Fledging

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Fledging

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of Bard College

by
Eliza Watson

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“I have two daughters

They are all I ever wanted from the earth.
Or almost all.
I also wanted one piece of ground:
One city trapped by hills. One urban river.
An island in its element.
So, I could say mine. My own.
And mean it
Now they are grown up and far away
And memory itself
Has become an emigrant,
Wandering in a place
Where love disassembles itself as landscape:
Where the hills
Are the colors of a child's eyes,
where my children are distances, horizons:
At night,
On the edge of sleep,
I can see the shore of Dublin Bay.
Its rocky sweep and its granite pier.
Is this, I say
How they must have seen it,
Backing out on the mailboat at twilight,
Shadows falling
On everything they had to leave?
And would love forever?
I see myself
On the underworld side of that water,
The darkness coming in fast, saying
All the names I know for a lost land:

_Ireland, Absence, Daughter._

- “The Lost Land” by Eavan Boland
1. Wolf Tales and Honey

Long ago, nearly all the wolves in Ireland were killed by men. Those who survived live in the forest that circles our village. My mother and grandmother believed that our woods were a refuge for the souls of the lost wolves, that they ran through the trees in search of revenge against the men who murdered them. The wolves were hunted for their furs and turned into cloaks or rugs, while the men who killed them reveled in the glory of their newfound gold. Their bloodied skins were left to rot, decomposing carcasses of flesh and bone, until there was only one. The men hunted that lone wolf for years, followed her lonely howls as she ran through the wilderness at night, in hopes of finding her family. They say that when the last wolf was killed, the moon did not rise for thirty days: the sky, a black veil of mourning.

Beneath the light of a full moon, when the wolves cried the loudest, my sister was born. My mother told me they cried every night when they had to part with the moon. “A love like that is painful,” she said. On the night of my sister’s birth, my grandmother brought my mother to the potato field that lay beyond our house.

My grandmother believed that the baby needed to be born beneath the stars. “She cannot be tempted by the darkness,” she said. Stripping my mother’s clothes, my grandmother laid her naked and exposed beneath the moonlight. Her breasts hung heavy and swollen, nipples reaching for the soil, stomach protruding from her body like a tumor. Before we left the house, my grandmother told me to grab the chicken bones that we kept within a basket beneath the
floorboards. I gathered them into a bag, tearing some of the remaining flesh off with my teeth. It was rotten and sour. When we found a clearing in the potato field my grandmother placed the bones in a circle around my mother as her howls of pain echoed in the empty air. My mother’s bottom sat bare against the dirt, worms and bugs crawling through the crevices of her body as they traversed the landscape of her taut belly and straining skin.

A few nights earlier, my mother had pulled me into her arms, tucking my wild hairs behind my ears. Her yellowed nails scratched at my scalp and spine, soothing me into accepting her embrace. I was wary of her touch, unsure if her hands would bring love or pain. Too often, it was the latter.

“Leanbh,” she told me, “you will be a big sister soon.”

“I know,” I said back. She was constantly reminding me, speaking to me only about the baby that was growing in her belly. I had spent the past few weeks caring for my mother’s growing stomach, hunting extra rabbits and fish for her endless appetite. My mother’s teeth had sharpened, turned into pointed fangs, eager to rip into flesh and bone.

She smiled at me, a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes, faltering beneath her nose. We stayed like that for a while, me in her arms, both of us in silence.

“You will be a big sister soon,” she repeated finally, “but I may not be here to see it.”

“I know this too,” I told her.

I had overheard my grandmother and her fighting about it, both screaming, throats torn to shreds, their voices harmonizing in pain. My grandmother was worried that my mother’s body would not survive another pregnancy. She was convinced both the baby and my mother would die this time, that my mother’s grief would be passed on to her only living child.
“Your body can’t take it. Please, inión. The death of another baby will kill you,”
desperation broke my grandmother’s composure as she begged my mother to understand.

“My body has always been a cemetery,” my mother said calmly. “That’s all it’s ever
known.”

When my sister was born, she was covered in dark hair. Her body was lean and pale, blue
veins peeking from beneath tufts of fur. My grandmother eased her from my mother, cradling the
crown of her head in her palm, pointing her closed eyes towards the moon until they opened. She
was the daughter of wolves, my grandmother insisted. My mother didn’t object, too busy
howling with pain, pushing the last of my sister’s home from her womb, the dirt beneath
drenched in blood.

I was allowed to cut the umbilical cord while my grandmother cradled my sister, wiping
blood from her brow. My mother lay, exhausted, her sweat glistening beneath the dulled light of
the night sky. She watched as my grandmother licked the blood from my sister’s hairy face,
dribbles of spit leaving tracks through the red. When I went to cut the cord, pulling a knife from
the sheath beneath my skirts, my mother began to cry, a primal sobbing that echoed through the
fields, matching the cries of the wolves within the forest. My sister didn’t make a sound.

My sister is only three years younger than me, but as children, those three years felt like
decades. She was annoying, rash, and stubborn, never listening to me and always getting into
trouble. We hated each other. Often, she would have nightmares about our fights as I laid in the
bed beside her, she would scream my name and kick, covering my body in bruises and scratches
as she flailed. In the morning, we would fight again, spewing venom from our tongues as we
screamed insults. Although we hurt one another, we were also fiercely protective, redirecting our anger the moment anyone else sought to pick on one of us.

While there were other children who lived nearby, most didn’t like us. A few days a week, my mother would drop us off at random houses within the clearing. There, we would join a dozen or so other children and study. This was the most schooling we received, and we only attended until we were about twelve. My mother insisted that we go to school, that we needed to learn. My grandmother scoffed at this, telling her that there was no need for that in the clearing, while my mother combed our hair, refusing to give an answer. Stomping through the house, my grandmother pouted. “Waste of time,” she muttered.

“Don’t listen to her,” my mother whispered. “She’s jealous.”

I assume my mother just wanted us to learn something, at least the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Both my grandmother and mother didn’t know how to read, although my mother would occasionally carve random childish letters into the bark of firewood before burning them. By the time my grandmother came into the room, the logs were already burning, my mother watching the flames lick her letters until they disappeared.

Once, my sister tried to teach her how to spell her name, holding her hand over my mothers, twisted the knife into the flesh of the log. “Like this,” she said, demonstrating with ease, then passing the blade to our mother. My mother’s hand was uncertain, a timidness to her movements that almost resembled embarrassment. They passed the knife back and forth until my mother finally got it right, her lines wobbly but legible.

“Good job!” my sister told her, wrapping her arms around her neck.

My mother beamed, “Really?”
“It’s perfect.”

Afterwards, my mother wrote her name over and over again, covering the log in large juvenile letters, her tongue sticking out in concentration. A few years later, I found that log underneath her bed, hidden behind an old quilt.

My sister was easy to love, but easier to hate. My mother and her were constantly at each other’s throats, screaming, throwing things, and shouting the worst insults they could think of. Waiting for them to tire themselves out, my grandmother and I would just watch. We were never stupid enough to interfere. Only when they were done, both hot with rage, cheeks streaked with tears, would I go to them. My grandmother never bothered with this part, instead forcing me to choose who deserved comfort the most. I usually chose my sister.

When my sister was nine, she brought home a beehive that she found hanging from a tree. She buried it in the floorboards beneath our bed and pressed her ear to the wood in the middle of the night to hear them buzz. They stayed beneath our bed almost all summer, escaping in the afternoons to search for pollen, their fat bodies wriggling out from the thumb size holes my sister had carved into the wood. My sister kept the window beside our bed open, placing wilted daffodils and bowls of sugar water on its frame, hoping to guide the bees outside instead of to the kitchen where our mother and grandmother cooked roasted ducks and minced rabbit, bubbling sweet berries into jam, their fragrant cooking an unintentional temptation to the hundreds of bees that buzzed below our feet.

By August, the bees had stored enough food, that comb spread below the floorboards, creeping throughout the house. Honey was seeping through the cracks, leaving the floor sticky and sweet. My mother blamed it on my sister and I, saying that we needed to wash our feet better
before we came inside. She found out about the hive when she was mopping. Soapy suds dripped between the roughly cut wood beams, pooling into the comb, drowning the brood that formed below. The buzzing heightened, a muffled rumble that filled the house, until the bees swarmed, a cloud of vibrating bodies that billowed up my mother’s skirts, tangled themselves in her hair, and stung. My sister shouted at her to stay calm, her own body moving through the swarms of bees as easily as water. We ran from our house, my mother maintaining her composure, moving quickly as she shed her clothes behind her before the bees imbedded themselves beneath the fabric.

My sister and I sprinted, faces red hot with panic. I could hear the angry buzz of the bees behind me as their stingers stabbed at my calves. After we had finally ran far enough away and calmed down, we found my mother sitting nearly naked in the grass, swollen red welts scattering her skin. I pulled the stingers from her wounds, smearing homemade herbal salves to relieve her pain as my sister ran back into the house, checking on the hive to make sure that they were okay. My mother was livid, her body tense and hot beneath my touch, mouth pressed tightly closed.

When we returned to our house, my sister was crouched beneath our bed, her hands prying the flooring upwards toward her chest, revealing a large clump of honeycomb crawling with bees. When my mother saw her, she went still, eyes narrowing, a hand resting on her hip. Already, the skin above her eyebrow and left cheek were swelling, her face lumpy like some sort of monster.

“What were you thinking,” she hissed at my sister, voice low, barely a whisper.

My sister opened her mouth, not sure how to respond, looking at me uncertainly before saying, “They needed my help.” She told our mother about the broken branch, how a storm had knocked over part of the tree, leaving the beehive exposed and dangling a foot from the ground.
“Bees can’t swim, she explained, the rain would’ve killed them.” She lowered the floorboard again, crawling out from underneath the bed and wiping her hands on her skirt.

If she had just apologized, it wouldn’t have been that bad. My mother would have yelled until her voice went hoarse and would have eventually forgiven her in a few days, after the swelling had gone down. But my sister didn’t apologize, instead, she stared at my mother, standing to meet her gaze, and raised her chin slightly, unwilling to back down and admit her mistake.

My mother silently turned her back, grabbing the large wooden bucket of water that rested at her feet. The mop had been knocked to the floor, on the other side of the room, near the door, but she did not go to it. Instead, she lifted the soapy water. Her fingers clenched the edge of the bucket, hoisting it onto her chest, letting it lean slightly against her chest. We watched, confused.

Before we could react, my mother tipped the bucket forward, a waterfall crashing towards the hive below. “Don’t,” my sister screamed, reaching for the bucket, but it was too late. The empty bucket toppled from my mother’s hands, falling to the ground with a hollow crash. Distraught, my sister ripped the floorboards, hands scrambling as she bloodied her nails trying to save them. When she finally tore enough of the floor, she was met with a stream of silent floating bees.

After their fight, I waited a while before going to find my sister, choosing to let her calm down first. If I went to her too soon, she would unleash her wrath on me, which is not what I wanted. To fill the time, and to keep my mother from lashing out on me next, I busied myself with tidying. I swept the floor, washed the pots, gathered firewood and sticks, skinned the meat,
peeled the vegetables—basically whatever I could do to stay out of the way. Keeping my eyes lowered, I stiffened whenever I heard my mother approach as she continued to slam the doors and stomp her feet, muttering swears that were full of venom.

Eventually, I went to my sister. I found her sitting outside, knees drawn to her chest, snot running from her nose, eyes red and puffy. That was the difference between her and our mother.

“She didn’t mean it,” I told her, pulling her close, waiting for her body to soften against my chest. Sometimes she would push me away, unwilling to let go of her anger, unwilling to forgive herself for making things worse.

“I did,” she said. I never doubted it.

My sister was honest—always truthful, although it sometimes hurt. She was incapable of lying, even if it spared somebody’s feelings, even if it spared her own. When she was eleven, a sixteen-year-old boy followed us home from school and asked her to come outside to talk. He told her he thought she was pretty and asked her on a date. My sister told him he was “butt-ugly and a nasty bully.” She was right, but the next day when we came home she had a black-eye and a cut seeping beneath her brow, her dress ripped at the hem.
2. Rooted

Within the woods, through patches of moss and wiry roots, my family and I would often walk in silence, my sister and I occasionally bickering, our hushed fighting breaking the forest’s stillness. My grandmother walked ahead of us all, lopsided with her hips slanted at an angle, but her steps still sure and strong. Close behind, my mother followed, skirts swaying with the natural shifting of her hips, an effortless elegance. Further back still, my sister and I would walk side by side, sometimes shoving the other with the bony bits of our elbows, making faces behind the two that led us.

The four of us filled our aprons with stinging nettles, wild onion, woodland sorrel, and dandelions. We dug our fingers into the dirt, pulling up gnarled roots, their appendages contorted like broken bodies. If we were lucky, after a long period of rain, we would stumble across a patch of mushrooms, hidden beneath the shadow of a rotting log.

Quiet streams of sunshine peeked through the leafy foliage, illuminating the bugs and particles of dust that floated lazily in the air. In the sour heat of the summers, the mosquitos would hover like fog, leaving itchy balls of hardened flesh that we scratched until they bled. They thrived in the humidity of the woods, congregating in clouds, preying on the warmed bodies of animals.

My family lived within the walls of the woods, a circular clearing that stretched for miles until it met the trees once again. On the outskirts of this clearing, further away from the center of the village than most, my great-grandparents had built our house long before I was born. My grandmother grew up in that house, and when her parents died, it became hers. The wood had
faded to a light brownish-grey and there was a small leak in the roof that we never bothered to fix, but the house was still sturdy enough all those years later.

At dusk, our house would be swallowed by the shadows of the trees. Through the clearing, a river ran strong and smooth, winding for miles far into the trees beyond the fields. My mother told me that the river was endless, forever flowing into itself. She said that it “wrapped all the way around the earth, its head eating its tail like a giant snake.”

Unlike others who lived in the clearing, my family would often go into the woods to hunt and forage for food and medicine. Many of the families I grew up with were too scared to do even that, preferring to stay in the openness of the fields. My family and I didn’t try to leave the clearing, although we would venture far into the depths of the trees. Those who did try to leave the clearing never returned. I was never exactly sure how far the forest extended, how thick the trees and brush grew. No matter how many times I had gone into the woods, I never came out on the other side.

Yet there truly was no need to leave the clearing or abandon our village. Before my sister and I could even speak, we were taught that the clearing was our home - the only home we would ever need. The legacy of those who left was laden with disapproval from those they abandoned. To leave was only ever done out of curiosity or desire, never necessity. There was ample land to farm and grow, to build houses and fences, to raise children and cows. Just outside of the village, there were acres of fields, a grassy plain that moved like the sea, an endless empty area that lay before the edge of the woods. But still, there were those who strayed from the clearing, seized by a longing for the world beyond the forest, a curiosity that could not be quenched by the monotony of our village.
My family had lost many to this disease, this plague, as my grandmother called it. When my grandmother was in her early twenties, her youngest sister left the clearing, positive that there was something better waiting beyond the forest, outside of Ireland. She told my grandmother that she wanted to go to America. She was only sixteen, a child. Before she left, she begged my grandmother, “Please, come with me.”

We didn’t know exactly what had happened to those who left the clearing; once they left we never heard from them again. But there were many stories - tales that had been passed from person to person, each telling slightly different than the next. A boy that I went to school with, told me when we were both seven that his aunt left the clearing before he was born and that she made it all the way to America and now worked in a factory. Another time, when I was in the market buying linens for my mother, the seamstress told me that her daughter’s husband had left the clearing twenty years ago, sailed to New York, and opened his own pub.

My grandmother told me “If you let it, the forest will dig itself inside of you, consume you, and leave you to die.” As a toddler I wouldn’t speak a word while in the forest, scared that somehow the trees would worm itself into my mouth and wind down my throat. No matter how many questions my mother and my grandmother asked, I was mute, unable to make a sound. The air was thicker and sweeter within the trees, smelling of rotten fruit and decaying leaves. I remember the way the scent would linger in my nostrils for hours, burrowing so deep into my mind that it became the only thing I could smell, even from miles away. I would plunge sticks of cinnamon and cloves up my nose, inserting twisted balls of wool and strips of beeswax hoping to smell something, anything else.
When I was four, I dug my fingers into the caverns of my nose, hard snot gathering beneath my nails as I scratched the soft skin that lined those endless warm tunnels. I pressed my knuckles into the holes, hoping to find the smell and pull it out, twist it around my fingertips and trap it in a jar so it could never get out. I imagined the smell to be ugly, a putrid wisp of smoke that only I could touch. I pushed my fingers so far up my nose that I bled, droplets of goopy blood gushing down my arms to the floor. I did not speak or even cry. My mother found me drenched in my own boogers and blood, still scratching the insides of my nostrils, uncaring of the harm I was doing to myself. That wasn’t the only time I tried to rid myself of the woods, purge my body of any traces of it.

My grandmother had explored these same woods as a girl, and her grandmother before her. She had told me this in an attempt to make me more comfortable entering the forest, or maybe to offer me more shame, affirming that there was something wrong with me. I knew that my weakness bothered her. Her constant attempts to strengthen my courage told me as much.

“Why aren’t you frightened?” I asked my grandmother in desperation when I was six, awoken in the middle of the night by my nightmares, hoping to know the secret to living with the woods.

“I am,” she told me.

As my grandmother aged, her bones brittled and wrinkles deepened. She spent more time in the woods, each passing year bringing her back again and again to the winding paths. It was obsessive, compulsory, an itch living beneath her skin that needed to be scratched. Every day she would walk to the woods, sometimes gone long after the sun had set, returning without explanation of where she had been. Although my grandmother told me she was scared, I never saw it. She walked through the woods as if it were her own body, following the paths as naturally
as the blood flowed through her veins. Her relationship with the woods confused me, and I would sometimes trail behind and watch her instead of searching for food. I imagined my grandmother as a puppet controlled by the woods, invisible strings awkwardly jerking her limbs and dragging her along as she hung, controlled, from the branches above. The forest told her which way to go, spoke to her in a way it never seemed to speak to me, her feet controlled by the wind.

When I was eight, I followed her, careful to stay far behind, hidden by bushes and branches. I was, of course, terrified of my grandmother, knowing that if she caught me there would be consequences. But I was too curious to turn back. She was a mystery to me, impassive, shielded. Keeping a distance, I watched as the trees swallowed her whole, waiting a few minutes before following her inside.

My grandmother was surprisingly agile for her age. When she was nine, my sister said that our grandmother must eat baby bones from the burials of stillborns to keep her body agile despite its aging appearance. Many of the other kids that lived near us called my grandmother a witch, mocking her lopsided gait behind her back. I knew my grandmother could see them, because whenever my sister and I tried to do stuff like that to her, we received a hard smack on the head. But she never said anything. My sister took great pride in my grandmother being called a witch, and would sometimes shout to the other children, “y’know it runs in the family,” before giving a dramatic cackle and running after them, dirty fingers wiggling out in front of her. I didn’t fully agree with my sister’s theory and told her to stop being ridiculous, but still, I would sometimes sneak out and check on the graves of my siblings just to make sure that nobody had been digging them up.
The deeper I followed my grandmother into the forest, the more difficult I found it to see what was in front of me. The foliage was thicker, shading everything in a dull shadow, a cocoon of darkness. I noticed that the farther we walked, the more overgrown the path had become until there was no path at all. These paths had been used for decades, trodden into smoothed soil by the feet of my grandmother, her mother, and her grandmother before her. My grandmother was walking away from these paths, into the unknown. I wondered if maybe there were no paths here for a reason, if maybe, our ancestors had found something that scared them away--something too dark. I lost sight of my grandmother in the density of the trees, unable to figure out which way she had gone.

I had never been that deep into the woods before. Everything about it was unfamiliar. I continued walking until I realized that the sickly-sweet smell of rotting leaves changed, replaced instead by a slight mustiness mixed with the richness of wet dirt, dripping sap, and fetid mold. The shift was gradual, barely noticeable until the previous smell was completely gone, but the longer I walked, the stronger the new scent became. I paused then, taken aback by this realization, furrowing my eyebrows as I realized the smell that had plagued me since I was a toddler had finally been replaced. Shadows danced in the dirt, stretching their bodies as if reaching for my toes. My own shadow was distorted and bent, a warped spider scuttling behind me, eager to trap its prey.

The night seemed to stretch on for years, the moon above waning with each passing minute. A pool of stagnant water glowed beneath the stars, reflecting the million dots of light that moved overhead, their light weaving through the branches, occasionally eclipsed by clusters of budding leaves. The water was black, its depths impenetrable, a crater that extended to the other side of the world. I peered into its depths, a dark surface reflecting the night sky above, the
moon’s gentle light bathing my face. A woman peered back at me, dark haired and chestnut
eyed, her lips slightly parted as she looked at me in wonder. There were faint lines creased below her eyes, the first inkling of wrinkles, her supple skin bruised from exhaustion. I blinked, and so did she. Her face seemed more worn now, the lines around her eyes deepening with each passing second, the skin of her cheek sagging from the bone, drooping like the jowls on a dog. I blinked again, and so did she. Strands that framed her face lightened to grey, streaking her dark hair with wisps of smoke, until it was all consumed. She was older now, like my grandmother.

I raised a hand, hoping to reach inside the pool and pull her from the water. Surely she must be stuck inside. But when I raised my hand, so did the woman. A stream of moonlight shone dully through the trees, revealing the wrinkled skin of my fingertips. No, I thought, panic rising in my chest, catching in my throat, heat rising to my cheeks as I held back my tears. No. I lifted my hand to the light, the moon irradiating protruding purpled veins and spots from years of sun. Deep calluses covered the pads of my palm, rough and darkened from dirt, the folds of my skin loose with age. The face that stared back was my own.

I stared at myself, unbelieving, watching my face grow older with every passing minute. The skin hung from my cheeks, sunk into the caverns of my skull, turning yellowed and waxy, purpled capillaries bursting beneath flesh, a living corpse. Holding my breath, unable to look away from that pool of water, I waited for the moment I would die. My body ached, breath labored and weak, each inhale cracking my bones in agony. The moon above disappeared, light snatched from the sky except for the faint twinkling of lights. Alone in the darkness I waited.

But then, the moon waned again, a gentle sliver of light breaking the darkness of the night, faintly flowing down upon me. The lines upon my face began to lighten, skin tightening and regaining color, slowly. I was aging backwards. I don’t know how long I sat there beside that
pool, how many times I watched myself age to the brink of death. At the brightest glow, when
the moon was at her fullest, a baby’s face stared back at me from the waters, chubby cheeks
dotted with flushes of pink, wide eyes glossy and bright. It felt strange, at times almost painful,
to have my body shrink and grow and shrink again, but I took a curious pleasure in it, in seeing
myself in all my forms, the knowledge of who I once was and who I will someday become.

When I finally stumbled out of the woods, the world was as it always was, the sun had
already set and the moon was fixed in one phase, a halved piece of pie illuminating the fields in
an endless misty grey. My grandmother was waiting for me at home, a cup of tea in her hand,
stirring the wilted leaves with a spoon in the other.

“What happened to you?” my mother asked, grabbing a blanket to wrap my shivering
body in as I struggled to get words through my sobs.

My entire body ached with the strain of panic, still afraid that I was stuck in the forest.
My mother rubbed a hot cloth on my face, wiping dirt from the cuts on my cheeks. Her hand was
caring but firm, pressing too firmly against my cuts, tearing them further into my flesh. I
flinched.

My grandmother remained quiet, stirring her tea disinterestedly, barely bothering to look
in our direction. My sister sat by her feet, the dolls that she had made from wool and corn husks
abandoned in her lap as she looked up at me concerned.

“You were in the woods,” my grandmother said. She knew.

I nodded.

“And you survived.”

I paused, for a moment my panic ceased, replaced instead by thought. “Yes,” I told her,

“\textit{but-}”
“But you are still afraid.” She pressed her wrinkled lips together, a sheen of tea glistening on the coarse hairs above her mouth. She nodded. “Good.” She looked at me then, her eyes hard and dark, a fearfulness hidden deep in the black of her pupil. “Good.”

My mother guided me from the kitchen into her bedroom by the back of my neck, stripping me of my soiled clothes and replacing them with thick woolen undergarments. She combed through my knotted hair, pulling clumps of mud from my scalp, and formed two braids. She told me it was time for bed, guiding me to the pile of blankets she had pulled from the cupboard and arranged. Once I was tucked in, eyelids drooping and sleep just at my fingertips, she looked down at me curiously.

“Why did you go to the woods?” she asked.

I fell asleep before I could answer my dreams full of twisted shadows, giant birds, and forests filled with star
3. The Fawn and The Moon

When I was nine, my grandmother told me about the first time her mother brought her into the woods. We were sitting outside of our home, weaving baskets to hold our food from the market. My grandmother’s hands moved quickly, her nimble fingers lacing strips of willow as I struggled beside her. The women in my family could weave six intricate and detailed baskets a day, selling the ones that we didn’t use in the village center to other families, whereas I could barely manage just half of a patchy lopsided basket, often littered with large unsightly and impractical holes. Usually, these weaving sessions were silent. My grandmother and I weren’t much for talking and I found myself noticeably more awkward around her than anyone else. Sometimes, my discomfort would be too much for me to handle, the silence looming over me like a heavy fog, and I would blurt out unprompted questions or small talk.

“The weather is nice. Huh, Nan?” Nothing. “Have you seen the Gallagher family’s new baby?” Rarely, if ever, would I get a response.

This time, however, my grandmother was the one who prompted the conversation, resting her wrinkled hands on her lap as she finished yet another basket. I peered at her hesitantly, worried that she was going to scold me for my horrible weaving job. I attempted to shield my lumpy basket from her, turning my body away slightly, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

“Have I ever told you about my first time in the forest?” she asked me.

Surprised, I shook my head, leaning in keenly, holding my breath, as she began to tell the story.
“The first time that I went into the forest, my mother brought me,” she started. I had known that my grandmother grew up poor, poorer than us, which is hard to believe. My grandmother had far too many siblings, an alcoholic father, and a narcissistic mother. I had never known her parents, they died long before I was born. Her father died frozen behind a pig trough in the dead of winter, a bottle of whiskey in his hand. A few years later, her mother was found hanging from the rafters of their neighbor’s barn.

“My mother brought me into the forest to find food. Just me. None of my siblings came. It was spring; the first buds were beginning to sprout from frozen ground and the forest ground was mushy with mud and buried leaves.” She paused, “My siblings and I used to love the feeling of mud in between our toes,” she laughed softly. “We walked together for a while. My mother pointed at animals that scampered through the branches and sometimes stopped to pick the occasional root or flower from the dirt. I was only five,” my grandmother added, her gaze fixed on the weaving in her hands. “So, my mother suggested that we play a game. She wanted us to both climb a tree and see who could go the highest. I was, well...leary, honestly. Almost frightened. I was only five. But my mother was very rarely cheery or playful, so I agreed. I didn’t want to ruin it. It wasn’t often my mother wanted to spend time with us—let alone me.

“I let my mother pick the tree; she settled on a large oak that towered over all the others, her trunk wider than the arm span of a fully grown man, branches spread bent and crooked like the bones in your fingers. I have always been a good climber, at least as long as I didn’t look down.” she paused, her eyebrows furrowed in thought, “In some ways, I think the sky seemed to call to me that day, pulling me up branch by branch until I was at the very top.

“Looking down at everything from the sky, it was like seeing a different world,” she said “I was so proud to reach the top, but when I looked for my mother I could not find her. I
remember calling her name, peering through the branches to find where she was crouched, expecting to be met with a laugh and a smile. But she wasn’t there. She left me. She was gone. I was up there for hours, calling for anyone that could hear until my voice grew hoarse,” she said, fingers looping a scrap of bark, tucking the end into a prior weave.

“Soon enough, I had to climb down. It was getting dark, and if I waited until nightfall I would never be able to find my way home. But in order to get down, I had to look below, which I found terrifying, I didn’t like heights, and as a child, everything seemed so big. So tall. It seemed to stretch forever. No matter how far I climbed down, I was still too high up from the ground. I could feel my whole body shaking, my legs and arms were so weak, it was like each movement was fueled by nerves.” She paused, clearing her throat, “And then, when I was taking a step down, I tried to place my foot on the branch below to balance myself. I searched so carefully for a sturdy spot to place my hands so I could redistribute my weight, but the branch snapped.

“I fell,” she said. “I should’ve died that day—or maybe I did. My crumpled body just laid against the ground as I cried. My spine was broken, shattered ribs impaled my lungs, and each breath was full of blood. It bubbled from between my lips. Night fell as I was dying. Trying to stay awake, I focused on the moon above. Just as I was about to give up, I saw a deer. It was a three headed deer: male, female, and fawn; its was body strong and large. Thick ripples of muscle moved beneath its flesh. Through half-closed eyes I saw it gently tilt its heads. Its six gentled eyes peered down at me as its hooves stepped in the spreading pools of blood that coated the soil. There was so much blood.” She shook her head gently.

“When the deer came to me, the fawn lowered its nose to my face, breathing its hot air on my skin. It was so gentle and warm. By this point, I could barely keep my eyes open. The pain had burned the last of my nerves, leaving me numb and exhausted. The darkness seemed like a
peaceful rest or relief. I gave in to the sweetness of sleep, but just before drifting, there was a cool wetness between my eyes, a tender sigh, and a lingering warmth that spread to my cheeks. Then suddenly, three tongues licked at my body, slippery tongues cleaning ichor and mud from my wounds, drinking from the pools of blood that gathered in the crevices of my body. And to this, I fell asleep.

“When I woke, it was still day—time seemed to have stayed still—and the three-headed deer peered at me from behind a bush. If I had not known, I would have thought them all separate beings, animals with their own bodies and legs and tails. I was shocked to find my body completely clean, a bit sticky from saliva, but my bones and wounds were healed. Though, a single scar stayed.” she pointed to her forehead, “The shape of the moon, between my brows,” she grew serious, her brows furrowed into a deep crease. “That day, the trees whispered secrets and twisted truths to me. I will never forget it.”

“What secrets did they tell you?” I asked, but she ignored me, moving on as if she didn’t even hear me. Some secrets aren’t meant to be shared, I told myself, trying not to pout.

“When I returned home, my mother acted as if nothing had happened, as if she had not just abandoned me alone in a tree in the middle of the forest. For a while, I almost didn’t believe that what had happened was real, I thought that maybe my mother was right and that I was crazy.” She laughed, “If it weren’t for the scar between my eyes and the memory of the three-headed deer, I may have even forgiven her.

“The woods always pulled me back, even when I tried to run away. Remember. Garinión, no matter where you go, the forest will find you. Now,” she said, signaling that our conversation was over. “Finish your basket.”
My great-aunt was one of the only siblings that my grandmother saw regularly. Barely three years younger than my grandmother, they were rather close as children. Sometimes, during the winter, my mother would make my sister and I carry baskets full of meat and herbs to my great-aunt’s house on the other side of the river. My great-aunt’s husband and all of her children were dead, so we were the ones left to care for her. By the time we arrived at her house, we were on the verge of frostbite, our eyelashes coated in thick white crystals. There, my great-aunt would strip us of our cold and wet clothes, wrap us in woolen blankets, and place us near the fire. Her house was small and dirty, a hodgepodge of broken knick-knacks and rubbish that she would try to pawn off on us to bring home. Sometimes we couldn't bear to say no, so we would carry back chipped teacups, burnt dish towels, copper nails, and an assortment of other useless things that our mother would cuff us on the ear for dragging home. These trips stopped the winter she died of typhus. My sister and I found her in bed, body swollen like a tick, the stench of rotting meat filling our stomachs before we puked it back out. We didn’t even know she was sick, but there she lay. Long dead.

My great-aunt was always eager to tell a story. Inching forward in her seat, she would whisper grand tales full of drama and descriptions. She always leaned a bit too close when talking to people, each word splattering flecks of spit on my cheeks. When she told me the story about when my grandmother went missing, her breath smelled of eggs and cabbage.

Apparently my great-grandmother was distraught when she realized that my grandmother had disappeared. However, my great-aunt said that she only noticed when there was no more food or no money left.
“She had already been gone for days,” she told me, twisting a greyed rag in her hands, wiping crusts of saliva from the corners of her mouth. “The eldest of us had already looked for her,” she assured me. “We took shifts in between watching the babies. But nobody had seen her; we’d asked all ’round town. Most folk didn’t even know who she was though. I guess they didn’t pay attention to beggars. Mother looked everywhere for your grandmother once she realized she was gone and sent search parties full of drunken men, including our father, into the woods.

“They searched for days, though half-heartedly. While she was gone, folks in the village dropped off baskets filled with meat and bread. Our mother would sob and perform her grief for visitors when they came; her pride never stopped her from accepting charity.” she muttered bitterly. “When your grandmother went missing, we actually had more food than ever. Dozens of young women came by to give us home cooked meals, help care for the babies, and even gave us younger children hand-me-down knit clothes. Oh, my mother loved it.” she laughed.

“But two weeks later, far off the paths of the forest, sleeping beneath a rowan tree, your grandmother was found. Her body was wrapped in a nest of vines and roots, like she was sleeping beneath a blanket of bark. A group of men found her, although they might have missed her if it weren’t for the youngest of the lot. He never admitted it, but he was spooked by a loud bird, jumped into the air, and then tripped over one of the vines that wrapped around your grandmother. She was only ten at the time. Almost her entire body was covered in the tangle of brown and green, except for her face. The boy screamed when he saw her, and then was sent by the older men to go and get our father,” she paused to cough, phlegm coating the inside of her handkerchief. “He arrived not long after, all ruddy faced and drunk, shouting slurred words that echoed through the woods.
“Our father tried to cut her out with an axe.” she laughed, “He always thought brute force could fix everything,” she pointed to a nasty scar on her calf that ran jagged with the curve of her foot, “With each cut, the bark wept thick sap that smelled of soured honey. The rowan tree didn’t want to let her go. Our father couldn’t cut her from the roots. No matter how many times he swung his axe, the forest seemed to heal itself; it was the strangest thing.

“When your grandmother awoke, the rowan tree loosened its grip. Its roots seemed to slacken with exhaustion, like holding your grandmother was the hardest thing it’d ever done. Daybreak was still waking the sleeping sky, a bluish grey that painted the dawn like water. There were no pinks or oranges, no bursts of brightness, just the blue. Hundreds of splinters stuck from your grandmother’s body like feathers. The long strips of wood were shoved deep into her flesh and blood crusted around her wounds. Her skin had already started to heal around the wood, leaving purple blotches of rotted flesh. There are no scars now, or at least, not where we can see them. Mother pulled the splinters from your grandmother’s body for days, peeling back layers of skin with the butcher’s knives and plucking the wood from her flesh like feathers.

“I asked her what had happened, but she didn’t remember. The only thing she could tell me was that she had tried to leave,” my great-aunt paused, her gaze meeting my eyes. “She had tried to leave the clearing. But the forest didn’t let her.”

“Why did she try to leave?” I whispered, shocked. My grandmother had never told me this before.

“The same reason they all do,” she told me simply, “She was unhappy.”
4. Hollow Bones

By the time I was ten, my fear of the forest had faded, becoming a more manageable anxiety, one that settled into my bones, dug itself so deep that it became a part of me. And like most things about myself, I often forgot that it even existed. It became as ordinary as my freckles or knobby knees. Yet, as much as I tried to ignore it, something always pulled at the thread that connected me to the woods. It roped me back in whenever I went too far, whenever I was away for too long.

This feeling compelled me to begin spending more time in the forest, tagging along with my grandmother as she went for her daily walks, sometimes even asking her to go with me later in the day once she had returned. She never refused. The first time I asked, I shyly approached her, tapping her lightly on her elbow, “Will you bring me to the forest?”

She was confused, eyebrows raised slightly as she looked at me inquisitively, but did not hesitate to say, “Of course.”

One of these times, while foraging, my grandmother and I stumbled upon a wren crumpled on the forest floor. Spring was on the verge of welcoming summer, the endless days of rain lessening as sunshine began to peek through the greyed clouds. The wren’s wings were bent as if mid-flight, neck twisted grotesquely, like somebody had tried to pluck its head from its body. I found a perverse fascination in witnessing the awfulness of its tragedy. The wren was just a baby. There were patches of flesh where feathers had not yet sprouted, its innocence made plain in an ugly sort of way. My grandmother ignored cries, brushing past me swiftly to kneel before the bird, cradling its lifeless body in her hands. I watched through eyes blurred by tears as
my grandmother opened the bird’s mouth and spit in it, feeding the baby the essence of her being. A glob of saliva pooled from her thinned lips, hanging in a heavy stickiness before plumping into the wren’s beak. My grandmother’s fingers pinched the bird’s mouth shut, placing her thumb on the concave of its throat, and pressed gently into its esophagus. The bird shuddered; a panicked choking twitched its body into a frenzied dance before resting motionless once again.

Then, the wren’s eyes fluttered open, its tired gaze peering at my grandmother through heavy lids, sleepy and skeptical. My grandmother laid the bird down again, placing it gently on its feet and pushing its bottom as if to say, get a move on. It gave us one last curious look, its gaze almost human, before flying away.

There were many times where my grandmother seemed to bend nature to her will, killing or saving life with ease. She had a hungriness, an animalistic quality about her, which was reflected in the way she would hunt. Her eyes saw everything, followed each movement of the forest with ease, her ears twitching from some far away sound that only she could hear.

She preferred to sit perched on a branch with her bow strapped to her back and a quiver of arrows hanging from her hip. Even in her old age, she was able to hoist herself up a tree, leaned her hunched back against the bark, blending in seamlessly to the foliage that surrounded her. Only once had she shot her prey, its imminent death hurtling silently from the sky, would she lower herself from her perch, swooping down to pull the arrow from the animal’s flesh, wiping the bow’s jagged point clean on the linens of her underskirt.

My mother’s approach was different; she stayed close to the ground, walking barefoot over roots and rocks, her soles stained black from dirt, each footstep silent, like a ghost. She
crouched behind bushes, laid flat in tall grass, only her eyes moving as it followed her prey. She would rarely use a bow. More often than not, she would just wait until an animal came close enough for her to stab it, her unsheathed knife clutched in her hand, patient and still.

Their differences were often the cause of tension, my grandmother’s disapproving eye always watching my mother, picking apart her flaws. “You can do better than that, inion,” she said often, as my mother glared back at her irritated and disgruntled. It was her way of showing love, which we knew, but it didn’t make her any easier to deal with. In my grandmother’s mind, her way was the only way. Anything that deviated from her path was wrong.

I never saw my mother with a man, but whisperings circulated the clearing of my mother’s dalliances. Other children would hurl insults at my sister and I, calling our mother whore, slut, wench. “Liars”, I would scream back until my sister dragged me away. My mother was beautiful. The sway of her hips captured the gaze of every man she walked past, but she never seemed interested. In fact, she never even seemed to notice. She walked with a grace that unfortunately was not passed down to me, each step light and elegant, as if she were dancing.

She tried to teach me once, how to hold myself, to walk with an effortless sophistication. I had cried to her after coming home from school, convinced that I was ugly and ungainly. My knees were covered in mud, the result of too rough boys who liked to pick on ugly girls. Sitting beneath a tree at lunch, a group of boys had come over and started tossing acorns at me, gentle at first, until their laughter fueled their violence and soon I was being pelted by rocks. When I tried to get up to leave, they shoved me to the ground, pushing my knees in the dirt until I bled. “Poor ugly lass,” they taunted.
When I came home, my eyes were red and puffy, and tracks of blood ran down my shins. My mother asked what had happened, so I told the truth, unable to even look at her.

She did not hesitate to comfort me, gathering me into her arms, and rubbing my back until I calmed. Wiping the mud from my legs and wrapping my wounds carefully in bandages, my mother waited until I was cleaned for us to talk. “You might not believe it, she told me, but I was the same as you when I was your age.” I scoffed, not believing her. “You are beautiful,” she said sternly, her voice telling me not to argue. I knew she was lying, but it felt nice to hear it all the same.

The next morning, she brought me to the grassy field beside the chicken coop, a large basket hanging from her shoulder. She kicked off her shoes as soon as we got there, she never wore shoes if she could help it, and unpinned her hair from the single plait that ran down her spine. She motioned for me to do the same, waving her hand in my direction. She told me to walk from one side of the field to the other, one hand resting on her jutted hip, hair twisted over her shoulder as she watched. My body felt awkward and uncooperative, I tried to sway my hips like I saw my mother do so many times, to keep my shoulders back, chest forward, chin slightly tilted upwards, but it felt wrong. When I came back, my mother laughed and told me. “You looked like a chicken trying to be a swan.”

She took me by the wrists, and looked at me, her palm pressing into the small of the back, gently pushing back my shoulder blades, forcing my body to relax into a softer position. She made me stand like that until it felt natural, until I was able to recognize the feeling of my own body within this new posture. Then, she made me walk, keeping close behind me, her fingers gripping my waist, feeling the shifting of my hips, her touch working to loosen the tension that kept me rigid. We walked until the moon came up, our toes wetted by the dew that grew on the
grass beneath our feet. With each step, my mother’s hands molded my body like clay. When the sun began to rise again, the horizon behind the trees outlined in a hazy orange glaze, my mother told me to stop, wrapping her arms around my chest, pulling me backwards off my feet into her chest. She told me that I was a lady now, “Your body is your greatest weapon,” she told me, kissing me on the top of my head. “Now you know how to use it.” Before we went home, my mother gathered the eggs from the coop, tucking them into the pockets of her apron. A single hen sat inside, her feathered butt sitting on a nest of hay. My mother snapped her neck before she could even squawk.

My mother had seven children, but only two survived. Since I’ve been a baby, she has told me that she found me sitting in an owl’s nest, bald and blind. The birds were trying to eat me because I would not fly.

“They would have shoved you from the nest if I had not found you,” she told me. “You would have fallen and died.”

Every year, before my birthday, I was reminded of my birth story. My mother told it like this, “Before you were born, I had laid an egg. My stomach was swollen and hard, so I squatted behind the house and pushed until it fell from my womb. It was a lovely pale brown, spotted with specks of white and blue and larger than both of my hands. I hid it behind the shed, covering it with sticks and dirt. For nine months, I checked on the egg every day, keeping it carefully protected so it would not be discovered. In the spring, after the last snow had melted, I went to go check on my egg, bringing along a bucket to collect water, telling your grandmother that I would be home soon. But when I brushed aside the makeshift nest, moving loose wool and grass, lifting heavy sticks, I was met with an empty shell, a hatched egg, but no baby.
She opened her mouth in an exaggerated look of shock, slapping her fingers to her cheeks to emphasize the tale. “A few days later, at twilight, I found you in the woods. I heard crying from the trees, loud wails that shook the leaves. Y’know, you still throw tantrums like that sometimes,” she joked, tapping her finger on her chin thoughtfully.

“I followed your shrieks deep into the forest until I saw a large nest nestled between two branches and a baby’s bloodied hand dangling from the pile of twigs. An owl was perched on the branch above you. Its brown plum was ruffled with spots white speckled across its feathers, helping it blend into the bark. I watched as fuzzy baby birds pecked at your flesh, nudging you with their feathered heads. The mother owl spread her wings threateningly as I climbed to you, tilting her head to peer down at me.

“When I reached the top, the birds pulled at my hair, screeching and hissing, warning me to leave. I didn’t listen, instead moving slowly, inching closer to the nest with my hands outreached, waiting for the moment to grab you. When I returned home, my fingers were bruised, and my knuckles were swollen red from the owls’ pointed beaks. But cradled in my arms was you. My beautiful baby girl. You were so little and light, born with hollowed bones like that of a bird, a hooked nose, and feathered hair as dark as night.

“We fed you raw meat and worms. Whenever I let you suckle on the utters of cows, you would vomit up white froth. You hated the taste of milk and preferred to gnaw on bloody rabbits and squirrels instead, mashing the tough flesh between your tiny pink gums.

They stole you from me,” she told me, face flushing with anger, “I will never let that happen again.”
When I was three, my mother pulled me into her arms, her face radiant with joy, telling me, “You are going to have a little brother or sister,” her hand resting gently on the slightly fatter pouch of her belly.

“Eh,” my grandmother mumbled from the stove, shuffling around the kitchen, her feet dragging against the floor. “Don’t get her hopes up, inión. This one may not live long enough to even bring milk to your breasts.” She waved a dismissive hand behind her, not even bothering to meet my mother’s glare.

“Don’t listen to her” I told my mother, whispering the baby’s heartbeat into her ear, my mouth pressed against her stomach as I breathed all of my air into her bellybutton.

A few weeks later, my mother gave birth in the middle of the night. I could hear her screaming from my bed, a labored panting that imbued the house with heat and sweat and tears. From my bed, I listened as a baby cried once or twice, so softly I thought I imagined it, and then nothing. The next morning, I found my mother sleeping, blood caked on her thigh, a fresh grave buried out back.
5. Spirits, Siblings, and Soot

In the evenings, after we had supper, my mother would leave seven pieces of bread on the windowsill. “For your brothers and sisters,” she told me once when I asked. I remember wanting to tell her the dead don’t eat, but I held my tongue for fear of my mother’s anger. Instead, in secret, I started to leave my own gifts. Hidden behind logs of wood, or in the dingy corners of the cellar, I would leave poisonous mushrooms, mouse bones, or some other undesirable item. I was careful not to leave these gifts in places where my mother would find them, throwing them outside after a few days, only once I was sure one of the ghosts must have found them.

My mother’s miscarriages lived with us. They walked through our house like rats, scurrying beneath the floorboards as we slept. My eldest sibling, my brother, had a particular fondness for the empty space between the fireplace corner and the wall. The twins preferred the cellar and in the middle of the night, I would sometimes hear them jiggling the trapdoor, a playful clanging that seemed to ask me to come and play. But when I would unlatch the lock and lift the door, there was nothing but cobwebs. They annoyed me.

My mother’s first child was a boy, born four years before me. The next, a girl. And then a year later, I was born. When I was three, my mother gave birth to stillborn twins. My mother bled for three days afterwards, her bed painted red. I remember that I was not allowed near her, my grandmother keeping me far away as my mother grieved and healed. When my grandmother wasn’t beside my mother, she was busy making tinctures and teas or yarrow, motherwort, and raspberry leaf. During this time, I was mostly left alone, free to clumsily walk through the house, searching for bread or sweets to eat.
The first time I met my siblings was the day after my mother gave birth to the twins. I was sitting near the washing bin beside the fireplace, a crudely made doll in my hands, when I heard someone calling to me. The voice was raspy and rough, like the sound of scraping bark. The words were unintelligible to me, or maybe I just didn’t understand them. My knowledge of vocabulary was limited. The voice was coming from the chimney, above the ash that lay on the blackened bricks, echoes bouncing in the empty space that tunneled upwards.

I poked my head into the fireplace; the opening was taller than me, so my entire body was able to look into the chimney while standing straight up. The raspy voice kept speaking, mumbling words that floated with the winds that swirled down the chimney. “Come here”, it whispered, between fragments. “Play, play, play.” My newfound loneliness found this voice endearing and I eagerly stepped into the hearth, my feet and ankles covered in soot. I peered up into the chimney, searching for the voice that wanted to play, when suddenly a gust of wind swirled downwards towards me, blowing the dust from the chimney’s wall, encompassing me in a tornado of ash. I screamed, the frightened cry of a toddler who had been taken by surprise. And as the soot swirled, leaving smudges on my cheeks, the voice laughed, saying through its childish giggles, “silly little sister.”

I didn’t particularly like having my siblings around, although they weren’t always terrible. Sometimes our rivalry was fun; it was like a game, albeit a dangerous game. But their presence made my mother sad, a sorrow that she carried with her day and night. Her sadness made the air around her thicken with unshakable gloom, affecting those who stood too close.

My mother’s moods passed to me as easily as smallpox. The weight of her loss felt heavy on my chest, a squeezing that made it hard to breathe until I would finally let myself cry. Once, I asked my mother why they made her sad if they are still here. I thought that she should be happy
that her children stayed with her. She sat down, her body slumped forward, breasts resting on her stomach, thinking of how to word her pain to a five-year-old.

“No,” she said, carefully. “They are not with me. Not really.”

When I told my sister about the ghosts, I was hoping she would be an ally to me. She was three and impressionable, barely able to string together words. One night, when we were lying in bed together, I whispered to her about our dead siblings. I told her about the graves behind the chicken coop, the bread on the windowsill, the scuttering under the floorboards. I told her about our mother’s cursed womb, the bundle of herbs hidden beneath her pillow, and the baby bones she kept in her sewing box. “They hate us,” I told her. “They hate us because we survived.”

I wanted her to hate them back, just like I did. To blame them for our mother’s misery, for the broken cabinets and soot covered floorboards. My sister didn’t say much though, just looked at me with eyes too big for her face, listening to me speak, trying to make sense of it all.

The next day, when my mother put out the seven pieces of bread, my sister left her own gifts - seven dandelion heads, one placed gently beside each piece of bread. *Traitor*, I thought. As she grew older, my sister's vocabulary grew, and with it, our arguing. She didn’t understand why I hated our siblings so much, why I resented them. I didn’t understand why she cared for them at all, why she didn’t see what they were doing, how they were tricking her. “They are bad. They don’t love you; they just want to hurt us. Don’t you see? They are tricking you,” I’d tell. She would listen quietly, but never believe me, continuing to trust our siblings wholeheartedly.

“They are our brothers and sisters,” she said. “They love me just like you do.”

“Please,” I’d beg, “please understand.”

She didn’t listen. A few years later, when she was seven, the twins locked her in the cellar and dropped a pig carcass on her neck, knocking her unconscious. “They said they wanted
to play a game,” she told me, staring at her clasped hands that laid in her lap. We found her four hours later, lying in her own blood. When she fell, she hit her head on the stone wall, leaving a deep gash on her left temple. I found her first, then screamed for my mother, scared that my sister was already dead. My mother ran down the stairs, her face a calm mask, but her hands shook as she turned my sister’s body over and placed her ear to her heart.

“She’s alive,” my mother said. I helped my mother lift my sister, placing her gently in her arms like a baby. After my mother carried her upstairs, my grandmother cut her hair to give her stitches. My sister's blood matted the back of her head, leaving a knot the size of a chicken’s egg.

When she woke up the next day, the bags under her eyes were purple and her lips were cracking from dehydration. She was confused, unable to fully remember what had happened, drifting in and out of sleep. Later, when she recovered, she told me the truth. She refused to tell our mother. “She won’t believe us anyway,’ she said.

I knew it was true.

After that, my sister didn’t trust our siblings anymore. Unlike me though, she thought that the best way to deal with them was to stay on their good side. She urged me to try and reconcile with them, to apologize for my behavior, to beg for their forgiveness. I knew it was too late though. Eleven years of hating each other wouldn't go away that easily.

Sometimes, I could hear my grandmother talking to them, her mouth pressed to the cracks between the floorboards, whispering into the empty space. I asked her once why she talked to them, why my mother leaves them bread, why she still cries at night, and leaves flowers on their graves.

“When you’re a mother you’ll understand.”
The first time I bled like a woman, I was twelve years old. A brown stain smeared the inside of my underwear, the smell of sweet metal and the color of old blood. I assumed that I had cut myself earlier when I was dangling from a tree; I had wrapped my legs tightly around a branch, skirt and hair both hanging upside down, laughing as all of the blood rushed to my head. The next morning, as my fingers inched their way into my underwear, a cold wetness painted my nails red like summer strawberries. Every year, when the berries were ripe, I would eat so many that my tongue turned crimson. I would eat them until my stomach hurt so badly that I was convinced a strawberry bush was growing inside of me. The red was coming from between my legs, below my navel. I told myself that maybe it was the strawberry plant growing outside of me. Maybe it had gotten too big, the roots tangled in my intestines, leaves winding up my ribs until it had nowhere else to grow.

When I told my sister about the strawberry plant she told me that we needed to take it out, that it was dying inside of me. I imagined planting the strawberry bush in the garden, that the small red fruits would bear little babies. When my sister was born, her face was as pink as the inside of my cheeks, my mother’s insides having stained her red. I remembered the way my mother screamed, the way she spasmed in pain, how she squeezed my grandmother’s hand until her bones popped.

“Do you think it will hurt,” I asked my sister.
“Maybe, but I think that’s just what happens when you become a mother,” she said, “Maybe everything hurts.” She mentioned our grandmother’s crooked back and our mother’s swollen feet, how they both sighed when they sat, and how our mother cried at night.

There was already a persistent pain creeping up my thighs, an uncomfortable stabbing where my underwear met my belly. I could hear the ghosts laughing at me from behind the cupboards and felt the heat rise to my cheeks. *Maybe the strawberry plant will already be dead like them,* I thought. Part of me hoped it was.

My sister told me I had to lie down on the bed with my thighs spread apart, my dress hiked up past my navel, my underwear soaked red, a tiny spot of blood staining the sheets. When she told me I had to take my underwear off I refused, but she told me that’s how women have babies. I shut my eyes and turned my head away as she peeled the fabric from my body, carefully and gently like how our grandmother did with the other women in the village.

Sometimes our grandmother would bring my sister and I along when she was working as a midwife, tasking us with holding the basin of water or dabbing cool cloths on the mother’s neck. Her and my mother cared for many expecting mothers within the clearing. Sometimes, women would knock on our door, wrapping their cloak around themselves nervously, as they asked if my mother or grandmother was home.

Once, a girl around my age came to the door, her face gaunt and pale. She was barely thirteen. When my mother saw her standing at the door, she whisked my sister and I from the kitchen sternly telling us to stay in our room. We the scrape of a chair on the floor, the slam of a cabinet, and then hushed whisperings. My sister and I pressed our ears to the crack between the wall and door trying to hear what they were talking about. The only words we could make out
were “father,” “swollen,” and “desperate.” The girl’s soft sobs broke the whispers and we heard
the quick movements of our mother going to comfort her, “Shush, now. You will be okay.”

“Okay. Now push,” my sister said.

By the time my mother and grandmother came home, I was crying and screaming with
my skirts bunched to my navel. My sister told them to come help, that I was having a baby, that a
strawberry plant was stuck inside of me and needed to get out. They were both in shock at first,
but then my mother laughed. She doubled over, clutching her stomach, a fit of giggles shaking
her whole body. My grandmother sat down at the table, her head resting in her hands as she
shook her head.

When my mother could finally talk again, she said “There is no strawberry plant stuck
inside your womb. This just is what happens to all little girls when they grow up.”

She helped wash the blood from my body and gave me a strip of cotton fabric to place
inside my clean underwear. Then, she sat down with my sister and I and told us both all about
menstruation. She went to her room, then returned a few moments later with a bracelet made of
red stones. In the center of the bracelet, laid a single blue crystal, barely the size of my pinky
nail. She slipped it around my wrist, fixing the clasp tightly before letting my arm drop to my
knee. She told me that this will help me know when I am going to bleed, “Each stone is a day of
the month and when the red stone comes, so does your bleeding. My mother gave this to me
when I was a girl,” she said. “But, I have no need for it anymore.”

In the cupboard, my mother and grandmother kept jars full of dried herbs, all labeled and
dated from when they were picked. “Come,” she said to me, “You, stay put,” she said pointing to
my sister. We left her sitting on the bed, her face contorted into a childish pout, arms crossed as
her glare followed us from the room. In the kitchen, my mother rummaged through the cupboard, the clinking of jars echoing through the room like a song. My grandmother sat at the table, knitting, two needles in her hands.

My mother pulled out three jars, all filled with dried herbs, the leaves and roots of the plants faded brown and green. We sat at the table, the three of us, as my mother poured a small amount of the herbs out onto the worn wood. “Yarrow, mugwort, and raspberry leaf,” she told me, pointing at each pile as she spoke.

“These are all herbs that are sacred to women,” my grandmother added, her needles pausing as she looked at me to speak.

My mother smiled, softly. “That includes you now,” she said. “Yarrow can help relieve pain, and can even be used to stop bleeding, both from wounds and menstruation. Mugwort will cause bleeding. If you find that your bleeding is late, it will help. If you don’t bleed,” she said, “you are with a child. Mugwort can change that. Raspberry leaf helps women with babies, keeps both of them healthy and relieves womb pain and nausea.”

Both my mother and grandmother showed me how to grind the herbs, steep them in hot water to make tea. They told me which herbs to mix with them, “Chamomile and lavender are both good for relaxation,” my mother said, and how often to drink them.

My grandmother also pulled out a collection of tinctures from the back of our medicine cabinet, the tiny amber bottles gathered in her arms like flowers. She told me, “These tinctures are more potent than tea, that I should take a stopper full of each a few days before the first day of bleeding.”
“You are getting older, iníon,” my mother said. “Soon, men will look at you differently. You will see. A hunger will take over their bodies and a longing will gleam in their eyes.” she told me. “Humans are nothing more than animals, as much as we try to deny it.”

I did not bleed for months afterwards, my bracelet left almost forgotten and untouched on my wrist. But still, every month, during the week of the full moon, I would drink yarrow tea and mugwort tincture with my mother. My grandmother would join us, although she did not bleed anymore. “Here,” my mother motioned to be, “sit beneath the night sky and feel the pull of the full moon on your womb. Listen to your body’s sighs.”

“Our bodies’ change with the moon,” my grandmother would say.” Her phases are our own.”

Sometimes my sister would want to join us, upset that she had to lay in bed while the rest of us were outside together. My mother allowed it, even though she was still young. My sister drank chamomile and dandelion root tea instead of yarrow, but she did not know the difference, she was just happy to be included. The four of us would sit, side by side, beneath the glow of the stars, our eyelashes casting spidery shadows on our cheeks. Usually, my grandmother would start to hum, a soft melody that carried in the wind, a Gaelic tune that she had learned from her grandmother.

“We are all daughters of the moon,” my mother told us.

The next time I bled it was summer. It was hot and sticky; the air felt like liquid honey. I awoke in the middle of the night, the moon calling to me, a twisting knife plunged deep into my
stomach. I pulled my skirts to my knees, blood spreading from between my legs, my underwear already stained. There, sitting within a puddle of blood, lay a single strawberry, red and ripe.
7. Brambles

I don’t have any memories of my father, only of what others have told me. My mother said that his heart ate itself from starvation, having never loved anything but himself. We laid by the fire as she spoke, wrapped in blankets, my head resting on her breast. She said that when he died, his half-eaten heart still hung from his mouth, blood dripping from his lips like rubies. When my mother took it from his mouth, it was still beating, a butchered mass of writhing muscle.

“I finished it for him,” she told me, giggling in my ear like a child. “It tasted like salted pork.” Her smile widened, gums glistening red in the light of the fire.

My mother didn’t speak of my father much, but when she did, her eyes burned bright with rage, a thousand feathers bristling from her body, poised for flight. When this happened, I would try to avoid her, knowing that only a few things could calm her wrath. I would search for seeds and nuts at the edge of the woods, beyond the pastures and fields, where the wilderness began to grow. After a few hours, I would return my cupped hands overflowing with walnuts or chestnuts, offering them up to my mother. Pouring them down her throat, she would finally calm, her full belly extinguishing her rage.

My siblings and I all had different fathers. The eldest child was born with gills on the side of his ribs. The one after that with two horns hidden beneath her hair. The others had hooves on the soles of their feet, ears that bent like cats, scales instead of hair. I never saw them to know if this was true. They didn’t survive. My sister and I looked nothing alike and neither of us looked like our mother. My sister had dark thick hair that fell to her waist, bushy eyebrows, and dark
heavyset eyes. Dozens of freckles dotted her face and ears, the latter of which grew red when she was angry or embarrassed. She was short but strong, muscles rippling beneath her skin.

I was taller, less strong, but more agile. I would always win in a race, but she would always win in a fight. My hair was brown, tinted red in the summers, shaggy layers fell at my shoulders in loose curls. My nose was large and hooked, face long and soft, eyes too large for my head. Freckles dotted my shoulders and nose, but faded almost entirely in the winter months. When I was younger, my feet were big and awkward, something that I hated, but my grandmother told me I would grow into them. She said that the size of a child’s feet determines how tall they will be. I was almost a head taller than my sister.

Sometimes I would try to imagine what my father looked like, comparing my features to my mother’s and grandmother’s to see what I had inherited from him. My nose, my forehead, the color of my hair, the way the spots on my shoulder’s darkened in the summers. I imagined him with a beard, one that fell to his chest, strong shoulders, legs that could run for miles. Maybe he was a traveler. Maybe that’s why he has no family here, I would think, no family besides me.

When my sister and I were small, three and seven, we had a contest. We each drew a picture of our father, of what we thought they looked like. My sister drew her father fat and happy, rosy cheeks and thick eyebrows just like her. She drew herself next to him, holding his hand, a birthday cake on the ground between them. I drew my father alone on a horse, stoic and strong, departing for a long journey. In the background, there was the clearing, our house, a small dot surrounded by trees. Hanging from his saddle, I put my handkerchief, the one I carried in my pocket with my initials embroidered onto it. “So he won’t forget me,” I explained to my sister.
When my mother found our drawings she ripped them up and threw them in the fire.

“You have no fathers,” she hissed, eyes burning, lips curled to bare her teeth.

My sister cried, but I knew better.

All I knew about the men in my family, my grandmother told me. From dawn to dusk, the men would work in the fields, harvesting wagonfuls of crops to sell in the town’s market. My great-grandmother would often join my great-grandfather, leaving her eldest children to care for the babies while she went to work. My grandmother told me how she cared for her siblings and tended to the house, doing the washing and cooking that her mother could not. While her parents were away, my grandmother would send the youngest of her siblings to the village center, bundled in their warmest wools, and have them beg for spare change. Their smallness offered sympathy that my grandmother could no longer garner as a grown young woman, and the begging money, although shameful, helped to pay for grains and meat. Yet even then, it was never enough.

To survive, my great-grandmother taught her to find food in nature, which my grandmother then taught my mother, and my mother continued to teach me and my sister even after my grandmother had passed. My great-grandmother took my grandmother and her siblings to the forest to search for food and medicine, anything that could help them survive another day. When they gathered a large bounty, they did not have to return to the forest for days, sometimes even a week. However, when they tiptoed home with pockets empty and light, my great-grandmother made them return to the dark forest alone, tear-streaked cheeks still stinging from their mother’s angry hand, not able to return until they had managed to fill their baskets completely.
One summer, when I was six years old, my grandmother brought me to the forest in search of blackberry brambles. She led me to the woods, walking through the pasture where lazy herds of sheep lay and graze, her wrinkled hand pulling me gently along. There was an urgency in her stride, each hurried step deepening the line between her brows, her bow strapped tightly to her back. Only when we reached the tree line did her stride soften and with it, her taunt face. The lines in her face smoothed, as if bark under the hands of a whittler.

After some time, she slowed, pulling me beside her with an impatient tug, and pointing at a wiry pile of green before us. At first, I looked in confusion, not sure exactly what was so special about the overgrown branches that littered the forest floor, before, too slow for my grandmother’s liking, realizing that those overgrown branches were hanging heavy with ripe fruit. We picked blackberries for hours, our pockets and fingertips stained purple, the sweet juice dribbling down our chins as we ate just as many berries as we gathered. Afterwards, we sat beneath a pine tree, letting the slivers of sunshine warm our cheeks.

She told me that if you knew where to look, you would never go hungry.

“But how do you know?” I remember asking her, confused on how she always knew every time where to find our treasures.

She thought for a minute, most likely thinking how to explain the ways of foraging in language a seven year old would understand, looking at the woods around us, as if searching for the answer in the trees.

“Nature will tell you,” she told me. She pointed. A small grey squirrel sat on its haunches, whiskers twitching in impatience as it clutched a walnut shell in its paws. She told me that the walnut is food for the squirrel, but it can be food for us too. The tree it sits beneath is a walnut tree. “You can tell because the tree’s bark is dark, which means it is very old, and it has
ridges running up and down its trunk”. She picked a handful of berries from her basket. She told me that walnut trees have flat leaves, pointing to the leaves that hung above our heads, with smooth pointed leaves in bunches of six or seven. “If you can find the tree, you can find the walnut.” She pointed at the squirrel again, its black beady eyes now staring right at us, frozen from fear of my grandmother’s gaze. Suddenly, the squirrel darted away, paws crinkling the fallen leaves that lay on the forest ground. My grandmother’s arrow pierced its head before it got too far.

Every summer afterwards, at the end of July, I would pick blackberries from the same bramble that my grandmother and I discovered when I was six. Over the years, I found many more secret places full of edible plants and herbs, hidden to everyone but me and the forest. My favorite was a hollow oak, it’s trunk emptied, a hole large enough to fit a human child. The trees pulled me, a soft sighing in the back of my mind, beckoning me to the woods. I would toss and turn in the middle of the night, waking to the sound of whispering.

I would often awake, when the world was still bathed in moonlight and tiptoe out the door, escaping to meet the forest. Sometimes, my grandmother’s bed was empty too. Her blankets were still laid neatly, not yet slept in, and her unworn nightgown was hung in her closet. Strangely, her daily dress and stockings were also hung up and even her shoes remained beside the front door. The first time I noticed my grandmother’s absence, I had already snuck out for two weeks straight. I assumed she was somewhere in the house, perhaps washing her face or getting a glass of water, buck naked for all to see. I peered around the corners and through doorways, hoping to find her so that I could wait until she returned to bed to make my escape, but I couldn’t find her.
Maybe she is outside, I thought, she must be using the bathroom, completely confused on why she was unclothed. But she wasn’t there either. Eventually, I gave up, having already wasted enough time, the whispers now practically shouting, my skin alight with desire for the night, I stuffed some extra blankets beneath my covers and left.

Although the village was still sleeping, much of the woods were awake. I walked silently, trained by both my mother and grandmother to be just as quiet as the tiny field mice that ran through the fallen leaves, occasionally sitting beneath a tree and listening to the world around me. Beneath the dulled glow of the moon, many eyes peered at me from bushes and branches: raccoons and owls, foxes and deer, and sometimes the occasional bear. My heart raced with the thrill of danger, the intrigue of the unknown. I fantasized about what lurked beyond the trees and watched me as I moved unknowingly, almost invisible, through the forest. What lay beyond the pasture, hidden from me in the shadows of the night? I was bewitched. I stayed in the woods until the moon began to fall, her body shying from the sun’s gaze, two lovers unable to touch. When I returned home, as the clouds were lightening from grey to white, I would have a new scratch or bruise, my boots caked in mud and leaves, but my fists always full of plants.

A few times, I could’ve sworn I saw my grandmother’s face peering at me from high in a tree. A beak where her nose should be, grayed hair shining in the moonlight, like silver feathers. The winds hummed me sweet lullabies, the same that she sang to me as a child, deep strums of Gaelic that twisted on my tongue.

The night time escapades continued well into my adolescence, the only time where I truly felt alone and unwatched. The eyes were constant in the clearing. Although we lived on the outskirts of the village, people always somehow knew everything about us. One of my only friends besides my sister lived in the center of the village, on the other side of the river. She was
kinder to me than the other children, and seemed to enjoy coming to our house and playing in the fields. My mother would send her home with flowers and herbs, occasionally giving her medicine if someone in her house was sick. But although we were friendly, we were never particularly close. I was hesitant to share too much with her, to tell her the truth about my family or the forest. Instead, I would often tell her fairytales, grand stories of magic and myth. She would laugh in glee, sometimes adding in, before asking if we could go and play. When I was twelve, she and her older brother went missing. When she would visit me, she was often covered in bruises, fingerprints scattered across her arms and legs, large welts trailing down her neck. Her home situation was no secret. Her brother was seven years older than her, a twisted angry boy who loved chaos. Her mother and father played innocent, too afraid to ever really confront him. So like them, the rest of us ignored it.

When they went missing, we all assumed they had gone to the woods. If they had been in the clearing we would have found them, even if they were just buried bodies and limbs. Maybe they got lost, or were taken there, or maybe it was just supposed to be a joke at first. There was nowhere else to go. Maybe her older brother had lured her in, dragged her by the arm, covered her screaming mouth, twisted her neck, left her corpse to rot beneath a tree. Maybe he ran away, too scared to return without her. I don't know. Her parents were distraught, but they had six other children to care for. Like with all missing people, the village organized a search party, but they were never found.

The forest is filled with eyes, that I knew from the moment I was born. It took me far longer to realize that the clearing had eyes too. Eyes that watched and watched and waited, whispered behind your back, judging, laughing, plotting. I was more comfortable with the eyes in the forest. I knew how to defend myself against them. I figure that is why I spent so much time
there once I grew older, once I began to understand what the forest was. Those nights were long, but not nearly long enough. A faded darkness that offered freedom, the night sky on my skin, the taste of what it meant to be unseen.
8. Bird Song

When I was fifteen, my grandmother died. Her health deteriorated quickly over the span of a few months, leaving her miserable and bed-ridden. My grandmother was never one to sit comfortably in one place, and although her body was in pain and her mind a bit scrambled, she refused to go quietly. My mother started sleeping beside my grandmother, too scared to leave her alone all night. She would wake alone in bed and find my grandmother sitting outside beneath the sky wrapped only in her nightdress. Sometimes she would get as far as the pasture where the sheep grazed before my mother realized she was gone. Those times, my grandmother would sulk home, her small and crooked frame wrapped beneath my mother’s arms like a scorned child, her bunioned feet caked in mud and feces.

My grandmother’s dying was tiring for us all. To help ease her soul, I would bring her treasures from the forest, lining them up along the windowsill beside her bed as she slept. When she woke, she would squeal in delight, her face lit in youthful wonder, shouting to my mother that the fairies had come again and left her gifts. I felt shame for deceiving my grandmother, making her appear foolish to her family and the true fairies that lurked in the forest, but she found solace in the objects and believed them to be protection against her sickness. When she died, my mother and I gathered the gifts and burned them.

She died in the spring, when the first daffodils were beginning to sprout from the bulbs hidden beneath the soil. I was sitting with her after having gathered water from the stream that ran through the forest, dabbing its cool water on her hot temples. The water soaked into her skin and streamed from her eyes, two rivers cascading down her body, soaking her bones and
flooding the floor. I licked the water from her cheeks, her skin wrinkled and damp beneath my tongue. Her tears were not salty, but tasted clean and cold like the purest water from a well. I placed two buckets on either side of her bed, gathering the water to boil for tea and our baths. Occasionally a fish would flop from between her eyelids, stretching her skin until it was translucent, and my mother would wrestle it with her hands, skinning the scales from its body and gutting it to eat for dinner. My grandmother’s face turned waxy and grey as death tightened its grip and swollen purple veins protruded from her cheeks like worms. She had forgotten my name, looking through me with absent eyes, unseeing and clouded by tears.

“What do you see?” I whispered into her ear, burrowing my nose into her neck, inhaling her smell of musk, sweat, and mint. She never answered. She was gone already. Her breath was ragged and wet, each inhale a fit of mucus threatening to suffocate her. Her body was betraying her, drowning her in sorrow.

As a child, I loved to swim in the river that ran through the clearing. The water was cold and clear in early spring, warmed by early fall by the summer sun. Winter never fully froze the river, leaving chunks of broken ice drifting far into the woods. My sister and I would sometimes place figures on those growlers; we made tiny figurines with hair made out of wool and watched them float far beyond the trees. We thought that maybe they would find their way out and reach the other side of the forest. My sister liked to make dolls of people that we knew, creating tiny butchers and farmers, even sometimes making us. Whenever she made herself, she always made a mini me.

“I would never leave you behind,” she would tell me, wrapping the small dolls in fabric scraps and painting our smiling faces.
I preferred to make imaginary characters, create new stories of people from far away lands, little gnomes who lived beneath bridges, or napping mermaids who waited for men to seduce. As we were making our figures, I would always tell my sister all about my characters. She loved to hear my stories, sitting silently the whole time, taking in every word. Only when I was done and finished with a final the end, would she spew a barrage of questions. She always wanted to know more. Sometimes I would entertain her, coming up with answers to satisfy her curiosity. Other times I would say that it was a secret, that the dolls didn’t want me to tell anyone else until they were gone, away on their journey down the river. A few days later, after we have waved our dolls goodbye, our numbed hands flapping in oversized mittens, would I finally tell her the answers to her questions.

In the spring, once the ice had melted, my grandmother would bring us to the river to fish. In early spring, when the first salmon began to swim upstream, my grandmother, mother, sister, and I would rush to the river, two of us on either side of the shore, carrying a huge net. Each of us would hold one corner, the net spread between the four of us like a giant’s blanket, and ease it into the water. The salmon would swim right into it, their scaly bodies flopping into one another, bulbous eyes protruding from the sides of their head. In that first week of spring, we would usually catch dozens of fish, dragging them home in buckets, wrapping each salmon carefully in brown paper and bringing them into the village to sell.

My grandmother's last breaths were labored, but quiet. The pause between each inhale and exhale grew, her chest laying still for minutes at a time before reluctantly rising again. Each exhale rattled the windows, my grandmother’s body expelling all of her life, her body a skeleton coated in skin. My mother sat on the other side of her, combing through her knotted hair, chunks ripping from her skull twisted in my mother’s fingers. My gatherings lay beside her on the
windowsill, a handful of acorns clenched in her palm as if she were willing them to grow. I wanted to pry her fingers open and steal them back, hold onto the last bit of life she had to offer, nurture them until they sprouted into huge oaks with my grandmother sitting on the branches. I placed my palm over her fist, wrapping my fingers around her own.

Her breathing paused again. I don’t remember how long we stayed there, still except for the rasps of my grandmother’s breaths, the shaking windows, and my mother’s silent sobs.

When she died, it was quiet and quick and unextraordinary. My mother didn’t notice at first, the way that my grandmother’s body relaxed, her eyebrows and jaw turned soft, her chest sinking deep into herself as she let out her last exhale. It was only when the house stopped shaking and the storm ended that she realized what had happened. She screamed, her voice cracking from her expression of grief, my little sister cowering in the corner. My mother’s cries filled the house, a thick black smoke that choked me, filling my eyes with darkness. When I fell to the floor, I heard my sister sob, her cries desperate and frightened as my mother continued to scream, her pain ceaseless and never ending. My sister told me I was dead. I never asked my mother. But when I returned, that is when I felt it. My grandmother’s breath left her and entered me, a jarring cold that gripped my lungs and forced me to gasp for air. My lips blue and trembling, eyelashes coated in ice. It took three days of sitting in the fireplace to thaw, flames licking my wounds and healing my heart.

After waking, I went to sleep that night with a pain in my chest, tossing and turning. Like most nights, I awoke to moonlight streaming through the window, beckoning me. I rolled from the bed, softly, as not to wake my family, and crept out the door. A longing filled my abdomen, a heavy blossoming that rooted in my navel, pulling me to the woods. The air felt hot, almost itchy, like my skin was ablaze with invisible fire. As I stumbled from my house, eyes still
clouded by sleep, my fingers ripped at my flesh, nails raking across my skin, leaving long red welts in its wake. I remember feeling like I couldn’t breathe, like every breath was full of smoke, like an oven blazed in my chest. Too quickly, perspiration drenched my nightgown and sweat dripped from my temples into the concave of my collarbones, pools of salt evaporating as soon as they came, sizzling from the heat of my skin.

By the time I reached the forest’s edge, I was naked, my nightgown abandoned somewhere behind me, laying forlorn in puddles of mud. The entrance to the woods, a slender parting of bush, pushed a cool breeze onto my burning skin, a sweet relief that eased the pain of my body. Inside the forest, the silence seemed louder, a buzz of insects and birds, the quiet noises of animals moving through brush. The night was dark, except for the sliver of moon that shone like the white edge of my fingernail. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the darkness, but then, a blink and the woods was transformed into black a white, an eerie glow that made everything visible.

As I walked through the woods, my body began to cool, the sweat licked off my skin by a breeze. I shivered, wrapping my arms across my chest, pressing my forearms into the goosebumps that covered my breasts and stomach. It was then that I realized that I didn’t know where I was going. But I kept walking - bare feet stepping into softened soil, grass tickling ankles, disheveled hair tangled behind my shoulder.

With every step it seemed to grow colder, my breath a cloud of heat that I would capture in my hands, hoping to save some warmth. My toes grew numb as I stumbled onward, making my steps clumsy and loud. Soon, I came to my tree, the oak with the hollow trunk. It looked distorted in the nighttime, but my eyes could make out each bug that crawled through the ridges of its bark. At its base, a badger sat at its base, stared and then slowly trotted away, unconcerned.
I squatted near the base of the tree, curling my body into itself, hugging my knees as I
scooted into the hollow of the tree. There, the wind ceased and my breath filled the space with a
dull heat. The light was darker within the tree and my eyes had more trouble making out the
shapes, a relief compared to the forest outside which never seemed to rest.

The hollow was comfortable. When my sister and I were very young, we could both fit
inside. I would walk behind her, my hands covering her eyes, guiding her to the tree. “Where are
we going?” she whined.

“It's a secret,” I told her.

She was only a toddler. I packed a few cookies in my apron and some old wool that our
mother said we could have. When the wool was too matted for her to turn into thread, she gave it
to my sister and I. Sometimes we would use it to make our dolls, but that time I took it with us to
the tree. When we got to the tree, I told her to keep her eyes closed and made her turn her back. I
placed the wool inside the tree, creating a small nest for us to sit on before telling her to turn
around. “Tada!” I said, grabbing her hand and leading her inside. We had to sit so close to each
other that our foreheads touched, knees almost up to our ears. My sister made us pretend to be
mice when we ate our cookies, scrunching our noses and pushing our teeth out over our lip to
look like rodents.

We got older and couldn’t fit in the tree together anymore. I never let my sister know
exactly where the tree was. I wanted it to be my secret, a place that only I could go to. The wool
was gone now, completely disintegrated into the soil, and my bare skin sat on leaves and twigs
instead. I rested my head against the inside of the bark and closed my eyes, waiting to warm up
from the cold. I didn’t want to go home yet, so I closed my eyes.
When I woke up, it was warmer. Much warmer. The scratchiness of the leaves and twigs were absent and instead replaced by a softness. It was still nighttime, my eyes quickly adjusting to the darkness surrounding me, when I saw that my body was covered in feathers. A deep brown plume grew from my thighs and arms; patches of pale white decorated my breasts and stomach. I examined one between my fingers, twisting it slightly beneath my skin. The sensation was uncomfortable, but not painful, almost like a deep itch that couldn't be scratched. I tried to pull one from me instead, yanking the quill from my upper thigh, a moment of pain, and then a dull ache. The feather was in my hand and a thin line of blood streamed from the open wound. It almost felt like having my hair pulled.

I crawled from the hollow of the tree, eager to examine the rest of my body. My arms were longer, I noticed, the feathers hanging down to my knees. Wings, I realized, lifting one above my head. I let it fall quickly, a woosh of air as strong as the wind. I lifted both and, pushing as hard as I could, I brought them back down. For a moment, my feet left the ground, legs dangling useless until I landed hard on my feet. I tried again, this time lifting my arms back up as soon as I had brought them down, repeating the same motion over and over until I was flying.

The foliage above was thick, a maze of thick branches and needles, but soon I was above the trees. Soaring through the misty clouds, the forest was unrecognizable to me. From a distance, I saw the clearing, a small circular plot of land, scattered tiny dots that I knew were houses. The river ran through the clearing like a bolt of lightning, its water moving endlessly, clear and quick. It flowed far into the woods, its path devoured by the trees from above. It felt like I flew for hours, the darkness of the night never seeming to lighten. Perhaps the sun was sleeping away the day.
But as the gentle dawning of yellow crept over the horizon, I returned to the ground, landing at the edge of the clearing, my feathers ruffled from the wind. My eyes and arms were heavy, both felt like they were lead. The weight of my bones was unsettling, making my first few steps clumsy and heavy-footed. I walked home, almost unable to keep my eyes open, going inside as quietly as I could and rolling into bed.

When I woke up the next day, it was already mid-morning. My sister was not in bed, but I could hear my mother’s muffled voice talking from the kitchen. I looked down at my body, which was the same as it had always been. No feathers, no wings. I stretched, my arms and back were sore, a hot throbbing deep in my muscles, the memory of flight.
9. Snake Skin

After my grandmother died, my mother spent a lot of time in bed. For months, she would sleep, waking only to cry or stare absently at the wall. When she woke, we would sit by her side, spoon feeding bone broth and shredded meat until she gagged. Her body became thin and brittle, concaved cheeks sinking into her skull. We stopped going to school long before my grandmother got sick to help take care of her, but after she died, we started taking care of our mother instead. I let my sister do the hunting. It allowed her to get out, to leave behind the stretch of death and depression, the emptiness that permeated every corner of our house. I knew she enjoyed her time alone, where she could rest and sit in the trees, the self-soothing that came with the release of her bow.

While she went to the woods, I stayed with my mother. Most of the time she was sleeping, so I would busy myself with cleaning or cooking or making medicines. With only two of us, there was a lot of work to be done. Many things had always been done by my grandmother, like making medicine or tinctures. I tried to remember exactly what herbs go in what, how hot to boil the water, how much alcohol to use, which tinctures were taken orally or topically, but I made many mistakes.

Every few days, my sister and I would try to haul her out of bed, hoist her arms over our shoulders and drag her to the tub. “C’mon Mam," my sister whispered, her voice thick with desperation. This was the most difficult task. My mother’s skin was seeping, slimy and scaled, her flesh fell from her body like wet rags. When we pulled her from bed, pried the sheets from her damp skin, molted flesh lay between the sheets, a pile of translucent silk that was soft and
clammy to the touch. The water in the tub was scalding hot, hot enough to slough the dead skin that still hung to her body in flakes. She would let us scrub until her body was raw, the new skin underneath pink and painful, but she never complained. She never spoke at all.

While my sister washed our mother’s hair, I would change the sheets, sweeping the dried skins into a bag and dumping it behind our house. The skin was brittle and delicate, thin scaly layers that flaked into pieces as I brushed them away.

In her sleep, my mother would writhe and squirm, her body constantly moving beneath her blankets. She would wake, drenched in sweat as her skin peeled from her thin face. Her body was falling apart before our eyes. We would take turns watching her at night, afraid that she would wake up and kill herself if we were not with her. She had no desire to live anymore. Her mother was gone, her siblings, her children. I knew that we were not enough for her, that we were not enough to make her stay.

Eventually, her mood lifted and she was able to pull herself from bed. The first time this happened I was so relieved. I was washing dishes on the front porch, a basin of soapy water at my feet, when I heard the door creak behind me. My mother was standing there, her hair coiled into a low bun at the base of her neck and her fingers quickly tying her apron around her waist.

“The woods,” she said simply.

There was no mention of the last few months, the darkness that she had been consumed by, or the absence of her mother. When she returned a few hours later, my sister and I were waiting for her in the kitchen, preparing ourselves for the talk that would inevitably come or to find our mother dead in the morning. But, when she returned, she acted like nothing had happened.

My sister and I looked at each other, concerned. “Where did she go?” I muttered.
She shrugged her shoulders. “Does it matter?” she asked back.

My mother fell back into that darkness again and again, a pattern that repeated itself for the rest of the time I was with her. There was never any warning, just one day she would be back in bed, her body shedding itself like a snake, my mother crumbling as I begged her to stay. And then as suddenly as it had come it was gone and she was back to the same mother I had known, and loved, and hated.

In my mother’s good times, she continued to bring me and my sister to the woods to gather food, although it was different. She would try to teach us what her mother had taught her - how to spot the difference between morels and gyromitras or blueberries and nightshade. When we had eventually proved ourselves to her, she would accompany us sometimes and watch, silently observing us as we examined the woods around us. By then, our years of being in the woods had tricked us into thinking we were wiser. Our youthful arrogance overshadowed our cautious intelligence as we moved with an unearned confidence through the woods, being careless and cocky. When we made a mistake, which we often did, our mother would whack us on the head, pointing angrily at the shallow gills beneath a mushroom head that told us the difference between life and death.

“Stupid,” she snarled, her hand gripping our arms, pulling us close and shaking us until we apologized enough for her liking, leaving bruises in the shape of her fingers. It was then that she reminded me the most of my grandmother.

I called to my mother, pointing to a small patch of fiddleheads, not yet sprouted into ferns. My sister was hidden behind a foliage of leaves, searching for their own bounty to show
our mother. My mother walked over, her face impassive and stoney, showing neither pride nor joy.

“Fiddleheads,” she murmured lowly, picking one up between her pointer finger and thumb, peering at the tight spiral of green tendril. Still nothing. “Hurry, now,” she told me, turning and walking away, leaving me to fill my basket alone.

I found my sister soon after, scooping handfuls of leaves off the forest floor, searching for plants growing in the soil beneath. “Have you found anything yet?” I asked, swinging my basket around my shoulder as I leapt over a gnarled root that protruded from the ground.

“No, I haven't” she told me, sighing and angrily tucking a strand of dark brown hair behind her ear. Her thick and unwieldy eyebrows furrowed, giving away her displeasure and frustration at her lack of success. “But I will,” she assured me, looking up at me and sitting back on her heels, taking a break from digging in the leaves. Whenever she set her mind on something she wouldn’t stop until she had done it. She was determined like that. I, on the other hand, knew when to stop. She peered into my basket, her dark eyes narrowing in jealousy, “So what did you find?” Her attempt to seem unphased was satisfying.

“Just some fiddleheads and some dandelion roots” I said, ‘Nothing special.” I joined her on the ground, splaying my legs in a v and leaning back on my hands. I was tired and the cool ground felt nice beneath my skirts.

“Fiddleheads, huh? Mam’ll be happy about that,” she told me, disgruntled.

I laughed, “She already saw them.” She didn’t offer any praise or approval, like usual. But we were both used to that.

My sister nodded and paused for a moment, her lips pursed as she thought. Hawks screeched above, circling some distant prey doomed to be their dinner. Suddenly, her face
cracked into a devilish grin, skin stretched taut against her high cheekbones. She put on a fake falsetto, letting her hands hang daintily near her shoulders, “Oh, I am just so proud of you. You are the best thing to ever happen to me. You are just so wonderful and I love you so, so much,” she teased.

I frowned, turning away from her slightly, looking down at a beetle traversing the endless topography of weeds and twigs upon the forest floor. My sister was the hunter, and I, the forager. She teased me often about my inability to shoot a bow, my softness towards animals, how I hesitated when the time came to kill. I was better with a knife, I insisted. That, I learned from my mother. My sister was always too rash, too wild, too like my mother to be with her for too long. My grandmother taught her how to hunt, but my mother taught me. I preferred to be close to my prey, to be able to look into its eyes, feel its heartbeat when I plunged the blade into its flesh. I liked to know that it was a fair fight. That I had given it a fighting chance.

When we returned home, tired and sore, our pockets and baskets heavy with plants, berries, and food, we laid our haul out on the table and heated the kettle with water for tea. Sitting at the table, we separated leaves from stems, tying herbs to be hung from the windows to dry while my mother boiled more water above the fire for the nuts and seeds that needed to be shelled. In the bottoms of our mugs, my mother would place a fistful of dandelion heads, pouring scalding water over the yellow weeds, allowing them to sit and soak. In the warmth of the house, we sat, us three around one table, and drank our tea. The yellow petals of the weed melted into the water like butter, the bottom of my teacup like a sea of treasure, the siren’s secret. My own face peered back at me from my mug. I tapped the surface of the scalding water, startling my own reflection, sending ripples through liquid gold. It tasted bitter.
10. Burials

We buried my grandmother two days after she died. My sister and I dug her grave on the edge of the forest, beneath a birch tree. We left my mother to wash our grandmother’s body alone. Wiping a warm cloth on my grandmother’s wrinkled skin, she scrubbed her clean, the flesh beneath her fingers already cold and waxy.

She was wrapped in white linens and laid on our kitchen table, candles burning around her body in a circle. A few women from the clearing stopped by to pay their respects, bringing mead and flowers. “She was a wonderful woman,” they told us, their eyes full of pity. They hugged my mother and whispered soft condolences in her ear, kissing her gently on each cheek before going to kneel beside my grandmother’s body. Off to the side of the room, a few women congregated in small groups, talking softly, an occasional quiet laugh breaking the hushed silence of the house. A few women carried babies on their hips, their tiny hands and mouths grappling for their mother’s nipples as they uttered small coos and cries. My grandmother had helped birth these children, I realized.

The funeral was held at night; clouds covered the sky in a patchwork of greys and blacks. Her body was lowered into the earth, light raindrops wetting the soil that covered her body. It smelled like dirt, both musky and fresh.

That summer, I brought a boy to the woods and let him touch me between my thighs for the first time. He shoved clammy hands up my blouse, fondled my nipples with calloused hands. His touch was rough and eager, pulling hungrily at my hems, squeezing too tightly, his mouth
hot and clumsy on mine. I was sixteen. There were boys after him, pimple-faced and gangly, awkward and greedy.

They were reluctant to follow me into the forest, but the promise of my body must have been convincing enough because they agreed every time. Their penises looked like the worms that I found in the grass after it rained, but shorter and fatter. They looked like if someone poured a bucket of water on them, they’d drown. I imagined them wriggling around inside their pants, trying to get back to the soil. Worms were good at moving through the dirt, making holes and tunnels wherever they went. I wondered if that was how the first man and woman were made—from worms and dirt. If so, I was happy I was the dirt and not the worms.

All the crops in the clearing died with my grandmother. Her eyes shriveled like the potatoes buried deep in the ground, empty sockets black and unseeing. We didn’t have enough food for the animals, and soon, they starved. The sheep beyond our house became barely a dozen, their bodies frail, thin, and exhausted by the weight of their wool. My mother and I killed most of our chickens in the winter, when food was the scarcest. By the spring, there was only one hen left. My mother and I tried to spare her for my sister; she had a particular fondness for the bird. Whenever it rained or snowed, my sister would bring the hen inside, wrap her feathers in a blanket, and sit with her by the fire.

But by the end of winter, we had no other choice. In the middle of the night, while my sister slept, I sliced the neck of the hen, quickly, so she wouldn’t feel any pain. I thought that if I could do at least that, maybe my betrayal wouldn’t be so bad, that maybe it wouldn’t sit so heavy on my heart. The next morning, I told my sister that she must have run away because she was lonely. “Maybe she went to live with some other chickens,” I told her.
She turned her face away, hiding her eyes behind a curtain of hair.

Two days later, my mother went to the market alone and came back with a single plucked chicken wrapped in a paper bag and two small dace “Look what I got,” she told us. She said that she was lucky and there was a sale.

My sister was twelve when my grandmother died, on the cusp of adolescence, her girlhood still evident in her tangled hair and chubby cheeks. On her thirteenth birthday, our mother was unable to get out of bed, so it was just the two of us. I tried to make her a cake, but we didn’t have any flour or sugar. The only items in our cupboards were jars of herbs, canned wild berries from the summer, and dried rabbit meat. A few weeks earlier, my sister and I had gone to the market to find some food for us to eat, but the stalls were bare. My sister tried to buy half a dozen eggs, but the price had risen so much that we couldn’t afford them. We returned home defeated; our baskets empty except for three potatoes that turned black from mold by nightfall.

“How dare he,” my sister said when she saw them. “We’ve been buying his potatoes for years.”

“Maybe he didn’t know,” I said, trying to distract her from her rage. I knew that he must’ve known. All the potatoes were like this. If they weren’t rotted when pulled from the ground, they would be in only a matter of hours.

That night, while my sister slept, I tried to salvage the potatoes, cutting as much of the mold off as possible before boiling them above the fire. I ate half of one and went to bed, saving the rest for my mother and sister.
I awoke to a lurching in my stomach and saliva thick in my mouth. Before I could make it outside, I was on all fours, being violently sick on the floor. Drenched with sweat, I vomited until there was nothing left; my dry heaving twisted my intestines like a knife.

I buried the leftover potatoes in the dirt outside.

I didn’t tell my sister until the day beforehand that I was planning on leaving. I never told my mother at all. I feared what another loss would do to her, the absence of another child. *I’ll send for them. They’ll join me soon*, I promised myself, trying to ease the guilt that churned my stomach.

I brought my sister to the rowan tree in the forest. When my grandmother was younger, she had hung beads and colorful fabric scraps from its branches, its adornments dancing in the breeze. We sat beneath the tree, side by side, my head almost a foot taller than hers. A murmuration of starlings flew above the trees; thousands of tiny black birds swirling with the wind. Already, the leaves had begun changing, greens to browns and reds. Soon, the trees would be bare and the winter rains would fall steadily for months.

I didn’t know how to tell her; she was still so young. I hoped that she would understand that she would realize that I *had* to do this. I felt the tree behind me dig into my back, the bark rubbing against my shoulder blades, sharp and pointed sticking out from taunt skin. My sister’s cheeks were gaunt and greyed, the rest of her baby fat sucked from her face far too young. She coughed, a dry hacking that shook her whole body. I rubbed her back, trying to ease her convulsions and waited for her to calm.
I grabbed her hand, wrapping my fingers around hers, our palms touching as I tightened my grasp and leaned my head on her shoulder. We watched as a lone starling pecked at the ground, pulling insects from the soil. “I have to go,” I told her.

“Okay,” she said, unphased. She leaned her head on mine, “Will you be home later?”

“No,” I told her, pausing. “For good.” I felt her head lift and body stiffen, pulse quickening slightly beneath her wrist. I sat up too. From within my pocket, I pulled out two figures with my free hand: two little dolls, one with thick dark hair and the other with short reddish-brown curls. Letting go of her hand, I turned it upwards, dropping the two dolls into her palm.

“I’ll come back for you. I promise,”

She held the two dolls in her hand, clutching them tightly until her knuckles turned white. Clearing her throat, she said, “You won’t.”