Confabulations, Iterations, and Other Collected Falsehoods

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Abstract

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This project is the beginning of a collection of fairy tale and fabulism-adjacent short fiction. It emerged out of a desire to create stories that lean on the conventions of fairy tale as a means of speaking to, subverting, and building upon the expectations of the genre. The specific approaches to this project vary from story to story, with some written using language and forms reminiscent of fairy tale, and others using realism to describe the impossible. All, however, lean on the tradition of oral folk tales, as well as writers like Angela Carter, Carmen Maria Machado, Kelly Link, Karen Russell, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin, and others creating innovative work in the genre of speculative fiction. Thematically, these stories work with long-standing topics of traditional fairy tale and fantasy (gender, growing up, social pressures and expectations, navigating responsibility, responding to injustice, etc.), but always from a tilted angle. My goal is to create a collection that asks readers to question their own expectations about storytelling, identity, and the norms of the world they live in, and inspires new conversations about narratives long taken for granted.

Fairy Story

I was slick with fever in the dark heart of winter when I first met them. Our windows were black as goats' eyes, the cataract of moon leering through. The sky wept snow as my father cooled my forehead, watched me slip through his fingers.

For days I'd been in bed, growing hot, growing weak. I sweated and watched shapes moving in the shadows. In the shivering firelight behind my father's shoulders, I was sure that I saw my mother, flitting between the shelves. "This one for cough and this for good luck," she said, clear as if she'd spoken aloud, tapping jars of gnarled echinacea root and powdered lamb's bone, of clary sage blossom and the flaky, dried tails of river newts.

"This for fever and this for heartache." She knew every growing thing, how to fill stomachs, cure ills, ease suffering. I clung to her skirts, as children do, and watched her every move. I'd memorized every one by the time she left, just as I knew the earthen smell of her, the feel of her hand on my cheek.

I knew the cures for pneumonia and withering and gout like I knew the certainty of scraped knees in spring, of cold fingers in fall and sweet apples in summer. I could picture each herb in its jar, labeled in her long, looping hand, as if she herself might still swing the cupboard open again and draw one down as if no time had passed, might again dance her fingers over their stoppers until she found the right one.

When I first met my fairies, her every word was etched behind my eyelids. If I had only been called to tend another child with my symptoms, I would have broken their fever by nightfall, had them smiling and sipping warm broth by daybreak. Bound, as I was, in my body though, the knowledge lay fallow, unable to save me. I had no strength left to stand. To grind the wormwood and fenugreek, to labor over flame. No words to speak the knowledge to my father, who had a gardener's heart and understanding of the sick. Sunspots bloomed behind my eyes when I tried to push myself up.

Fever took me in waves through the long and formless night, and the shape of my mother gathered at the edges of my vision, leaned over me and spooled her sweet-smelling hair onto my pillow. I closed my eyes against her warmth and thought, I will die here. Under the moon's blind eye. Every cure curled up and sleeping in my throat. I breathed in the scent of woodfire and the sharp odor of sick and the smell of her and for a moment the sound of her hair on my sheets was almost like the rustle of wings. I heard her voice—a voice, many voices—whisper: "Can you keep a secret?"

Yes. My breath was thick and heavy in my throat, slow and growing slower. *Yes.*

* * *

They are industrious, my household spirits. All wheeling energy, hanging kinetic in the air. The perfunctory productivity of bread baked and shoes sewn and straw woven into gold. Sly too, flitting from my gaze like beetles from the light. Rattling in the rafters, infesting every floorboard.

They bustle from sunspot to shadow, shelter in crannies. They teem from all the hidden places—haunting our steps, unseen.

* * *

Before my mother had gone, I would spend days hanging at her skirts as father worked the fields, hungry for her smiles and her time. The first came easily—she was all joy, it seemed, a woman born with open arms. The second was a far more elusive creature.

When I think of her, I imagine her as a whirlwind—a thing of perpetual energy. A storm that swallowed wreckage and left a trail of good works in its wake. A closed loop of her own efforts; a cycle of furor. She never seemed to stop. Not to breathe or smell the wildflowers, not to sit on the dirt floor and play make believe, whisking and moving and whirling—I learned to balance myself in her eddies, capture stray breezes as they came. I learned to beg a story as she stood rooted over the cookfire, to move carefully through her world so that she could forget I was there.

Her stories, when she told them, were wild ones. Earthen cities of girls who had never seen the sun. Kingdoms populated by water nymphs, all set ablaze. Fey folk who offered you food and drink and dance and would swallow your name the second you said yes. Even the true ones seemed to be untamed things, loose in the world and unwrangleable. She had raised herself, she said. Her mother, a tortured creature, had borne her after a string of nameless dalliances, then as a girl left her to fend for herself. She cooked, she cleaned, she taught herself to sew—and with the gardens she left behind, learned her trade of healing.

I listened, rapt, imagined my mother as a feral child, a girl left to claw life from nothing and watched her with all the more awe as she moved about our home, preparing treatments for the neighbor boy's chill, the washwoman's toothache. I could hardly imagine her as such a small, helpless thing. She seemed as inevitable as a storm.

Father grew quiet for a long while after she left. When we found her gone he went out and waited in the fields all day, watching the road, and didn't return until long after nightfall. He came inside without a word, laid in bed and would not move. Stayed there even as the sun came up, even as my stomach rumbled, as our fire burned down, leaving me shivering through the night. He remained the next day too, and the one after that. Eventually I dressed myself and went to the fields he'd allowed to wilt.

When I was small, he'd offered me his time and his knowledge, to take me on as his apprentice. I had always had a knack for growing things. One birthday, my parents had given me a garden: a packet of seeds—exotic flowers and bitter leafy things my father had no use for on the farm—and a little trowel and a patch of earth just beyond our window. In a few months, it was a forest of bright petals and delicate blooms, snapdragon and tulip and marigold. A green thumb, my father called it, but my mother, her eyes sparkling, called it a kind of magic. I had always loved the sun on the fields, the way the earth felt in my hands, the way my father could coax life out of the inert. He knew growing things too, in his way. How to nurture them, care for them, keep them alive. But once they were grown, they were a mystery best left in my mother's hands. He never had her knack for spinning straw into gold. I turned him down to shadow my mother's every step, to soak up her approval through the work she loved so much. So I had no expertise in his world of tubers and grains, tough blossoms and soft leaves, but I tended his crops the best I knew how as he slept and woke and slept and woke, as if in a dream. I harvested what I could reach, peeled bark from old trees to burn in the hearth. I stood as tall as I could to make oats soften into meal on the stove.

I spent my time, those long days, sifting through every memory I had of my mother. She was a magician after all, an alchemist of joy. From nothing always came something in her hands: a lost doll became a little wooden cat carved from firewood; a lost harvest was spun into a game of finding mushrooms and fruit and following wild quails back to their clutch. From nothing always always

came something. So I worked and worried and remembered and waited for her to alchemize something beautiful from her absence, to emerge from the nothing she left behind with hands full of daisies and a smile on her face.

My father rose from his stupor eventually. Nearly a full cycle of the moon after mother left, he got up from bed, dressed himself, and went about his business without saying a word. He never spoke about his absence, but neither did he disappear again, leaving behind a husk of himself to be tended. Eventually he warmed again, smiled again, and I smiled back, even as the edges of my lips tugged at something that creaked deep inside.

At night I sometimes crept over to the dying fire after my father had fallen asleep, to sit by the flames and feel my mother's warmth on my cheeks. And as I drifted, I could sometimes swear I heard whispering, the caress of gentle fingers as a blanket wrapped itself around my shoulders.

* * *

The air here has hummed with life, always, even before it hummed in me. In sickness, my ills are tended. In fear and hurt, I brim with light against the darkness. When my strength fails, fairies wrap hands around mine, bolster me in the jetstream of their irised wings.

Oil fires crackle in my windows day and night.

* * *

I realized, long after that night of fever, that they must have known me long before I knew them. Lying in wait among the timbers and tresses, hiding at my elbows. My father never heard the whisper of wings in the timbers of the house, and during his days of absence, I was too young, too hungry, too heartbroken to wonder that I never grew wearied. To wonder that a child could do a woman's work and not slow or stumble. With my mother's departure came a time of slow-creeping miracles I could not see until I'd met my fae folk face to face.

Things forgotten would find their way to rights: toppled milk would find itself back on the shelf, only a drop spilt; a forgotten candle would be blown out on a windless evening; in lean seasons, wild berries and mushrooms would appear on our doorstep. My father was too haunted then by sorrow to be anything but grateful, and I too young to understand until I fell ill, felt death on my tongue and woke, alive. My father wept and held me tight that morning, told me we were blessed. I tried to melt into his wonder and joy. But all I could see was them.

The bristling wings. The sharp eyes, always grinning. Their nimble hands as they slipped back into their knotholes. I began to recognize the gentle guidance of their touch, the way I could continue, as though wound by coils and cogs, even when my body grew weary. I saw but couldn't speak of it. Not to myself, certainly not to my father. How to tell a haunted man of my own haunting? How to speak of things so easily left unspoken, so easily left hidden in the rafters, where they preferred to be? We had not once made mention of my mother since the day she left—if she in all her freewheeling enormity, her boundless light that had once drawn us up like seedlings from soil, could not be spoken into being, then how could this?

I swallowed my fear and said nothing. And as I grew, I came to like it that way.

My father returned to the fields, spent long days in the sunshine, nurturing life from the earth. I took on my mother's mantle. Who else would banish boils, concoct cures, ease children into the world? I labored at the hearth, recreating my mother's recipes day by day, with none but my spirits, my sprites, to keep my company. They buzzed at my elbows, at the ends of my hair—supporters through sickness and health, through rage and through joy.

My father, less haunted though he eventually became, still could not hear a word of my mother without darkening, retreating somewhere I could not reach him. I learned to hold my tongue until he left each morning. I would light the fire at sunrise, prepare his morning oats, see him to his

work. And as he stepped out the door, the fairies would drift from their knotholes, gathering about my ears, my jaw. And I would begin to speak, to sing and whisper and shout as I worked.

Perhaps to pass the long hours, perhaps to hear the familiar hush of their laughter. Perhaps for an excuse to speak of her, the fading image of her face, the smell of her hair, already half-remembered. Perhaps anything. But I spoke and they listened. I kept their secrets and let them keep mine.

As I grew older, the creep of miracles seemed to quicken, to become grander. We would wake to wheels of cheese fresh on our table, chopped wood stacked on our hearth. Once, when an early frost crystallized our valley, tore life tooth and nail from our neighbors' harvests, we found every tomato, every pepper, every pea and parsnip and sweet potato bundled in our kitchen, untouched by the chill. My father laughed then, held me as close as he had the night I survived my long illness and told me that I was a blessing.

I drew away from him, protest on my lips. My fairies delighted in their labor, in their surprises and presents. But I could not abide their work be mistaken for my virtue. I insisted on my innocence and he laughed, called me humble. For if I was not responsible for our turns of fate, for the labors of love that kept the wheels of home turning, who, then, could be?

I wanted to speak of them then. My jaw ached with secrets swallowed. My hands longed to reach for his, to tell him every trial, every triumph offered by their efforts. But I looked at my father—my gentle father, my father the farmer, the builder, the tender of growing things—and I heard the rustle of wings. Of half-heard whispers asking: "But can he keep a secret?"

And for a moment I saw him, not as he appeared today, but as he seemed when I was small and newly motherless. When he wore his pain, his sorrow, his secrets plain on his skin. When he

allowed himself to be borne down by suffering, as if only he could feel the weight of it. I saw him laying down his burdens, even as I staggered under my own.

My father smiled and looked on me with pride, a woman now, nearly of an age with my mother when she had left. And I swallowed every secret all over again.

He held me and thanked me and I said nothing, but looked past him as my fairies smiled and flitted out of sight.

* * *

I used to think they found me by chance. Maybe I tread through a mushroom ring and they followed me home. Maybe my father invited them in by mistake with a bowl of milk left on the sill for the cat. Maybe my mother called them down to fill the space she left behind.

But I know better now. A colony like this does not move in. It comes from the very source.

* * *

I could not speak to my fairies after the frost. Every word fell flat and hollow when I sang my usual songs, whispered my usual secrets, and eventually I fell quiet. I still worked. And worked and worked. There was produce to preserve and tinctures to stew and salves to sell and all the other labors of home that came as naturally to me now as breathing. But I was quiet, quiet, day and night, even steeped in their sibilant gossip and guidance.

My father could see something had shifted too. He lingered at the door in the mornings before he went out to the fields, searching for excuses to remark on good weather and the quality of that week's eggs. But as was his way, if he was concerned, he never said a word, and when I only ever answered quickly, politely, he carried on as if there was nothing more to say.

One morning, crisp and bright with autumn sun, I rose early. My father was in bed still, his snores rumbling occasionally through our home. Usually this was my time to dress. To stoke the fire and warm the house. To draw and boil washwater from the well. In an hour I would be milking the

goats, collecting the eggs, boiling licorice root for the neighbor's ulcers. But I lingered a moment, watching dust motes and cobwebs trembling at the corners of our four walls, feeling the distant warmth of the sun. Then, with my father still asleep on the other side of the wall, I rose, dressed, and went outdoors.

I didn't know where I was going until I arrived, ankles deep in the chickweed and shepherd's purse growing wild from my childhood garden. It had lain mostly fallow in the shadow of our cottage since my mother left—no time for childish things when there was a woman's work to be done—but as I stood in its once-tidy rows, it blossomed to life in my mind. The crocus and snapdragon I spent girlhood coaxing from the earth. The maidenhair fern, the primrose and eyebright. I would watch my father labor in the field and my mother move between the goats and the chickens and our cottage door, carving tidy lines into rich soil, secreting away each dewdrop of life inside—and in the springtime there would be riots of color, of sugar-sweet pollen and petals that would be woven into crowns or picked fresh for tabletops, or steeped with calendula for tea. I could see, here and there, little shoots of green, or twisted vines, choked out by the tall grasses, and wondered if these might be the sisters or daughters or granddaughters of the ones I planted so long ago.

It was quiet too, I realized. It was always quiet in the mornings, but today there was a deep silence I didn't recognize. A jay sang somewhere over the hills and the chickens chuckled their sunrise gossip. But nowhere did I hear the rustle of wings, did I feel the hum of air displaced by flitting fingers, whispered secrets through sharp teeth. The sun was bright and it was autumn, and I dropped into the dirt to dig.

It was dark when I returned, face flushed with pleasure and chill, knees chapped and dark with earth. From sunrise I had cleared away weeds, turned the earth where it had grown stiff and

dry. I unearthed seedlings nearly lifeless and made space for them in my garden, set them in the sun and gave them fresh water to drink. There were bulbs tucked away deep underground, perhaps dormant, perhaps sprouting year after year with no one around to see them. I made space for them too, promised them that I would be back when first they poked their young leaves into the spring cold.

I burst inside, pockets full of seeds and stones, with half a mind to tell my father everything. To make a grand meal and tell him about the garden, the seeds, the fairies, my labor and my pain. Life, it felt, was flowing from my every pore, from my very fingertips. But my father was not sitting at the fire as I expected, pulling off his boots and sipping mead. The house was silent.

I found him in bed still, the hum of his snores now a rasp, a rattle like a dried seedpod. He was feverish. Weak. When I spoke his name, he hardly looked at me, eyes flickering about before coming to rest behind their own lids. I set aside the seeds. I tossed away the stones. I went back to the hearth, pulled down notes and herbs and returned, again, to work. The fairies did not flitter down, nor did I speak to them, the way we had become used to. But I could hear them. Humming, always humming, just out of sight.

* * *

I've hated them at times, it's true. But I've loved them more, far more. Their skittish courteousness, their benevolent attentions. They have been friends in the darkness, warmth in long winters. They have held me when there was nothing else to hold.

But like a fire, like a dear friend, they do not bear being forgotten.

* * *

The morning I came to think of as her last, my mother had begun her work as always, and I sulked with a circlet of dandelion and clover about my ears. I had begged to place it on her head, to play at being wood nymphs in the orchard. It was spring and I loved the way the blossoms fell, the

plump swells of peach and nectarine. The sunlight on my face and the grass underfoot. But as ever, she couldn't spare a moment.

Most times I pouted, but stayed with her anyway, watching her weave her various magics at the hearth. But this time I felt fierce. I was small. And lonely and bored and eager for even her anger over the trailing ends of her distraction. I sniffed. And I said something to her. Something I'm sure now was cruel, something that I had thought would get me sent out to clean the goat stalls or to bed without dinner. For a long time I tried to remember what it was. But what time takes, it rarely gives back.

Whatever I said, I waited for her to whip around, to fix me in a simmering stare that seemed better to me in that moment than the back of her head, the edges of her skirts. But when she turned, there was something different in her face. Something strange. Sad, maybe, or fearful. She set down what she was holding—a bowl, a book, a pestle, that much I couldn't remember either—and took my hand instead.

She led me to the door and outside, waving to my father in the fields as he tilled. I didn't think to ask where we were going. The sight of my mother with empty arms, without purpose in her gait, was enough to transfix. I didn't even mind much that she moved like a rusted hinge as we walked, like she was prying nails from her joints with every step down the main road. I didn't mind that she her tight-lipped expression didn't loosen until the sight of merchant stalls and the sound of musicians reached us. All I cared about was that, for a few precious moments, her time was mine. As we walked through the market she began to soften, to smile again. Like she did at home. Like she did when she was working. As the evening set in, the air grew thicker with the smell of smoked meats and ale. The band played something jaunty with a fiddle and she pulled me into the flattened circle of grass in the middle of the market, spun me into a dance. A wind unspooled, and I the blossoms and the bees caught in its wake. We walked home that night with arms full of calico bolts,

pockets full of jam jars and sweet wine, heads full of song. I was dizzy still, took her hand to steady myself as we rounded the hillocks. And then we smelled the smoke.

We were close to home and the air was no longer rich with the scent of meats and spice, but sharp with burnt plaster and ash, and down below, grey death plumed out the window of our kitchen. The shape of my father darted about in the red glow from the doorway and I looked up at my mother who had gone sickly and ashen as the sky. She gripped my hand, no longer gentle, and tore down the hill to home.

The fire was out quickly. Not complete devastation—the walls still stood, the thatch was blackened but not burned away, little more than a dark scald by the fireplace offered a clue of what had happened—but every one of my mother's books had been reduced to ash, and my father was left breathless and hoarse. The flames had leapt up out of the hearth just before dinnertime, as if guided by some evil hand, some toxic breath. They licked over the woven mat, ate up my mother's notes, her weaving, coughed smoke under the door until my father saw from his fields.

"Lucky," he said, "that you two weren't home. You may have been burnt up, and what would I have done then?" He kissed her cheek, gathering us both close. I nodded along in agreement. Lucky, I thought, and clutched my mother's skirt. But my mother stared up past my father's shoulder and said nothing. She pulled away and picked up a broom, laughter gone, the dance sapped from her step, and began sweeping up the ashes.

The next morning, my father toppled from the ladder as he replaced the inner thatching, earned a deep bruise on his ribs, a twisted arm that was never quite the same. The day after that, the hem of my dress was caught as I milled about my mother's side, sending me skidding over the dirt. I chipped a tooth, skinned both knees open. That same evening, we found our cat stiff and cold on the floor of the barn, soaking in a froth of vomit. And the third day, she was gone.

As I fell asleep that night before, she was baking, humming to herself as I curled up in bed, my father dozing in his chair. That's the last I remember of her. Swishing about in her spring dress. Hair rippling in the firelight. The smell of fresh bread. It still steamed on the windowsill when I woke in the morning, untouched, as if it had baked itself.

* * *

What is love, if not labor? What is labor, if not love? The fairies know there is no contempt greater than a gift rejected. Than a love unproven by work.

* * *

My father's illness banished the orchard, the meadow, the warmth of my soil-soaked fingers. I turned again to tending the goats and chickens. I harvested what I could, stronger now than I'd been when last this had been my responsibility. The time not spent feeding us, I whiled away grinding and stirring and distilling every kind of salve and elixir I could think of. He remained weak, feverish. With a lifetime of knowledge, I thought, with pure strength of will, I could cure him. But his body cared little for my will.

I heard my fairies sometimes then, flitting, whispering, watching from above, but I never saw them, not even out of the corner of my eye. Not even seething in the dark. I was never without their voices though, humming to themselves, to the house, to me, in a language I couldn't decipher. I wonder now what they might have said, creeping out of their hiding places as I slept, holed up in cupboards as I worked. What secrets I might now keep, bundled and buried unknowing in my own body.

It was winter again, slick and pale and blind. Every morning I woke early to stoke the fire, warm my father's tea, fetch his slippers, then to work, tending what crops I could, poring over books and what was left of my mother's notes. Mornings were the same and the same until the

inevitable morning when one wasn't. I had thought I would feel it in my bones when my father died, the way I knew, really, that my mother wouldn't return. But the sun rose the same as ever on the morning I found him. No gentle smile thanking me for the warmth, no wheezing breath murmuring my name. Just milky eyes frosted over with cold, stiff fingers that didn't twitch toward the mug I clutched in my hands. I sat by his bed wondering if this was how he had felt all those years ago, watching me fade into the firelight.

The sun slunk along the skyline, rising and setting and I didn't move from his side. His mug was frozen on his bedside and I'd nearly picked out all the seams of his slippers, the wool unraveling through my fingers.

They came to me then. For the first time in a long time, they slipped out of the darkness, wings flicking motes of light. As I held my father's hand in mine, his cold skin on my palm, I saw them slide, eel-like from behind the beams, creep out from their hiding places. I didn't speak as they floated down around my ears, settled on my shoulders. I didn't weep. They nuzzled me like cats, laid languid in the hollows of my collarbones, and whispered as one: "We can keep a secret."

I remembered what it had been like, those long weeks after my mother had left, when my father had lain petrified in this very bed, nearly as still and silent. The work of feeding us both, the way my mother had skittered at the back of my mind. The sound of them

Please, I begged them. *Please.*

They reached their many fingers into my skin, pulled me out from inside myself. I let them. The cool of my father's hand slipped away as I floated out of my skin, my eyes blinking from the trusses of the house we built, watching my body, still and steady down below. I closed my eyes and let go.

They lived long days in my body as I floated among the thatching. Maybe weeks, maybe months, maybe years. They took up residence in my flesh, wore me like they had always known how, comfortable and easy. Their fingers stoked my cookfires. The grease of their elbows kept the floors swept, the goats milked, the bread fresh on the table. They kept my body fed as I nursed my wounds. They buried my father when I couldn't.

I drifted. Watched myself from above as I imagined my spirits once did: affectionate, unmoored. How long I could stay like this? Untouched by need, by desire, by responsibility. My body was an old house I could not bear to live in, and they, my thoughtful caretakers, banished the cobwebs, kept the mills turning. I gratefully handed them the keys.

* * *

A haunting, a court, a company, a host. A fairy, a sprite, a spirit, a ghost.

Spirits are bad omens, or so I was told. But I'd sooner be haunted, a hundred times haunted, than alone.

* * *

It was warm and bright when I finally floated down from the rafters. My father long buried. My body long used. I drifted and stretched, imagining what it would be like to feel the earth under my feet again, the sun on my skin. I wondered if the weight of grief might feel smaller. I was willing, finally, to try. To see it for myself. My spirits, courteous custodians, parted as I descended, made room for me again in my skin. I settled into myself, slowly at first, feeling the tacky damp of the inside of my skin, the creaky corporeality of my bones, and then, like that, it was done. I blinked out from behind my skin, blinded, for a moment, by the fullness of it all.

Outside, blue skies warmed the meadowsweet. Rain-soaked earth begged to be broken by bare feet. I breathed in the air, felt my lungs expand and contract around it. Unsteadily at first, I took my first steps, like a sailor on dry land after long months at sea. I staggered and stumbled but

walked anyway. I thought I might fling the door open, soak in the aliveness of being, revel in the vitality of a body, even one so ravaged.

But these sprites of mine could no more easily banished from a body than from a home.

I moved toward the world, and I felt the grip of my spirits tighten. They pulled the breath and blood around me taut, made every bone a brick. They yanked at my hair like reins. Every joint ossified until I was still. I could not breathe. I could not move. The house creaked, dust and dead beetles spinning down from the ceiling. The sound of fairies laughing through the grind of stones, of bones.

I will tell the story of what I saw then.

I saw a child, in a house, in a home. Young but growing, and alone. She thinks she is alone. Wings froth in the air around her, unseen.

She is small, unsteady. She is allowed to roam, to explore, to wander. She is not often greeted when she returns. She stirs pots on the stove, stitches up holes in her dresses with pudgy hands. She cannot see the gentle claws that guide her fingers away from sharp edges, her body from boiling spills. She thinks their hissed instructions to be her own mind, listens with rapt attention.

I saw the child become a youth and then a woman. She goes away, far from her home, grows round and radiant, and her sprites follow, round-bellied and luminous as she. There is a child with her now, and twice the number of pixies perched about her—some no larger than a thumbnail. The smallest of them hover lovingly about the scrunched and bloody creature that wails in her arms.

I saw her grow from small to happy to haggard to hollow, staring at the child that lolled on its back from across the room, screaming to be consoled. She is thin, too thin, and my father begs her to eat. To come back to him. Fairies buzz around the child's head like flies, while their parents lay in wait in the rafters, hidden in the walls, heard but unseen. The woman weeps but does not eat, does not touch the child.

The woman is skin and bone when the fairies slip down from the rafters at last, flutter around her ears. They life her, inch by inch out of her fragile body. I watched her float, curled into herself like a child as the fairies slip into her like an old dress. They pick me up, cradle me in her arms, smile for my father out of her red mouth. Her body moves as she gestates above, cooks and cleans and builds and eats, feeds its child—its children—from its breast, the tiniest fairies letting out milk-drunk sighs through the mouth of their wriggling host.

When she floats down, finally, she clutches the child tight with her own hands. She weeps into the child's hair and the fairies, large and small, grin over her shoulder, twining their fingers in her hair. She tries to sit, to rest in her body. To remember her flesh.

But when she stills, every fairy pulls hard. Her head snaps up, like a tree falling in reverse, unfelling itself. Tears stop. They pull. And they pull and they pull and she turns, in her worn-in body, to continue their work at the hearth, the child bouncing without rhythm on her hip.

I saw this in a moment, my body rooted, my bones lashed tight. I saw her, us, we, me, and it was imagined, maybe, or else a lie, or else the truth, or else a version of a hundred histories of my mother and her mother and her mother before stitched into one. I saw this, and the fairies, with their iron grip, laughed. Settled into the crooks of my elbows, the dip of my throat, the notches of my spine. Twirled their fingers in my hair.

They hadn't made a home in our knotted pineboards or dusty trusses. They made a home in us. In me.

My fairies held me fast against the light, warm sun on the windowsill just out of reach, my feet bare on the cold floorboards, until I closed my eyes. Until I stopped straining and held myself loose and easy. Hung like this, like a marionette, like linens on a line, I could feel every twitch of their fingers, the nudges I'd never thought to feel. Invited in now, and under my skin, in the very

tendons of my limbs. I let them turn me from the window, felt them tighten my apron with my hands. They grinned, whispering and shimmering in my ears.

* * *

Skin and plaster, brick and bone. They teem from me, inside, outside, spill from my mouth, thrum in my sinew. When my will grows weak, will lumber and shingles fall down around me? Will my home turn to rubble, my body to ash? Can I live on will alone?

I wonder, I work, and I think, perhaps, that some houses were made to be haunted.

A Hook, An Eye

The hook slipped neatly through the meat of my daughter's cheek, parted skin and sinew like a fin through still water. She grinned around it, teeth pink, tongue pushing against the gleaming metal. The barb jutted from her upper jaw like an extra canine.

"How does it look?" she asked.

Her mouth moved clumsily around the unfamiliar shape. It was like braces all over again, her voice phlegmy and thick.

"Beautiful," I lied, and dabbed away a black rivulet of blood.

It would look beautiful in time anyway. Now it was all bright red and swollen, gory looking. Bloody, as the rites of girlhood always tended to be. The hook was streaked with crimson, opal glistening like the white head of a pimple from its eye.

In truth, she looked like Frankenstein's bride—but sixteen-year-olds were usually better off without truths like that.

*

My mother would wax poetic about her hook when I was a girl.

An auspicious blade through the fat of youth, she'd say. *A dowsing rod leading a girl to the well of womanhood. The source of that ichorous river from which life itself is sprung.*

But she had been married and strung within a year of her hook; things were different back then.

The one clacking against my daughter's teeth now was a gift, a customary maternal offering for a girl's sixteenth. The hook was an elegant, conservative curve the shop girl had called "swimming nymph." She'd looked no more than a year or two out from her own hook, a violent, three-pronged treble that grasped like a talon. Out of its eye peered a flash of moonstone, diaphanous as lingerie.

Desperate, I thought. *Sleazy.*

I was seeing more like it these days though. There was a girl at my daughter's school with a bait hook jutting shamelessly from her cheek. I spotted it across the parking lot once, saw-toothed, many-barbed, voracious. The severed knots of half a dozen lines poked obscenely from the crevice between eye and stone. My mother, with her plain, practical Aberdeen, would have fainted to see it.

The shop girl glanced at the beautiful, swooping thing I'd pointed to and pronounced its name with disdain, the barbs of her hook convulsing pornographically as she spoke.

I bought it on the spot.

Every generation is entitled to its little rebellions, of course. My mother had probably been just as horrified the first time she saw a woman with a knot through her hook's eye and none around her finger, severed twine trailing like jellyfish tentacles behind her.

She would point these mismatched women out to me every time we passed them, in the mall, in the park, in the street. I suspected that my stocky Siwash, with its dull jasper all covered in

dark snail trails of brecciation, was her way of protecting me from such indecencies. At least she hadn't insisted on a silt-brown riverstone to match her own.

"It's perfect," my mother had said as I tasted the tang of iron and steel on my tongue. "Unassuming. It won't do to look like you're trying too hard."

My sixteenth year was mostly spent learning to apply makeup without goring myself on the hook's bobbing point, my mother teaching me to dress around its barb without making a mess. I didn't always succeed at first. It was an imperfect art, my mother said, but a necessary one.

"It won't do to look like you're not trying at all."

She needn't have worried on that account. I thrashed on my hook then, as eager to lure as I was to be lured.

In class, I would run my fingers over the curved point of the hook, imagining how it looked to the boys on the other side of the classroom—gangly teens who tripped over the line spooling off their tongues. Who itched at the stubble of wire pushing out behind their lips. I would brush my knuckles coquettishly over the jasper, wondering if they thought the hook old-fashioned, the stone plain. If they found the point alluring, the promise of its eye seductive. If one of them might someday be the man to thread me.

*

I let my daughter choose her stone.

I'd been hearing stories lately of girls wresting control over their hooks from their mother's hands. Picking the shape, the size, even enlisting other girls in the spilling of their ichorous rivers, leaving floundering mothers in the lurch. I quickly flipped the channel when these reports blared from the smiling lips of glossy, jig-hooked women on TV, hoping my daughter had not heard.

Little rebellions were inevitable—I had been young once too. But no one was arguing a father's right to teach a son to spool his freshly grown line, to coil and cast it, to thread the trembling eye behind his bride's veil. A girl's hook was her mother's territory.

All the same, something gave in me when my daughter emerged from class a week before her birthday, side by side with the bait-hooked girl. I watched them from the car, that jaw whiskered with lines of past loves, passionately declared and as quickly forgotten. My daughter was laughing as they parted, waving like she didn't notice the vicious points, the careless knots.

As my daughter slid into the seat beside me, I heard myself ask, "How would you like to pick out a stone?"

I hovered behind her as she stalked bedazzled glass cases, chewing the curve of my hook and hoping she would pick something modest and unobtrusive. Obsidian or maybe agate, something that didn't distract from the dark curl of her hair, the sea green of her eyes. But I kept my mouth shut.

Little rebellions, I reminded myself. Better to give a little than wait for her to take a lot. The stone was hers to wear, after all, until she was married. Until her husband plucked it out, gnawed through a length of line to string her from hook to finger, for what I could only hope would be the first time.

I just about choked when she presented the opal to me—gauzy and shot through with crimson and cobalt. From a distance it looked almost as translucent as the moonstone, immodestly lucent. I opened my mouth to tell her as much, to steer her toward the shelves of dense jade, opaque hematite. She held the stone against her dimple, waiting for my approval.

"Beautiful," I said instead, and slid bills across the countertop.

*

I married one of those gangly boys in the end. Finished college with a gossamer thread from hook to heart line. Happily wed, happily strung. For a while, anyway. Just long enough for nature to take its course.

When I told my mother about the pregnancy, the divorce, I wasn't thinking of single-knotted women in the street. Just the woman who'd held me as my hook bled, brushed hair behind my ear and taught me twice to dress myself.

Her memories, apparently, were elsewhere.

She refused my calls after that. Returned my letters, ignored my pleas. She'd forgive my indiscretion when I called off the divorce, repented my pride.

I sat home alone as my belly grew, wondering whether the swimming thing inside me was even then spooling thread or sculpting a dimple where a hook would one day rest. She didn't call even when my daughter, dimpled and perfect, emerged screaming into the world. I wished for my mother often during those long newborn nights. My daughter wide awake and weeping. Me exhausted, hysterical. But in quiet moments, when she nursed and I dozed, her pudgy fingers wrapped around the crook where steel sunk into waxy flesh, I would watch her and think, "As long as I have her, I don't need anyone."

Now sixteen, still dimpled and perfect, my daughter ran her fingers over her own hook in the bathroom mirror.

It was bright and prominent as a nerve ending, and already the point was rubbing a raw spot into her lower lip. It would bleed at first, and then it would callous, as mine had, as my mother's had. She touched the gleaming metal—not as she'd held mine as a child, all thoughtless intimacy, but as I'd touched my own at her age, daunted, awed. She smiled at her reflection even as fresh blood pooled. I remembered how much my own hook had hurt, how I too had grinned and borne it.

I stood behind her, the medusa tentacles of my severed knot floating at her shoulder as she prodded and marveled.

What could I tell her now, I wondered? To be patient? To stay away from bait-hooked girls and boys with fledgling line? That womanhood would come in time? That I would always love her?

I brushed a dark wave behind her ear, swallowed saltwater mouthfuls of the things it would do her no good to hear.

"So grown," I said instead. "My little girl."