ's sake. And still, when I'm met with silence save a for some rocks beating against one another, my heart sinks. I rip off the lid, preparing to throw the rocks and the box and everything else in this room straight into the trash, and my breath catches.

“It's about time you got here, do you know how long I've been waiting?”
you ask, hand on hip.

I open my mouth to reply, but for the first time in my life I have absolutely nothing. I am speechless, stuck, lost.

You roll your eyes. “You know what Gran says, ain't no sense in looking like a fish out of water. Say your piece or close your damn mouth.”

My mouth snaps shut automatically. You're right, of course, and I almost hear Gran saying the words along with you.

You sit down on one of the rocks and pull your legs up beneath you, crisscross applesauce, folding your hands in your lap. My legs moving with a mind all their own, I take the same position and wait. Sitting like this has always meant business.

“First off, what the hell are you wearing?” you ask, adjusting your own denim overalls and flipping your braid behind your back.

I touch my pixie cut, smooth my blazer. “I came from work,” I say, more of a whisper than I intended.

You roll your eyes again, and though I hate to admit it, Mama was right – it is annoying as all hell. “Ain’t no work clothes I’ve ever seen. Doesn’t matter, though. You’re here now, that’s what counts.” You’re picking at your ragged, bloody cuticles, and for the first time in years I find myself doing the same in spite of the manicure I so carefully maintain.

“You ready?” you ask me.

My mouth gapes again before I remember Gran, snap it shut. “For what?” I try not to let my shaking hands knock you off your rock, but I can’t control them and have to set the entire box down.

“To take me back, of course,” you say, giving me another eye roll.

“Would you quit that,” I snap. “You look like a sassy little shit and it ain’t cute.” You lean back, eyes wide, and it takes me a moment before I register what I’ve said.

“Well now, who’d have thought it. All those years running from her, and here you are turned into Mama. This is going to be harder than I thought.” I start to respond, maybe apologize, but you hold up your hand to shush me. “Don’t start, we both know you meant it and we both know I’ve heard worse. Let’s just put it behind us and get moving.”

“I know it’s a mess, but I only just started. The movers won’t be here for three more days, though, so I’ve got time.”

You chuckle, stand, brush the dust from the rock off your bottom. “That’s not what I meant.”

An hour later, you’re sitting in the passenger seat of my Kia Soul, box stacked on books and pillows and all manner of crap so you’re tall enough to see out the windshield. “You know what Mama would say about this car, right?”

I laugh, I can’t help myself. “Why do you think I got it?” You laugh too, and for a moment our laughter sings together in perfect harmony. Gran was right,

our laughter is a little bit like music. “So what’s the idea here, I drop you off and then magic happens and everything is bright and sunshiney in my life all of a sudden?”

You don’t look away from the badlands out the window, the sagebrush and prairie zooming past us. “Oh I don’t know what’ll happen with your life, that’s up to you. This is just for me.”

“Of course,” I say, rolling my own eyes now. “Mama was right, only thinking about yourself.”

You cut a sharp glance at me, eyes narrowed. “You’re sure one to talk.”

I rub my right temple. “Fine, alright. We get you back there, and what? You fade into the sunset and finally find peace? You move on to the next life?”

“Damn, Ghost Whisperer, I ain’t dead. You’re just taking me home, alright? I can’t exactly walk myself there,” You say, gesturing down to your tiny body. “Not everything’s a story from your book.” Your eyes grow distant, and I know exactly what you’re remembering.

My mouth is a sharp, hard line. “You can sure as hell say that again.” I can practically hear your face shift, your smile grow, and I’m quick to cut you off.

“But don’t, smartass.”

You fold your arms as you sit back on your rock. “Who knew you’d grow up to be such a killjoy?”

I turn the radio up loud and watch the road and pretend you do not exist.

As the day turns to night and night grows darker, I flip my blinker and pull off the highway to a little roadside motel. You wait, impatiently of course, in the car while I get a room and bring my bags in. I set the box of rocks on the little table by the window and toss over a washcloth.

“Here,” I say. “A blanket.”

“I’m not a Polly Pocket,” you say, and we both bust out laughing in harmony once more. I could get used to this sound, I think.

I change into pajamas and get as comfortable as I can on the lumpy motel mattress. I hear you in your box, whispering to your rocks, and I flip over. “You should get some rest,” I say. “We’ve got a long drive tomorrow.”

“Mind your own damn business!” you call from your box, so I pull one of the pillows over my head and try to get some sleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night to your tiny hands rubbing my right temple, singing a familiar lullaby. “What the fuck are you doing?” I ask, sitting up and getting my bearings.

“You were having a nightmare,” you whisper, and now that I’m a little more awake I can see the tears in your eyes. “You were talking to her, and I just didn’t want you to be afraid.”

“Oh,” I sigh. “Well, thank you, then.”

You bite your lower lip. “You still have the nightmares?” you ask, looking a little bit afraid.

“Only sometimes,” I say, lying through my teeth. Something about the moonlight makes me realize just how small, how very very delicate, you are.

You wipe your eyes and force a grin. “Still can’t lie for shit, I see.”

“Yeah, not to save my life,” I grin back. “But it isn’t as bad now,” I try to reassure you. “I’m used to them, and I’m on some medications that help sometimes.”

Your lower lip wobbles, and I realize now you’ve been biting it to keep yourself from crying. I forgot that trick. “Are they still real scary?” you ask me, sitting back and wrapping your arms around your knees.

I take a deep breath. “I won’t try to lie again, they’re still a little scary. I guess it isn’t that they stop being scary, more like I know how to handle being scared now.” You nod, but I can tell you don’t really understand. “Want to sleep here for the rest of the night?” I ask, patting the pillow next to me.

“Hell no!” you say, and I can see you carefully fold up and put away all those feelings of fear and sadness. “I know how you toss and turn, you’re liable to squish me flat!”

I laugh. “Alright, suit yourself.” As you make your way back to the box and the miracle rocks, I quietly murmur a *thank you*. You don’t respond, but I can tell you heard me.

In the morning, back on the road, we sing along to Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell. I had forgotten how good it feels to let loose and sing to the open road, and with your sweet little voice next to me, I don’t feel so self-conscious. We both know every word, of course, and we pass hours this way. The sagebrush and antelope fly by and we sing and sing and sing, not caring how loud we are or how off-key we are or how free we are.

After a time, I hear a snuffle coming from your box, and I glance over from the driver's seat to see you wiping your eyes with the back of one hand. You meet my stare and I raise an eyebrow.

"I'm fine," you say. We both know you're lying, so I wait a few minutes to let things air out a bit. Quieter now, you venture a question. "Is it hard, living without Gran and Mama?"

I feel the air leave my lungs in a *whoosh*, and I blink a few times to clear my mind, my eyes. I bob my head back and forth, somewhere between a nod *yes* and a shake *no*. "Well, yeah, I guess. I miss Gran all the time. But you know, having Mama wasn't even really like having Mama."

Your brow furrows, and I long to reach out and smooth the space between your eyes with a gentle thumb, just like Mama used to when we cried. "What are you thinking about?" I ask.

You sit back on your rock, hug your knees, and wobble for a moment. I know not to push – you're gathering your thoughts, and that takes time. Finally, you tell me. "You remember when Gran made her cherry pie for the Fourth of July?" I nod, *yes*. "Remember how she overworked the crust and it seized all up on her? So she took the rolling pin, remember, and she shook it all around and

banged all up on the crust and finally got so mad that she threw the damn thing through the picture window in the kitchen. Remember that?"

And I feel as though I'm there – dancing on the front porch, twirling to the music of the wind in the cottonwood trees, twirling in a sudden rain of glass shards that cut into my hands, my arms, my feet. I still have a scar halfway down my right foot, and it tingles on the gas pedal as I sit inside the memory. As I cried, Mama came outside with peroxide and a kitchen towel. She used tweezers to get every single piece of glass out, then she cleaned me all up and gave every single cut a kiss. I sat on the porch swing and watched as she swept up the glass, and when she was finished we both went back inside and I helped her remake the pie crust and clean the kitchen, Gran nowhere to be found.

We're both silent for a long while, you and me, living inside this particular memory as the highway becomes a dirt road. "Yeah," I finally say, no louder than a church mouse. "It's real hard living without them both." You nod; this isn't news to you, and I wonder if those tears you cried belonged to me in the first place.

Before too long, we're turning down the lane that I know by heart, those two cottonwoods looming in the distance. I fear what we will find on the other side, or what we won't find, but you seem to feel nothing but excitement as you bounce from your rocks to the window and back again. I don't want to scare you, so I force a smile to cover my face and slam on the gas, ready to tear through the gaping wound of the past and bring you home.

My car hits the little dirt hill just so, ramps up and off and coasts through the air for an impossible second – flies between the two cottonwood trees – and I whoop with pure joy and pump my fist in the sky. My euphoria is short-lived, though, and we slam back to earth with an unsettling *thunk*, all the rocks jumping into the air and clattering back into the box in a jumble. I slam on the brakes and take a deep breath, over the threshold now, back into this world I once couldn't live without.

“Sorry about that, I don't know what came over me,” I say, grinning sheepishly. You do not respond, and I look over to see what's wrong. “Shit, where'd you go? Did you fall out? Shit, goddamn shit!” I throw the car into park and dig through the rocks, look under the seat, into the back, the crack between

the seat and the center console, the floormat, everywhere. You are nowhere to be found. You are absolutely gone.

I get out of the car, clutching the box of rocks like a life preserver, and slam the door behind me. I am alone here, just me and the rocks and this land that used to hold so much meaning. So much magic. I feel a low sort of wail bubble up through my stomach and out of my mouth, and though I try to bite it back, chew it down, it refuses to be stopped. I look all around, panicked, as my keening grows louder – at the trees that are just trees and the river that is just a river and the house that is just a dilapidated building. I feel no magic here.

I pick up a rock and feel the cold, round weight of it in the palm of my hand, then I tip my head back and cry and cry and cry. A few birds, startled by the human invasion, take flight through a hole in the roof of the house. The river babbles behind me. My heart beats deafeningly in my chest.

Through my tears, I see the large kitchen window looking down on me like a dirty eye. I hurl the rock in my hand and it sails, catching the air perfectly, crashing into the window and shattering glass everywhere. “Where are you?” I scream.

I grab another rock from the box and throw it pointlessly in the direction of the cottonwood trees. “Where did you go?” I throw another rock toward the river, then the lilac bushes, then the barn. “You said you’d always be here, so where the hell are you? Where were you when I needed you? How could you have left me alone?” One after another, miracle rocks soar into the night – some leaving destruction in their wake and others landing uselessly on the ground. I only stop when a single rock remains and I fall to my knees, clutching the rock to my chest and pressing it hard against my skin as if it will calm the panicked rhythm beating within. “How can you leave me so alone?” I sob into the rock and the night and the memories.

I let the gravity of everything push me back into the gravel and I spread my limbs wide like I might make a snow angel. Minutes pass, or maybe hours, and afternoon turns to evening turns to night. I do not move. I do not breathe, not until the moon hangs low and full in the sky above me, and I can’t help but remember nights spent out here with Gran and Mama both, dancing in the dewy midnight air to the light of the full moon. As I jumped and spun wildly beside these two unknowable women, I would reach my arms up and I swear to god my

fingertips would graze the moon's soft, velvet underbelly. Now, laying here on the ground looking up at her, it seems somehow once more within my reach.

I stand on shaky legs and raise my arms up, impossibly up above my head and the barn and the trees, until I finally skim the edges of that midnight moon. Staring down at my fingertips in awe, I hear a thousand Meadowlarks call out all at once, even though it's the middle of the night. And then I remember.

I am off and dashing across the rocks in the river before I can think twice, hopping lightly and gracefully from one to the other without so much as an errant drop of water landing on my shoes. When I am firmly on the rock island, river coursing all around me as I stand tall in its calm center, I smile and the corners of my face crack like they haven't stretched this way in years. We take the last miracle rock and place it gently on a bed of moss and reeds, tucking our memories around it like a blanket. Finally coming to a stop, after all these years and pains, we lay down on the rocks and allow the river to rush up all around us and hold us tight. We hold it right back, and we feel seedlings sprout up and reach for the fresh air as they grow out of the new cracks across our face. Gran always said that your growing happens in the place that knows you best, you see, and we came back here to do just that.

Grow A/New

“Enough.”

And so she went

to her work of

digging

A new hole

for a new

Her

Life

was what happened to her

As she slept

in the hole

new growth appeared

A little

Dirt

Water

Moonlight

Wish
that's all it takes.

Tonight
her task
is to grow

Some

Motivation

so that no

dishes sit dirty

in sinks of soapy

Unattended

Water

and

No task will need

be asked for

but will

just be

Done.

The problem
though
always there is

A

Problem

Isn't there?

The problem though
was that

The next

day she

Would

Wake

with a whirlwind

of activity

of movement

of motivation

And so they will

Next ask

Her

to grow

Some

Calm.

breath/howl

breathe

In the cool, dim light of evening, we walk the dusk-wet streets of town. Matt veers to bump into me, and I giggle helplessly in reply. The streetlights flicker in and out, dancing along the puddles lining the streets. The entire evening is perfumed with the faint smell of rain.

“Thanks for walking me home,” I say, swinging my flute case absentmindedly. “I hadn’t realized how late it had gotten.”

“Don’t mention it,” Matt replies, all grins and *who-me?* shrugs. “Can’t have you walking home alone in the dark now, can we?”

I suppress a shiver, at what he’s implying or maybe just the chilly rain. Either way, Matt is ready with his letterman jacket, and as he drapes it over my shoulders the smell of rain is replaced by the distinctly Matt smell of leather and sweat.

“How chivalrous.” I pull it tight around my shoulders. “You’re such a nice guy.”

He grins. “I try.”

We fall into silence for a few blocks. After a while, though, the silence feels awkward and I search for something to restart the conversation. “High school band is a lot more serious than middle school band,” I finally say, then want to kick myself. I’ve gone and reminded him how immature and inexperienced I am, and he’s probably wishing he’d left me to walk home alone and found Ashley S. or some other senior instead.

“You’ll get used to it,” he responds, nice as ever, shaking me from my thought spiral. “You know, you aren’t like the other freshmen girls. You’re so…” Awkward? Hopeless? “Mature.” I grin, hope I’m not blushing too fiercely. Take that, Ashley S.

As we near my house, the streetlights appear further apart and the windows we pass are illuminated less and less with the light of occupancy. I live in the part of town where the houses want a little more distance from one another, and the people do, too. As we pass a darkened alley, Matt stops abruptly in his tracks.

“My house is just down there,” I say, turning away from him and gesturing along the inky lane. Matt doesn’t move an inch, and I start to spiral again. Surely someone like Matt has someplace to be, surely he’s tired of

indulging me. “If you need to get out of here, though, I’m fine walking the rest of the way alone.”

“Come on, Mara,” he says from behind me. “I know a shortcut.”

“But my house is right down there,” I say, my forehead crinkling in confusion.

I feel more than hear Matt’s laughter as he steps closer. Is it his breath at the back of my neck raising all of the little hairs? I know this is what I was hoping for, what I wanted, but I’m beginning to doubt myself.

I turn to face him, to tell him that suddenly I’m not feeling so well, but the look on his face makes me freeze. I clutch my flute case to my chest, bolstered by the comforting familiarity of the rounded edges and time-worn leather. All at once, the night feels stiflingly dark.

“I think I should really...” I begin to sputter, but Matt cuts me short.

“I thought you wanted me to walk you home, Mara?”

“Well, yeah,” I say, trying to maintain a lighthearted tone. “And that’s my home!”

“Come on, quit messing around. I saw the note you passed your little friend in class.”

Oh god, the note. He read the note. “Oh my god I am so embarrassed,” I whisper. “Look, Matt, she was telling me about this guy she was dating and asking me all these questions, and I was just –”

He smiles the smile of someone older, more experienced and smarter, and places his hand on my waist. “Mara, I get it. You’ve never done this before and you’re nervous. I was nervous too, my first time. But you don’t need to be, I’m going to take good care of you.”

“Matt, no, I’m sorry if I led you on or something, but I... I just want to go home.”

He pulls me closer. “I won’t tell anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about. You need to relax – I told you, I read the note. I know what you want.”

I feel my heart beating in my ears. If there *were* any sounds to hear the pulsing would drown them out, but we are completely, silently alone.

“Matt, no,” I say, more quietly than I intended.

Matt covers my mouth with one finger, the ghost of his entire hand threateningly close. “Just stop talking.” His grip on my waist tightens.

Looking at his face, the anger, entitlement, I see written across it, I know what’s about to happen. I realize this is my last chance to get out of here, my last

chance to act. Panicking, I bring my flute case up, up, until it connects with his nose in a dull *thud*. As a faint trickle of blood starts to run down his cheek, I wonder if I have just made a very large mistake.

“You *bitch*,” Matt breathes into my ear.

Before I can react, he’s pulling me into the alley. Matt does some sort of move I’ve seen him use in his wrestling matches and my ankle twists and gives out and then I’m lying on the gravel. I can feel every piece of rock pressing into my back and I think of the countless little indents they’ll leave behind on my skin. Matt lowers himself down, covering my body with his own, but my eyes are shut tight and I try to imagine he is something – anything – else. A heavy blanket. A pile of coats. A dog.

A howl echoes through the night nearby, very nearby, and some buried fractal within me aches to howl back. As I open my mouth, though, Matt covers it with his hand and I wait to feel him tug at my pants or to unbutton his own. Instead, he is perfectly still. I hear him gasp, give a strangled little cry, and then it starts to rain.

Except the rain is warm – hot even, and sticky, falling on just my face. I choke as it floods over me, up my nose and into my mouth between Matt’s now-

limp fingers. It tastes metallic and thick, nothing like the raindrops I used to catch on my tongue as a little girl. Then suddenly, the pressure is gone and my body is my own once more. I lay still for a few breaths, like a rabbit in a crosshair, before I feel my muscles begin to wake up. I wipe the sticky wetness from my eyes and see a world reborn. Matt is nowhere, nothing, completely disappeared save for that letterman jacket – a jacket that now looks like a prop from a slasher flick, saturated with dark, syrupy blood. I spare him half a thought before I see her.

My mother, hunched, breathing heavy, covered in gore, looks almost beautiful. With the moonlight bouncing off the sticky blood covering her hands, her face, her entirety, she has taken on an ethereal glow. I inhale deeply and breathe out “Mom?” even though I can sense that she isn’t entirely my mom. She isn’t entirely not my mom either, though, so I reach for her like a child waking from a nightmare.

“Breathe, Mara.”

breathe

She pulls me to my feet and something tells me to follow her home, so I do. Something tells me to howl into the night, so I do.

howl

~

Later that night, I stay in the shower until the water going down the drain changes from muddy red to clear and clean, until I hear Dad shout up, kindly but firmly, about the water bill. When I finally limp into my bedroom, Mom is waiting for me on my bed with a neatly folded pile of pajamas next to her. She's cleaned herself up a little, too, but I think she's probably spent most of her energy cleaning up the mess outside. I change into the pajamas and allow her to pull me into her arms like I'm a little girl again.

"Mara?" she asks, smoothing back my hair from my face. I groan in response. "Why don't you get under the covers, honey. Maybe I can sit with you for a while.

"Yes please," I squeak out, and when she tucks me in I feel the special kind of safety only she can bring settle in around me like a blanket of its own. I feel like I'm going to cry, from the night or the pain still pulsing through me, or maybe because here, alone with my mom, I can finally let everything go.

"Why did he do that, Mom? Why did he try to..." I trail off, trying to ask the impossible question even though I know there could never be a good enough answer.

She wipes away my tears gently, so gently, in contrast but also somehow completely in line with the version of her I saw in the alley. “You know those stories I used to tell you when you were a little girl?” she asks. I nod. “I think it might be time for you to hear them again.”

* * *

(Alright my love, it’s time for bed. Would you like to hear a story? No, not that one darling. You’re old enough now that I have some new stories to tell you.)

Once upon a time, there was a wolf. The wolf, driven from the world of man by their anger and fear, had retreated into the forest to make a home for herself amongst the trees and meadows. She was happy there, and spent her days swimming in the crystal-blue ponds and chasing rays of sun that broke through the canopy of leaves to dapple the forest floor.

(Yes love, just like you! Now listen closely, this story is important.)

One day, just as the wolf was settling into a bed of wildflowers for an afternoon rest, she heard something she had hoped never to hear again. The voice of a man entered her forest, and she was afraid. Slinking low beneath the flowers, she crawled to the edge of her meadow to investigate the sound. There, traipsing through the wood hand-in-hand, was a little girl in a blood-red cloak and a tall

man with a gun strapped to his back. The wolf knew what this weapon meant – she had felt the searing cut of its bullet against her skin as she fled into the woods so very long ago.

(There, there, my darling. I know this story is a bit scary, but the scary stories often have the most to teach us. Cuddle close to me; it will be alright.)

The wolf was quite worried when he saw the little girl accompanied by the huntsman, and felt deep down in her core – in the place all wolves carry their knowing – that something was not right. She followed the man and the little girl in the red cloak through the woods until they left the path behind and reached a simple log cabin.

The little girl withdrew her hand from the huntsman's and said, "Mister huntsman, this isn't my grandmother's house."

He merely patted her little red hood and said, "No, little girl, it isn't. It is my house, and I have something to show you inside."

The wolf's fur rose up all along the ridge of her back. She had lived among men long enough to know what the huntsman planned to show the little girl. She crept closer to the cabin and peered through a window, and when her worst fears were confirmed, she –

(Her fears? Well... that, perhaps, is a story for another day. The important thing to know is that the little girl was in grave danger. Listen, now.)

When her worst fears were confirmed, the wolf threw herself against the window, not caring if the glass broke into knives that cut her skin, not caring that the huntsman now held the weapon she so feared. She only cared about the little girl and keeping her safe. The wolf was through the window and across the room in two great bounds and, in his great surprise, was able to bat the gun from the huntsman's hands. As the little girl looked on in awe, the wolf dragged the huntsman from the bed and swallowed him down with a few snaps of her jaw. She turned to the little girl who, unafraid in the presence of her protector, reached her arms out to the wolf. In turn, the wolf lowered herself to the ground to allow the little girl to climb upon her back.

As they moved through the woods as one, the little girl peppered the great wolf with her curiosity.

“Lady wolf, what big ears you have!”

“All the better to hear huntsmen with, my child.”

“Lady wolf, what big eyes you have!”

“All the better to see the beauty of the free and open forest with, my child.”

“Lady wolf, what big paws you have!”

“All the better to carry you to safety with, my child.”

“Lady wolf, what big teeth you have!”

“All the better to protect with, my child.”

At this, both the wolf and the little girl laughed.

“Thank you, lady wolf. I feel that with you, nothing bad will ever happen to me again.”

At this, the wolf grew serious. “My darling girl, I will not always be here to protect you. In this world, there will always be more huntsmen. There will always be more danger.” The little girl looked frightened, and the wolf took on a kinder tone. “It is indeed frightening, but I have a secret for you – a secret you can use to protect yourself when you feel you are in danger. Would you like to learn to be a wolf, my child?”

“Oh, yes, lady wolf! All the better to be myself!”

And the wolf nodded her great head and agreed to show the little girl the way.

-- -- --

breathe

From across the quad, something catches my eye. I look up to find a vaguely familiar face watching me with a crooked grin. I grin back, an automatic response, and he ambles over. Folding the page of my book down and closing it in my lap, I lean back onto my hands to gaze up at the man now standing in front of me.

“Hi,” he says, waving a little.

I suppress a giggle. “Hi?” I respond, more question than greeting.

“I, uh, I’m Jack. We’re in Robertson’s poly-sci class together.”

“Oh, right! You sit a few rows in front of me and always ask very... insightful questions,” I smile up at him. He’s honestly pretty cute, standing there aw-shucks with his hands in his pockets. And it’s been so long, *so* long, since I’ve tried this sort of thing. My stomach feels fuzzy, like the static that plays when a TV is set to the wrong channel. I don’t know that I can tell the difference between fear and excitement anymore. I picture myself taking his glasses off, running my fingers through his messy brown hair. I picture myself gathering my things and running very, very far away from this moment.

I make a quick decision because I've been staring up at him for far too long now and he looks a little confused. "I'm Mara. Do you want to sit?" I ask, patting the grass next to me to disguise the slight tremor in my hands.

"Yes! I mean yeah, that would be cool." He folds his long legs awkwardly and sits beside me, and the care with which he lowers himself to the ground breaks my heart a little. I haven't met a guy before who has treated the space around me with such care.

I can't keep my laugh to myself this time, but Jack doesn't seem to mind. He just grins that crooked grin like he's won the lottery. I could get used to that smile, I think. To being someone's idea of a prize. And I do.

After a week or maybe a month, we walk together hand-in-hand through the rapidly darkening streets back to campus. With Jack, time has taken on a new, blubbery sort of structure for me, and I wonder if this is what happiness is. As we walk, I notice the streetlights glancing off puddles dotting the street and shiver in a moment of brief recognition. Jack, misunderstanding, takes off his cardigan and carefully, almost like he is approaching a baby deer, drapes it around my shoulders.

Remember, I tell myself. *Remember where you are. When you are.* Fifth date. Walking back to my dorm. I breathe in and smell Jack's cologne, sort of earthy and peppery, and the dusty scent of books that follows him home from the library at the end of his shift each day. I like this smell. I like this guy. I still feel a little wobbly, a little caught between then and now, but I'm okay. I'm okay.

I slow and move to return Jack's cardigan as we approach my building. "I think I'd better turn in for the night."

Jack's frown is small, worried. "Oh, sure, okay. No problem, but can I at least walk you up to your dorm?" I hesitate. "You look a little unsteady there and I want to make sure you get in okay."

I think about saying no, about running upstairs and giving my roommate some excuse and climbing into bed to call my mom, but I like the warm comfort of the cardigan and the light, easy manner we've been sharing. I'm reluctant to let go of either.

"Okay, sure. That would be nice."

As we ride the elevator up to my dorm, Jack inches closer and closer until he is able to grasp my hand firmly in his own once more. I smile weakly. What felt chaste and sweet earlier now feels like an invasion, but Jack is cute and nice

and I can already feel the sharp knife of memory fading, so I leave my hand in his.

When we reach my doorway, I finally give back the cardigan. “Well, I’ll see you in class Tuesday,” I say, moving to open my door. Noticing Jack’s look of surprise, I keep talking even though we’d already agreed on ending the night here. “My roommate is probably asleep, and I’m pretty tired too, so... you know.”

I open the door, hoping he will take the hint.

The room is perfectly empty with every light on and shining brightly. “Damnit, Annie...” I mutter, flipping one of the lamps off. As I bend down to remove my shoes, I hear a distinct *click* and realize Jack has followed me inside and closed the door.

“Jack, I’m really tired,” I repeat. “I’ve got this test to study for, and –,”

He cuts me off. “I won’t stay long. I’ll even help you study if you want.” He smiles softly. “We had such a good night together. I just don’t want it to end yet.”

My head starts to throb a little. We did have a good night together. All our nights, and days, too, for that matter, have been good. I dig my fingernails into the

soft meat of the palm of my hand, and the bright pain distracts me from my head and the throbbing and the memories. Surely, I'm overreacting.

“Okay. Yes.” I sit down on the edge of my bed. “I can study later. Do you want to put on a movie or something?” I smile a small smile and reach for my laptop. “My mom lets me use her Netflix.”

He sits next to me on the bed and the gravity of his weight pulls me closer to him than I want to be. “Netflix, huh?” he says, raising his eyebrows.

I realize my mistake, the unintended double-meaning of my words, a beat too late as his mouth crashes into mine. I pull back as much as I can. “Jack, no, I—” but he closes the gap and kisses me again. The pepper of his cologne is all I can smell now, crowding out all my other senses, drowning me. I push him away, hoping he gets the message, and scan back through the events of the night in search of what I might have said or done to indicate that this was what I wanted from him.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, still gentle, still soft, still far too close to me.

“I am so sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, but I don’t want to do this. I think you should go.”

“Mara, come on. I’ve tried to be patient, to wait for you to work through whatever you’ve had going on, but enough is enough. This is our *fifth date*. I like you. I know you like me. We’re both adults, we both know where this is going.”

Are we? Do we? Have I known this moment was coming from the start? Have I been hoping it would, way back in some inaccessible corner of my mind?

“No,” I whisper. “I didn’t know, I didn’t want,” I start, but he’s moving close again and kissing me again and drowning me again with his bitter, pepper smell and all I can do is push, push, push him back, and as he crashes off the foot of the bed and against the opposite wall, the acrid taste of fear begins to transform into a steady, burning fire deep down in my stomach – a fire that feels ancient and so, so familiar,

I stand and look down at him. “I said *no*.”

“Mara, what the hell?” his face is full of anger, too, but it is an anger that is altogether different from mine and a far cry from the fear I now realize I am searching for.

I know how to transform fear to anger, I think. Maybe I should try it the other way around.

So I raise my fist hand paw and punch slap slash him across the face and
my knuckles fingers claws slice through his skin like it's made of delicate silk and
the blood is so completely everywhere and I am moving in ways I didn't know I
could and the slashing feels good complete right and I feel I'm about to explode
and I do and

fear not fear anger power

snap tear don't make that any sound

anger power delight

we are made for

this so perfectly made for

wildflowers in our fur

rip claw blood everywhere

sun dappled on the ground warm so warm

consume heave howl

breathe

fresh meadow air

breathe

breathe

howl

breathe

~

I'm jolted awake by a shriek and slowly open my eyes to a pounding headache and a panicked roommate.

"Mara, what the hell happened in here?" Annie asks, voice rising in pitch and volume.

I try to gather my wits and find the source of Annie's distress, but I feel buzzy and lightheaded like I'm waking up from a night out.

She's standing in the doorway to our dorm, staring panicked at my bed. At me. blood dots my comforter like a pointillist painting from my art history class and my clothes are torn, stained rusty brown, and dried stiff. I groan, covering my face with my hands, unable to escape that familiar metallic tangy smell and its reminder that I need to learn to clean up my messes.

"Shit, Annie, I'm sorry. I tried to clean things up, but I was just so tired."

"Mara, I'm not fucking around – what happened?" Annie asks, looking closer. "Oh my god, Mara. Did something happen? Did – were you..." Annie trails off and covers her gaping, horrified mouth.

I blink at her and realize all at once what this scene must look like from her perspective. I open my mouth to calm her down, but I notice a bit of skin stuck between my teeth. I wiggle it free with my tongue like it's a popcorn kernel and swallow it before speaking. "No, god, nothing like that. Give me a second and I can explain," I say, but I don't continue. I just sit there, frozen as stiff as my clothes, searching for the right words.

"Okay, listen, girl. I know we aren't close, but I've got you, okay? I'm here for you." I watch Annie carefully make her way to my bedside, reach out, and tentatively place a hand on my shoulder.

And I'm crying, just like that. There's something so sisterly to her hand that I begin to shake with muffled sobs.

"Oh, fuck it," Annie says, throwing her arms all the way around me and holding tight. "It's going to be okay, Mara. You're going to be okay."

"I'm sorry," I choke out. "I – I don't have a lot of friends, and I'm not used to this kind of thing, and I don't even know why I'm crying but –" she saves me from babbling on with a gentle shushing sound that reminds me of my mom, and suddenly I know exactly how I'll explain things to her.

“Annie?” I try to calm myself down with a few deep breaths. “Can I tell you a story my mom used to tell me?” I know exactly how to repay her kindness.

She looks confused, worried, but she nods her head *yes*. “Whatever you need, girl.”

I know exactly how to keep her from worrying about that unspeakable something happening again.

* * *

Once upon a time, there was a

(That’s right, my darling. You know exactly who this story is about.)

There was a wolf. The wolf was very worried because she was being hunted by the men of the village near her woods. The men, though they would never admit it, were afraid of the wolf. They feared her strength and her power. They feared her wild beauty. Most of all, though, they feared her howl. From men of other villages, they had heard stories of a single wolf howling in the night and the sheep that would disappear in its wake.

So, this wolf

(Yes, my love. *Our* wolf.)

This wolf knew that she must find a way to keep herself safe from the would-be hunters. She decided that her only choice would be to disguise herself as a sheep and live among the men – right under their noses. The men would never fear a sheep, after all, with their soft wool and kind eyes. The men saw the sheep as simple, as belonging to them, and the sheep welcomed this belief and the safety it brought.

The wolf made her way around the field where the sheep liked to graze in the sweet spring afternoons and gathered clumps of wool stuck to the branches and thorns of rose bushes. After a time, she had gathered quite a lot of wool, so she returned to her hiding spot in the forest and wove herself new clothing – sheep’s clothing.

(Well no, love, I don’t suppose she liked the itchy wool any more than you, but sometimes we do what we must to survive.)

Clad now in her sheep’s clothing, the wolf returned to the edge of the field and, when the men were looking elsewhere, entered the group of sheep. With her great head lowered and her mighty shoulders hunched, the men had no clue that there was a wolf in the middle of their flock. They stayed in their watchful

positions around the edges of the field, looking out for a wolf who was already in their midst.

For a time, the wolf was content among the sheep. She missed running through the woods, howling at the moon, savoring the freedom of a night alone in a field of wildflowers, but at least she was safe. Or, so she thought.

After a while, the wolf began to notice that every few nights, one or two sheep would disappear from the flock. The next day, the men would return to the field to watch their sheep, patting their stomachs and talking to one another about the marvelous meal they'd shared. The wolf realized, then, that even here among the sheep there was no safety to be found from man, for he hunted wolf and sheep alike.

The wolf knew she must escape this place before she, too, was selected for dinner, and she did not want to leave the sheep in danger when she left. She gathered them around her, keeping quiet and low to the ground. "Listen to me, sheep," she whispered. "I have something very important to tell you."

The sheep would not listen, though. They laughed at the wolf's foolishness, telling her that they were perfectly content to graze the sweet grass

forever. “We’re safe here,” they told her. “We would be foolish to leave the safe and watchful gaze of the men.”

The wolf knew what might happen to the sheep if she left them behind, so she swallowed her fear and there she remained. Until, one day, that fear was realized.

One night, as she pretended to sleep alongside the rest of the flock, a man crept up after the others had gone home. The wolf heard him rustling through the sheep until he reached her and bent down, making as if to lead her away from the rest of the flock. She saw the glint of a knife at his belt and knew what he intended for her, so she threw off her sheep’s clothing and leapt upon him, pinning the man to the earth. She made quick work of him, tearing out his throat before his hand even reached for the knife.

(Yes, my dear, I suppose it is quite yucky. As a woman, though, you will need a strong stomach. Take a deep breath and you’ll feel alright, I promise.)

Suddenly, the sheep surrounded the wolf and demanded she answer their questions.

“How did you do that?”

“Why did you kill him?”

“Have you been a wolf this entire time?”

“We were safe before, but now they’ll stop protecting us! What are we to do?”

The wolf took a deep breath. “Quiet, all!” she called above the fray, and the sheep listened for her voice was mighty. “You may have thought you were safe here, letting these men own you, but you were not. Have you noticed your numbers dwindling? Your friends disappearing?”

The sheep looked nervously at one another, and the wolf continued. “This man mistook me for a sheep and planned to make me his dinner. I had no choice but to protect myself from his attack. I will leave the village of man now, and will not return. Will you come with me?”

The sheep spoke quietly to one another. “We are afraid,” they finally responded. “You may be able to protect yourself because you are a wolf, but we are just sheep! We have no claws or sharp teeth!”

The wolf looked at them kindly, knowingly. “I shed my sheep’s clothing and became a wolf tonight, just as I did long ago. Someone shared the ancient secret with me, and I am here to share it with you.”

The sheep looked at one another, doubting the wolf at first, but something about her words burrowed deep beneath their skin and awoke long-forgotten places within them.

One brave sheep stepped forward. “We can become wolves?” she asked.

The wolf smiled serenely. “Anyone can.”

As the moon climbed higher in the night sky, the men were called back to the field by the sound of howling from the forest all around them.

(Oh, my sweet love, that is the mightiest howl I have ever heard! Keep practicing, yes? You’ll need it someday.)

As the men came up the hill, they looked about the field, astonished to find their companion alone and bloody in the grass – not a single sheep to be found. In their place lay a flock’s worth of wool, discarded throughout the field. The men, quite nervous, examined the bundles of wool, believing them at first to be the hides of their slaughtered flock left behind by the beast they presumed to have killed their companion.

When the men looked closer, though, they realized that these were not hides at all, but rather carefully woven wool clothing.

“Why, these aren’t dead sheep – they’re sheep’s clothing!” one man exclaimed.

Howls echoed out once more from the woods surrounding the field, and the men looked at one another anxiously.

They suddenly had far more than one wolf to fear.

-- -- --

breathe

I hear a rap on the side of my cubicle and pull my head up from the legal briefs on my desk. My eyes have been staring at paper for so long that they take a moment to focus on the woman standing in front of me.

“Hey, Jenna, what’s up?” I ask distractedly, eager to return to my work. I’ve had what feels like the longest week of all time, and the only thing I want to do is get out of here and go home.

“Mr. Collins wants to see you in his office,” she says before turning and clicking away on her heels.

I shrug on the blazer I’ve folded neatly over the back of my desk chair and stand. At his door, I pause, waiting for Mr. Collins to finish up his phone call.

When he notices me, he waves me in.

“Alright, honey... Yes, I promise... Okay, ye- Yes, okay, honey, I have to go now.” *Click*. “Sorry about that,” he grins at me conspiratorially, making a *blah blah blah* gesture with his hand. “You know how women are.”

I stand there for a few moments, not willing to grant this a response. Finally, I prompt him. “You wanted to speak with me, sir?”

Mr. Collins waves at the chair on the other side of his desk and folds his hands. I try desperately not to fidget as I sit down; I’ve never been a fan of a pencil skirt. “How much do you know about the Stevenson case?” he asks.

I raise my eyebrows. “I’ve been working on it since it came in, sir, so I’d say I’m pretty well-versed.”

He grins. “Great.” He rifles through a drawer for a few moments before pulling out a file folder and tossing it across the desk to me. “I’m heading into the city this weekend for a last-minute arbitration, and I could use some help. I’d like you to come with me.”

I open the folder to have something to do with my hands and pretend to scan the documents inside. It doesn’t seem as if I can say no, does it? How do you answer a question that hasn’t been asked?

I look up and give a smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "Thank you so much for the opportunity, Mr. Collins. It would be my pleasure."

"Call me Chris," he says.

Three days later, I follow Mr. Collins – *Chris* – out of the hotel conference room, bleary eyed and ready to collapse on the queen-sized bed waiting for me upstairs. As I walk toward the elevators, though, Chris places a confident hand on the small of my back and steers me toward the hotel bar.

"Come have a drink with me," he says with crinkled eyes and a face that has clearly never heard the word *no* before.

I'm so tired, so ready for those crisp hotel sheets and a bathtub with a working faucet and the generic drone of a sitcom to lull me to sleep. I'm so tired, yes, but I'm also curious, so I can't help but allow myself to be led into the dimly lit, mostly empty hotel bar.

I try to look graceful climbing onto a stool too tall for my short frame while Chris orders two gin and tonics without asking me what I'd like.

"How long have you worked for Behrens and Associates, Mara?" Chris asks once the drinks have arrived, throwing his back without ever breaking eye

contact. I hold his gaze where it meets me from the other side of the half-moon of his glass.

“About a year, I think. No, wait – almost two years now. Wow,” I muse.

“I guess I sort of lost track of time.”

Chris watches me take a small sip of my own drink. “And do you like working with us?”

I try not to look sarcastic when I smile back at him. “It’s a great job, and I’m grateful to have it, sir.”

“Come on, Mara, cut the bullshit.” Chris sets his already empty glass down and motions for the bartender to bring him another.

I take another small sip. “What do you mean?”

“Mara,” he says flatly. “You’re what, twenty-four, twenty-five years old?”

“Twenty-seven, sir.”

“Alright, so you’re twenty-seven years old, attractive and smart, and you’re wasting away doing a bunch of lawyers’ dirty work in a cubicle next to Marcy the cat lady. Why?” He leans forward, placing his chin in his hand. I think he’s trying to create an air of camaraderie, but our age gap and the fact that, despite his instructions otherwise, I call him *sir* makes that difficult.

“I, uh, well, I wasn’t able to finish my undergrad. There were...
extenuating circumstances.”

He nods knowingly, though he really has no idea. “So basically, you
wanted to be a lawyer, and this is as close as you think you can get?”

I throw back the rest of my drink in one go, mirroring his earlier motions
as I realize how very much I do not want to be having this conversation. I feel it
hit me almost immediately. “I mean, I’m happy with my job. It’s a fine job. I live
in a fine apartment. It’s quiet. I like quiet.” I know I’m rambling, but I’ve been on
this barstool too many times and I don’t have the energy tonight.

breathe

smile

sheeps clothing

Chris’s face is a mask of composure, and I know exactly what he’s
thinking as he leans even closer. “Now, Mara, I don’t usually bother with the
paralegals, but I think you’re special. If you play your cards right, the firm could
help you finish your undergrad, maybe even go to law school.”

I sit back on my barstool, trying to decide how seriously to take him.
“Wow, that’s so... generous of you, Chris. I don’t really know how to respond to that, except to say thank you.”

“Hey, I’m a nice guy!” he says, laying it on a little too thick. “Say you’ll at least think about it.”

I nod. I suppose I will.

A few drinks later, Chris and I wait for the elevator together. I feel a pit in my stomach telling me not to get on this elevator, hear my mother and my college RA and my high school gym coach telling me to turn and walk away, but the doors ding and open and what am I to do except follow Chris inside? Once we’re in and beginning our slow, upward climb, I lean back against the wall.

“Chris?” I ask. He smiles. “Maybe when we get back, we can schedule a time to talk more about what you were saying earlier – about me going back to school?” I hate the question in my voice, I hate that even a small part of me believes him, but I can’t help myself.

He chuckles. “Sure, let’s get that on the books. In the meantime, though, I’ve got some suggestions for how you can get the ball rolling.” He takes a few ambling steps closer to me, a familiar look on his face.

Why did I bring this up? “Oh, you know, I’m sure it can wait until we get home.”

Why did I believe him? “I’m pretty tired and just want to head to bed.” Why did I get on this elevator? “Come to think of it, we should probably include Mrs. Behrens in the conversation, whenever we circle back.” Why did I come on this trip in the first place? “I’ll shoot her an email before I head to bed.” Why is this elevator so fucking slow?

Chris steps closer, ignoring everything I’ve said, and firmly presses me against the back of the elevator. “Come on Mara, you’re a smart girl. You know how this goes, don’t you?” I wish I didn’t.

“Stop. No,” I tell him, just the way the pamphlets and the videos tell us to. He simply leans down to kiss my neck, still ignoring every single word I say, and I don’t even bother to shove him away. “I’m getting really tired of this, you know?” I mutter.

“What?” Chris asks blearily from somewhere near my collarbone.

“Oh, never mind,” I reply. “You clearly wouldn’t listen anyway.” I shake my head slightly, then shove him away from me, hard, before pushing the emergency stop button.

Chris is frozen, shocked into stillness on the ground where he landed.

“Listen, I do know how this goes, and I’m frankly sick of the whole thing. You’re going to try to reason with me, then beg, or maybe try to run, but I’ve had a very long day and want to go take a bath, so can we just skip to the good stuff?” I can hear my mother again, this time chastising me (This is your shield, Mara, not your weapon.), but I don’t think she ever learned how to turn fear into anger, not like I did. If she had, she’d know there is no difference between the two – shield, weapon, they’re all the same.

Chris tries to push himself to his feet. “Mara, I – I don’t understand what’s happening,” he croaks, sounding every one of his fifty-five years and then some.

“You don’t understand?” I ask, my voice rising. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand why you all think you can just take and take without any consequences.” I shake my head again, words impossible now as acid climbs the back of my throat and my stomach starts to boil. There are no words for this feeling – only action, or allowing it to burn me alive.

I look Chris dead in the eyes and wait for him to recognize the primal fire in my gaze. When he does, I smile, and then

crouch lunge snarl

grass rustling in a field
stop crying stop no sound familiar
power anger joy joy joy
snap slice sweet sweet ribbons on the floor
crunch shake
this is how
we win
our freedom
bat laugh roll sing
(Don't play with your food, now.)
blood red war paint head hands feet tail
wildflowers wool
devour howl
howl
howl
howl
breathe
(howl)

~

In my hotel room, I sit on the bathroom floor, wrapped up in a fluffy towel. The air is still steamy from my bath and the fibers feel itchy against my skin. I ache to rip it off and run, naked, as far from the city as I can. Instead, I pick up the hotel phone and dial the only number I have memorized.

My dad answers. "Hello?"

"Dad," I breathe, barely a whisper.

tired so tired

"Mara? Honey, it's the middle of the night, are you okay?"

breathe breathe breathe wildflowers

"Do you have a second?"

I can hear him settle in, picture him sitting back in his favorite recliner and crossing one ankle over the other and holding the phone to his ear so very, very carefully. "I've always got time for you, little moon. What's on your mind?"

breathe

"Do you – do you think you could tell me one of Mom's stories?" I ask, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Oh, Mara,” he inhales sharply. “I don’t know that I remember them. They were never really meant for me, you know?” His voice sounds like regret and worry. My mouth tastes like oceans. “In the morning, I’ll poke around in the attic for her journals, how about that?”

I let the towel drop and lay flat on the tile floor, willing the cool into my skin. “Sounds great, Dad. Thanks.” He’s so good, always so good, that I never know how to act around him. If the world was full of men like my dad, I start to think, but I stop myself. It simply isn’t, and that is that.

“I miss her, too,” he says, and his voice breaks the final, frayed thread holding me together.

I don’t wait for him to tell me he loves me or ask me what’s wrong. I simply hang up.

* * *

Once upon a time there was a wolf.

(Because I want a turn to tell one, Mama.)

The wolf was very angry with all the men who hurt her, and all the men who tried to hurt her. She decided she needed to do something, something that would hurt them before they hurt her.

(Sometimes when I can't sleep, I think about our wolf and how you say she's so brave.)

So the wolf came up with a plan. She had heard some of the shepherds playing with a stray dog sometimes as they watched over their sheep. It would come up to them and beg for food because it was so hungry, and they would shout "Wolf! Wolf!" and run away, or sometimes chase the poor dog with sticks.

(Don't be scared, Mama, the dog is okay in the end.)

The very smart wolf knew just what to do to scare the men away and save herself and the poor dog, too. She waited by the field and watched them every day until only one shepherd was left, because all the others went to eat their lunch. That one shepherd played a while with the dog, even petting it a little. Dogs are nicer than wolves, so the dog was happy to have someone be nice to it and wasn't thinking about how usually they are so mean.

(No, Mama, this wolf *isn't* a nice one. She's a mad one.)

When the wolf was positive the other shepherds were far enough away, she came into the field and didn't even try to hide. The one shepherd saw her and was so afraid right away, because he saw how mad she was. The dog didn't know what to do, so it just kept wagging its tail.

The wolf took her time and slowly came up to the man.

“Wolf! Wolf! There’s a wolf in the field!” he shouted. “Somebody quick, come back and help me!”

The other shepherds were halfway to the village and couldn’t see him or the wolf, so they just said to him, “Stop playing around, we’re hungry and going to get lunch! We can tease the dog when we get back.”

The one scared shepherd tried again. “No, really! There is a real wolf here in the field and I think she’s going to eat me!”

(Okay, Mama, we can take a breath, but just a quick one. This is where the story gets good.)

The other shepherds didn’t even answer him this time, and they rolled their eyes and kept walking.

The wolf smiled, and the scared shepherd could see every single one of her sharp teeth. She jumped on him and held him down with her paws on his shoulders.

“Wolves aren’t jokes,” she told him. “We aren’t funny, or stupid, or things to hunt.” And with that, she ripped the skin right off his face and ate him up, and

she didn't even care how yucky it was! And then she and the dog went into the woods together and they both lived happily ever after.

(No, Daddy didn't let me watch scary TV or anything like that, Mama. I dreamed this story. In my very own mind.)

-- -- --

howl

In the warm, bright light of morning, I extend my legs out as long as they'll go and stretch all the way to the tips of my toes. I want the sun to reach every single inch of me.

Kam walks out of the cabin and hands me a mug, settling into the lounge next to mine. I inhale deeply, enjoying the smell of the coffee and the breeze. Kam's got a familiar look in his eyes, and I feel reassured that I made the right choice, asking him to come away with me for the weekend. I see him start to reach across to my free hand, aiming to grab it and hold it tight maybe, but before he can I set down my coffee cup, stand, and walk to the railing to look out at the view. Rays of the summer sun sprint across the top of the lake where fish and water skippers break the tranquil surface. I could be happy here, I think. I could

just stay here, maybe, after it's over. Just for a moment, I allow myself to believe I might.

Kam sets his own cup down next to mine and ambles up to join me at the railing. "I get it," he murmurs.

"Hm?"

"I thought it was too soon to take a trip together, but I get it now. I see why you wanted to come up here. The woods, the quiet. It's really nice to just be out here with you." It is really nice, but I know how long nice lasts.

I nod. "It reminds me of my childhood."

"Yeah?" Kam says, coming closer and wrapping an arm around my shoulders. "Did you come up here as a kid?"

"No, not here. But my mom told me stories about someplace like it."

He smiles and rubs little circles on my shoulder with his thumb. "Hey," he says suddenly, like he's just remembered something. "I woke up to some weird noises last night and you weren't in bed. I was going to come find you, but I fell back asleep. Where'd you go?"

“Oh,” I reply, casual as ever. “There was a wolf howling in the night and I came out to hear it better. You know, they’ll tell you secrets if you listen close enough.”

Kam laughs, surprised. He’s always acting surprised by me. On our first date he told me I was special, not like other girls, with a grin that said he was paying me a compliment. I had to bite my tongue to keep from telling him I was a woman. He’d learn eventually, I’d decided.

He tightens his grip around my shoulders, leaning in for a kiss. Like a whirlwind, I spin out from his grip and pirouette away from his kiss to the top of the uneven log stairs leading down to the lake below. He laughs again, maybe because he doesn’t know what else to do.

“I feel like a swim,” I tell him, stepping out of my flip flops and undoing a few shirt buttons. Yes, I know how long nice lasts.

I leave a piece of clothing behind me every few steps, like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to the end of the story, to the dock where I dive into the water and swim. Kam follows, like I know he will, letting out a gust of air as if he’s astonished by his own luck.

“You’d better hurry,” I call from somewhere closer to the middle of the lake. “If you aren’t careful, I might have to run off and find some of those wolves instead.”

“If a wolf is what you want, I can be a wolf,” Kam says, running off the dock and cannonballing, *splash*, into the water. He swims, arm over arm, trying to catch up. Once he nears me, he ducks under the surface and reaches, but his hands grasp only soft water that moves quickly through his fingers. Resurfacing, he paddles left and right, trying to discover where I’ve gone.

I am inches behind him. My smile grows long and lupine.

“Sure you can.”

paddle now stay behind grab claws maw

“I can, too. Want to see?”

howl

Wave After Wave



On our wedding day, I wanted to look like a fairy princess.

I had been growing my hair out since you proposed so that it could cascade down my back, curling gracefully from beneath the flower crown I saw on Pinterest. I know it drove you crazy, the formations I would try to tame my hair into – the hairs you would find in your pocket, on your pillow, between your teeth. No amount of makeup mattered to you, though, and every carefully constructed outfit went unseen. My hair became the braille I used to try to impress you and impress upon you my femininity. I dreamed you would smell the fresh flowers in the crown when I leaned into the safety of your chest, feel the cascading curls as you held me by the small of my back to dip me into a kiss. I pictured it fanning out in waves that brushed against your skin when you spun me during our first dance. I imagined it sparkling with promise, dancing off the paper in all the shiny photos we would print and frame in our new home.

I curled it myself, maybe thirty minutes before things were set to begin. I looked in the mirror – early twenties, long curling hair, lacy wedding dress,

crowned with flowers, about to marry the love of my life. Underneath it all was the face of my mother. Not in attendance to our wedding, nor to my life in general at the time. But in a way, she *was* there. Every time I looked at myself in a mirror, or later in a photo, I saw her face. The longer my hair, the more I resemble her – a fact that had not occurred to me during my many months of careful planning. Later, when I feverishly chopped it all off into a pixie cut, I would nervously ask your opinion first and you would tell me you didn't care. You didn't care what I did with my hair, as long as I was happy. I did not know what to make of this.



Have you heard the myth of the Menehune? Hawaiian legend describes them as a race of diminutive magical folk who sneak into the world of man under the cover of night to build structures and disrupt reality. They are said to have crafted irrigation ditches lined with lava rock to purify the saltwater as it flowed to inland fields, fishponds made to please royalty, and caves full of secrets and treasures. Many say they still live on the more remote islands today, hidden away in mountains and forests. There is a version of me that longs to believe this, to convince myself of their existence through clues and sightings that I could breathlessly report on my return. Thanks to you, though, I have learned to push

for more. For the truth. For answers that don't boil down to the "woo-woo" of my tarot cards and my astrology.

Prior to the Polynesian settlement of the islands of Hawaii, there were two major influxes of peoples. First, settlers from the Marquesas Islands. Second, Tahitians. In the Tahitian language, the word for commoner or peasant is "manahune." This is, apparently, the moniker they assigned those that inhabited the islands before them – the Marquesas voyagers they conquered. These "manahune" were forced to flee to the mountains and forests to hide from the Tahitians now subjugating them. Some say they disappeared over time as the Tahitians located, enslaved, and killed them. Others say they eventually amalgamated into the population now spanning the islands, until they were no longer their own race but rather part of the new, unified Hawaiian people. The only certainty is, as always, that nothing is certain. Could "manahune" have been mistranslated over the years to mean small in *stature* rather than *status*? Could myth have overtaken history? Behind every legend, it seems, is a far darker reality.



I pulled a tarot card from my deck to set my intention the day before my trip. *The Comic*. The comic says “yes, and.” The comic laughs, even while crying. The comic finds joy in all things. So, when Charles the Rental Car Agent fishes out the keys to a minivan, I am prepared to laugh through it. Really, I am prepared to sleep off some jet lag by any means necessary, and if this minivan will get me there, so be it. Charles, though, shakes his head.

“You don’t look like a minivan girl to me,” he says. I am too tired to argue. “Try this one instead.” He slides a key fob across the counter. Channeling the comic, I say “yes and.”

“And what?”

I’ve been spending a lot of time with my own thoughts lately; I think I’m forgetting how to speak to people. “Sorry – yes and thank you so very much.”

In spot 401, the key fob unlocks a Mustang convertible. Because I question all apparent gifts, I pull out the paperwork and read through it to make sure Charles hasn’t just upsold me. He hasn’t, though – he has simply crossed out the details of the minivan and written *I think you look like a Mustang girl* in a spidery handwriting that reminds me of my father’s. I save the receipt; it is the only time anyone will ever say this of me, and I like the way it feels to be seen as

a mustang girl. I drive to my Airbnb with the top down, not caring what it does to my hair. I try not to think about all the times I asked you to roll the windows up in favor of piping in artificial air to preserve that day's carefully constructed hairstyle.



Do you remember how we almost didn't go on a honeymoon? I had suggested Hawaii, but we couldn't afford something that extravagant, so I researched and clipped and pinned and saved until I was able to plan us a few days away on the Oregon coast. And then, you got a job offer. *Come music direct a community theater production of Annie!* You never cared for the ocean the way I did, anyway. The plans were all made for me, anyway. You asked me if this was okay in a way that felt like telling, and I told you no in a way that felt like asking. You didn't take the job, anyway.

We went whale watching, and the guide taught you how to listen for the deep inhale of the whales that could predict the coming spray. You knew they were coming before a single person on the zodiac saw a thing. We ate at a seafood restaurant famous for its scallops, a food you swore you would only ever eat while dining out after it perfumed our entire apartment with the scent of curdled

fish the one time we attempted to cook it ourselves. We wore matching t-shirts I bought us on Etsy and you laughed for days at the reactions to your favorite joke. “Married AF – stands for always and forever, why, what did you think it meant?”

You never reminded me that you gave up a job so that I could have a honeymoon. Still, I should have remembered.



The next morning, I pack my snorkel gear and drive my rented Mustang to the beach to meet up with the tour I booked. We are a motley crew: an older lesbian couple that are instantly my new life goals, three generations of a family on vacation together, a lost-looking father with two bored teenage girls. And me. Mindy, the snorkeling guide, makes conversation with me on the zodiac ride out to sea; she seems to think I am lonely. She tells me the fish are always beautiful but they don't always find sea turtles, so I shouldn't get my hopes up if I was counting on that. I don't tell her that this was the reason I booked the tour – to see a turtle. I don't want my potential disappointment to infect her. A moment later, a sea turtle drifts lazily by the side of the boat. I start again to believe, just a little bit, in magic.

After adjusting to the sensation of breathing through a straw while submerged underwater, I start to explore. A few strokes from the boat, the sea turtle from earlier paddles slowly up to me. I freeze – Mindy told us that Honu are protected wildlife, never to be touched, and I don't want to break any federal or universal rules. At the very last second, though, the turtle swoops gracefully, gliding about an inch beneath me down the length of my body before dipping even lower at my feet and diving to the ocean floor. I forget to breathe for a moment, shivering with chickenskin that has nothing to do with the temperature of the ocean, then remember in a rush and breathe through my nose, breaking the seal of my mask and snorting saltwater. I feel the burn all the way up to my brain and surface, coughing and sniffing. The sea turtle, as if forgiving me for my lack of grace, surfaces a few feet away. When she looks at me, we make eye contact and I swear I feel something in my understanding of the world shift. She contains the universe in her reptilian eyes, and I want nothing more than to swim through them and into the secrets they contain. *When I die, I think, I want to return as one of you.*

When we get back to shore and dismount the zodiac, I take a few wobbly steps before realizing that I missed a small strip of skin right above the waistband

of my bikini bottoms when I applied sunscreen that morning, and another at the top of my spine. If you were here, you would have made sure every inch was covered. You would have spread the sunscreen over the curves of my body with a familiarity even I do not possess of my own self. Later, changing out of my swimsuit, I would have marveled at the gentle tan covering my skin. Instead, though, I feel every single grain of sand trapped between my clothes and my body as they chafe back and forth across the cherry-red skin I couldn't reach alone.

The next day, I drive to Target and buy the kind of sunscreen you can spray on. I mist the air with a cloud and step through, back and forth, until a thin oily sheen covers my entire body, until I am slipping on the tile of the bathroom floor. *What would happen if I fell*, I wonder? Nobody would think to look for me until my check-out time came and went. They'd probably call you since I can't bring myself to change the emergency contact in my phone – they'd call you my husband and I would be too dead to determine if I should correct the present tense or the pronoun use first.

I try to pack this thought into the little box in the corner of my mind where I store all the scary things I think, and leave for the day's adventure. Somehow, I still get a sunburn.



My uncle gave us my favorite wedding present – a vacuum that cost more than a car payment. We put it on the registry because it was the one thing you didn't have an opinion on and because I loved it the moment I saw it in the store. You joked to our guests that it was really a present for you because it would inspire me to clean more. The men laughed knowingly; the women elbowed me; my lone queer cousin rolled their eyes. Later, when you would come out as nonbinary, it would be as if this memory washed away alongside your male privilege and socialization. You would tell me to stop tone policing you when I would ask you not to yell at me, and when I would try to explain that I fear for the safety of my body in a way you will never have to, you would tell me to stop living inside the prison of my own heteronormativity.

My voice shrinks and shrinks until I think it will disappear completely – until I wonder if a sea witch has stolen it in exchange for this Pinterest life we share.



I start singing in the shower again. First, as if by accident or afterthought. Humming the melody to a song I heard in a shop, the beautiful Hawaiian syllables beyond my haole ability for speech. When I notice, I look around almost guiltily. I am alone on this island, though – an ocean away from the shower where I would sing a few notes before being interrupted by you joining in, bursting into the bathroom with showperson flair, swallowing my song until I am silent once more (a side effect of your singing that you never seemed to notice). I am alone on this island, though, so I dust off Babs and Liza. I march my band out and beat my drum. I come to the cabaret. Judy and I have ourselves a merry little Christmas – a Mele Kalikimaka – but we stop before we go over the rainbow because even though you called me basic, that is the song that walked me down the aisle to you. Nobody interrupts me. nobody shows me how erasable, how subsumable, my voice is.

I pluck a hibiscus flower from a bush next to my rented Mustang and tuck it into my shower-wet hair. I spin in a circle in the center of the gravel road, there beneath the shade of the coconut trees, and my sundress flares out like a bell around me. I think I can feel my body ringing.

I tip my head back and shout, “I’m basic!” and nobody hears me but the turtles and the sea.



When we moved from North Carolina to Washington, we decided to stop and do something unique in each state we crossed. In Kentucky, we stopped for famous ham. I was taking a break from vegetarianism because I love the taste of Arby’s roast beef sandwiches and also because you thought the idea of vegetarianism was ridiculous, so I ate some of the ham and said it was the best I’d ever had. By Illinois, I was crying from the stress of being the only driver and from the rainstorms through Tennessee and from pure exhaustion, so we gave up the game and our unique thing for the state of Illinois was a Krispy Kreme drive through. Neither of us complained about giving up the game, but I mourned the end of my perfect Instagram travelogue.

While we ate our donuts – me still behind the wheel – I tried to tell you how stressful it was to be the only person driving the entire way to the West Coast. You said you *wished* you had the privilege to complain about driving and I nearly cried from the tsunami of guilt that washed over me. We made our tired way to Kansas City in silence. A very lonely silence. I wish I had kept talking. I

wish I had kept talking all the way to Washington state and through our engagement and wedding day and all the way up to right this very minute. I wish I had spent less time biting valleys in my tongue and more time making mountains out of the mountains I was feeling.



Bolstered by my massive success snorkeling with the guided tour, I decide to try it on my own. I am following my GPS through this unfamiliar island, and I turn into what I believe to be the parking lot for Poipu Beach but is actually a parking lot for a massive high-end shopping center. I don't realize this, of course, until I am one fish in a school of shoppers, tourists, seekers. In this moment, more surrounded by people than I have been since touching down on this island, I feel acutely and inevitably alone. So alone that, in the silence, the voice of my anxiety speaks up to fill the space. Instead of turning around and making for the beach, my anxiety whispers in my ear to keep walking, to follow the crowd. It tells me I will look like an idiot if I leave without entering a single shop. It tells me this like a joke we are both in on, silly ol' me always making mistakes, and it sounds a little bit like you.

I browse a few shops to satiate the hunger for sameness now rumbling through me, and I buy the only three things I find in my size because I need to know my body is capable of encapsulation, that it is not too large to be put on a hanger and sold for \$59.95 (a number that would give you a heart attack if you were here to hear it). I eat a grilled shrimp taco even though I am not hungry and, when I am satisfied I have made enough of a Destination of this place, I finally leave for the beach.

I park, bring my new beach towel down to the sand with my snorkel gear, and realize all at once that I don't know what to do with my belongings when I go swimming. For a moment, I think of you. Of how if you were here, you would watch my things and I wouldn't have to worry about beach thieves or inclement weather. But then it hits me – even if *we* were still a *we*, *we* would not be *here*. So I bury my anxiety in the sand and lean over toward a man reading a book. As a book person myself, I think I can trust him. At least, until I see a certain president on the cover of the book, and I notice a suspiciously red baseball hat, and then I decide to relocate to another part of the beach entirely.

Here, I find a woman reading a book with a cover generically decorated with flowers. Safe enough, I decide, and I ask if she will keep an eye on my

things. She agrees kindly, smilingly, and I set off to snorkel. This time, though, my mask isn't fitting well and I can't figure out how to set off from shore in my flippers. After I make it past the first break my mask floods with saltwater and my eyes are stinging and my nose is burning and I suck in hard through my snorkel and realize it really is a straw after all and if both ends are underwater you are drinking instead of breathing. I come up, resolved to try again, empty my mask while attempting to remain buoyant, and dive once more into the sea. Once more, it spits me back out coughing and dripping with saltwater and snot. This time I give up, but I take my flippers off too soon and by the time I make it past the lava rock to the shore I am bleeding from several indeterminate places and the bottoms of my feet look like the arm of our old couch after the cat had his way with it.

I can't bring myself to make eye contact with or even thank the kind woman as I gather up my things and make my way up the road. I decide to get a shave ice to soothe my aching pride, but first the line is forever long and second as soon as I find a bench to sit on the MAGA man joins me and is smoking – god knows why – a cigar and third I forget that the taste of artificial banana makes me nauseous so I order pina colada flavor without thinking and almost spit out my initial bite and fourth as I fish around in my bag for my first aid kit I realize I took

it out this morning to make room for, of all things, the spray on sunscreen. I eat every single bite of the shave ice, even drinking the melted syrup water at the bottom, as I slowly bleed into the sandy grass. I hope MAGA man can't see my tears through the cigar-smoke cloud encircling his bright red head.

You text me and ask me how my trip is going; we're trying our hardest to be friendly. I tell you it is pure magic.



Do you remember our trip to New York City? I thought the ocean made me feel small, but it was nothing compared to the skyscrapers – nothing compared to the way you told me to watch myself, my bag, my body as we walked through Times Square. I felt like I had been exacto-knifed out of a storybook village and plopped into a glossy magazine. I knew it made me look like a tourist, but I couldn't keep myself from gaping up at all the windows, gaping in awe at the number of lives, stories, dreams encapsulated within each building. I tried to imagine myself as one of them, but I could not force myself into this picture the way I had so many others – not even for you.

We spent day two completely apart, you off to see some friends and me off to bookstores and the closest thing I've ever had to a church: the library. I can

still hear the way my shoes clicked along the tiles of the New York Public Library. The smallness I felt beneath the marble lions was the same kind I felt looking out over the sea – the smallness of being held, not of being crushed. In these places, I felt more comfortable because I knew the way the stories between the pages ended. I realized all at once that I knew the way *our* story ended, too.

I came back to our Airbnb covered in a layer of grime from walking through city air thick with smog, expectations, and need. I waited in the tiny shower until I could hear your snores, and only then did I sneak into bed. Instinctually, you rolled over and threw your arm over me, pulled me close. Perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the millionth, I felt crushed by your grip. I thought then this was the beginning of the end, but I know now it was the end itself.



I drive to the Menehune fish ponds and park. It's really just a pull-out on a busy, narrow road. As I look down at the ponds, I think about the Menehune. The manahune. The people of the Marquesas islands, fated to enslavement and subjugation for having the misfortune of arriving first and practicing nonviolence. Fated to centuries of being shrunk down to an inch tall, folded up into a fairytale,

all because they were punctual and polite. As I look down at the ponds, I decide that I am going to start talking and never stop, to talk myself tall and formidable. I decide that I am going to sing in the shower every day until I die and become a sea turtle. I decide that magic and myths are constructed to make people comfortable with trauma and that this comfort is purchased with currency made from the silence of the traumatized. I decide that maybe you are right to not believe in magic. I decide to believe in magic, anyway.

A Proper Tiger

When I ask him, he tells me the stripes are there to tell me where to rip. A perforation of my purpose. He grabs one, tugs on it, rips a strip clean out of my flesh to prove his point. He hands it back to me, a crooked little smile sneaking across his face. *There now*, he says to me. *Don't you feel better*. The long, black stripe hangs limply in my paws, looking for all the world like a dead snake, like a deflated balloon. I didn't know that a tiger's stripes were meant for tearing.

The hole in my side is aching, but he pats it hard, attagirl. *Now you look more like a tiger is supposed to*, he tells me. The empty air stings where his hand passes through – a phantom pain where there was once a piece of me. Who knew tigers were meant to look empty? Who knew emptiness could be so filled with pain?

He stares at me, breath held, wanting, waiting. Waiting, waiting, always waiting for me. I am forever taking too long. I hesitate because now I know what it feels like, what to expect, but he nods at me and smiles and there is nothing I love more than to see his smile. I grab hold of another stripe. His smile grows, and so I rip. Fast, in a flash, off quick enough to avoid some of the pain, I am short enough another stripe. It hangs as limply in my paws as the other, the two a

gruesome pair of dripping, bloody fur and flesh. I look for his smile, though, because it will certainly ease the aching in my sides, but it is gone.

I've done it wrong. He tells me so, *just like this, just like me*, and he grabs hold of another and he rips. Long. Slow. Careful. I am forever moving too fast. *You want to be a proper tiger, right*, he tells me. I didn't know there was an improper way to be a tiger. I let him tear the rest for me to be sure it is done correctly. Stripe after stripe, my skin made into crepe paper decorations, made into a mountain of loss, made into everything wrong with an improper tiger.

When he is finished I am half a thing, wholly holey and unholy. I try to laugh at this thought, to tell him my little joke, but the stripe ripped from my throat has rendered me incapable of sound. All I hear is a little whistle, though that could just be the wind passing through me like a hollow log. I do not feel the ache anymore, not really. I suppose it is nice to know that half things only have half feelings.

He is pleased, though. I can tell. It is good when he is pleased. *Isn't that wonderful*, he tells me, *don't you feel just right*. I nod, for this is all I can do now. He wonders aloud what he might unpack into the crevices and canyons of my body. My phantom tail trembles in the cold air, and a single brown leaf falls

through the empty space near my navel. I did not know that tigers were made for carrying the belongings of others.

An Improper Tiger

Did you know that when you bury the remains of a tiger's stripes and fertilize them with saltwater tears, a tree grows? With branches twisty and gnarled, it doesn't look like any tree you'd recognize, but it is a tree all the same. A tree does not need to resemble any other tree in order to be a tree. Here, in this forest of amputated stripes, I lie in wait.

I do not know why they all choose this place for The Tearing. Perhaps the men like the ambiance, the echo of loss. Perhaps the tigers sense the blood spilled by their siblings before them, the blood running like a river below their feet, and feel a knowing deep within. Perhaps the stripes themselves can sense their kind all around them, transformed and transmogrified. However it comes to pass, it is always here in this place, and so it is here in this place that I wait.

She did not see the scissors hidden behind his back last night as they made camp for the evening. She did not wake as he danced around her, snipping here and there and everywhere to create the illusion that she was made to be torn. Once upon a time, I tried to tell them – to warn them – but these men carry more than just scissors through this forest at night. I do not try anymore. I simply wait.

Since she did not see his scissors, she believes him when he tells her to rip herself to shreds. He hasn't the patience for it, though. They never do. He'd much rather do the ripping himself. I hate this part, but it is important for me to stay. To be present. It is part of the process, after all, of populating the forest. And besides, one day he will know he was seen, and I will devour that knowing like a sweet fruit ripped smugly from a vine. It will be worth the wait.

I run my paws over the raised, bald lines crisscrossing my skin. They prickle, the scars awoken by the scene we bear witness to. They remember this feeling, these lay lines of my body, the feeling of being torn. Ripped. Shredded. Just as they remember the feeling of being sewn. Mended. Made whole. My eyes prickle along with them, the memory of a thousand tears pressing forward all at once. When the tears finally appear, as they always do, I gather them in my paws and I spread them over the saplings growing in the shadows of the tall, matured

trees. These saplings will be grown someday, too, but for this to happen I must wait and they must wait.

It is done. Finally. He leads the tiger away, no doubt off to search for treasures to pack into her new gaps and emptinesses. I wait to be sure he is gone, and then it is time. I run, black twisted trees swirling past me, weaving in and out of my vision, and my body sings at the wholeness and the movement and the ground beneath me strong and steady. Before the man can change his mind and double back, I gather up her stripes delicately, careful not to crumple or crease a single one. I hold them, cradle them in my paws like an infant, and I sing them lullabies as we make our way back to the heart of the forest. The hole is ready, vacated days ago, and I tuck the stripes inside, covering them over with a blanket of dirt and tears to wait for their growing to begin.

I am tired from my work, but I hear a rustling through the forest and know it is not time to sleep just yet. I steady myself, listening to the melancholy music of the wind and words whistling through holes once occupied by fearsome stripes. And then, I see.

You come to me, scarred and bruised and bleeding from all the places you tore out the pieces that were once packed into you, the pieces not your own. You

walk tall and slowly. You take your time. I have my needle and thread ready, see? I have been waiting for you. You nod at me, and I follow you as you lead me through the forest. We do not have need for words, you and me, for we are one and the same.

When you stop at a tall and beautiful tree, I know she is singing to you though I cannot hear the song. I know because my own tree sang to me just the same so very long ago. Your wicked smile is infectious and I smile back, ear to ear, as the knife edge of your claws slices through the crisp air. It has been so long since you have used them, hasn't it? But you and I both know that a tiger's claws cannot dull. We take a deep breath as one, in, out, and you begin your work. Ribbons of strong, thick, transformed stripes dance through the air and fall to the ground at our feet. I watch, enraptured, with needle and thread at the ready. I watch the beauty and ferocity of a tiger who knows exactly what she was made for. I watch you dance, and I wait for more to come.