

SEA FOAM

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By

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**UNIVERSITY OF REGINA**  
**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH**  
**SUPERVISORY AND EXAMINING COMMITTEE**

Courtney Morgan Bates-Hardy, candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Creative Writing & English, has presented a thesis titled, ***Sea Foam***, in an oral examination held on November 25, 2014. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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## ABSTRACT

*Sea Foam* is a collection of fairy tale poems. These poems draw from the themes, characters, and types of various fairy tales, ranging from the well-known tales of the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault to lesser-known tales from older or more obscure sources. The first section features the mermaid as a symbol of transformation. The second section focuses on fairy tales about the fear of change and the dangers of stasis. Finally, the third section tells the story of a woman who sees her life as a series of fairy tales. *Sea Foam* focuses on the theme of transformation in order to demonstrate the continuing relevance of fairy tales to our lives.

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For my family

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	ii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	iii
<b>DEDICATION</b>	iv
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>I. SEA FOAM</b>	12
Undine	13
Letter of the Mermaid	14
Captive	15
Siren	16
Equals Not Equal To	17
Pool	19
Human Perfection	20
Three Girls	23
A Mermaid in Love with the Sun	25
<b>II. I HATE CINDERELLA</b>	28
The Step-Sister Speaks, or I Hate Cinderella	29
Meditations on Yellow	30
The Birth of Beauty	32
“The Good People”	34
Sleeping Beauty	35
Red I	36
Red II	37
Father Ocean	38
Ivory Tower	39
Jack’s Forgotten Sister	41

Diamonds and Toads	43
Wings	44
Midnight	46
<b>III. ORIGIN STORY</b>	47
Origin Story	48
Bedtime	49
Red Swingset	51
Donkeyskin	52
Little Moonlight	54
Dorothy	56
Chick Flick	57
House of Mystery	63
Office Girl	64
Working Woman	66
Camping Trip	67
Wolf	68
Princess Lessons	69
Not Like Fairy Tales	72
Upon Marriage	74
Snow White Leaves	75
After Ever After	76
Dishes	77
Witch I	78
Witch II	79
I Understand You, Step-Mother	80
Mother-Witch	82
Grandmother	83
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	85

“Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. ‘This is how *I* make potato soup.’” –Angela Carter

## **Introduction**

*Sea Foam* is a collection of poems that draws from the themes, characters, and forms of various fairy tales. The collection is divided into three sections: the first focuses on mermaid myths, the second on fairy tales that demonstrate the precarious balance between stasis and transformation, and the third on various fairy tales that tell the story of a woman’s life. Each poem draws from, and therefore adapts, a particular fairy tale, such as “The Little Mermaid,” “Cinderella,” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” The sources of these fairy tales vary and often blend, from the well-known tales by Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers to lesser-known tales from older or more obscure sources (“The Story of Grandmother” or George MacDonald’s “Little Daylight, for example) and, of course literary fairy tales (Hans Christian Andersen or Oscar Wilde). The influence of Disney Studios plays around the edges of these poems, as it does for many people, including myself, who grew up watching their films. It is in adapting these various fairy tales that I hope to give my readers “the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise,” as Hutcheon describes in *A Theory of Adaptation* (4).

Linda Hutcheon offers a useful theoretical viewpoint that helps me structure my approach to writing adaptations of fairy tales. Hutcheon claims that every adaptation involves “re-interpretation and re-creation” on the part of the adapter (8). When I begin writing a fairy tale poem, I have either read a certain fairy tale recently, or I am drawing from childhood memories about versions I read or watched. The act of adapting is somewhat palimpsestic, in the sense that

an adaptation overwrites the adapted text, but the adapted text can still be seen in the adaptation. Hutcheon emphasizes the need to experience adaptations as adaptations, which “involves both memory and change, persistence and variation” (173). The interplay between the adaptation and the adapted text creates conversations between historical periods, between cultures, and genders; it allows for a multitude of voices to meet and rebound and split off of one another.

Consequently, my thesis has entered into a conversation about historical, social, and cultural concerns by writing fairy tales that are themselves particularly concerned with change or transformation. Hutcheon’s view of adaptation is closely linked to the two concerns at work behind my writing of fairy tale adaptations: first, the desire for comfort in a constantly changing world; and second, the acceptance of change as part of life.

Fairy tales are unique in their ability to capture a particular sociohistorical moment, only to be adapted by someone new in a different moment. They are also one of the most recognizable genres; we instinctively know when we are reading a fairy tale. Zipes has a theory about why this is the case in his book, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*. He quotes from Richard Dawkins’ *The Selfish Gene*:

Examples of memes are tunes, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain...And this isn’t just a way of talking—the meme for, say, “belief in

life after death” is actually realized physically, millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over (qtd. in Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 4).

Zipes argues that fairy tales have survived because they contain these memes. He uses the example of “Little Red Riding Hood” to talk about its widespread influence and dissemination that continues to this day. He believes that “Little Red Riding Hood” is a story that remains “relevant because it continues to raise moral and ethical questions about sex and power” (*Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 39). He explains that while Perrault’s “classic” version implicates women in their own rape, it was not always this way. An older version, “The Story of Grandmother,” sees the girl trick the wolf and escape. Both stories have been adapted many times—the feminist movement in particular has pushed back against versions of the tale that see Red Riding Hood devoured by the wolf. The movie *Freeway* (1996) certainly presents a Red Riding Hood character who refuses to be a helpless victim and, in fact, kills the “wolf” herself when no one believes that the man who attacked her is a pedophile. In *Trick ’r Treat* (2007), a young female character, Laurie, dresses as Red Riding Hood for Halloween and is heckled by her friends for being a virgin while they get ready to go to a party in the woods. Laurie walks to the party alone and is attacked by a man dressed as a vampire. However, it is soon revealed that she and her friends are werewolves and she loses her “virginity” by killing her attacker. Recent horror movies demonstrate flexible ideas about monstrosity and victimhood that aren’t limited by gender, in part because fairy tales have been adapted to better represent contemporary ideas about gender. As I have demonstrated, the importance of fairy tales and their connection to our contemporary lives continues to resonate in popular culture through their transmission as memes, and are especially relevant where issues about supposed gender traits are concerned (*WFS*, 39).

In writing *Sea Foam*, I am participating in a discussion about contemporary issues while adapting an old form. For example, “Red I” and “Red II” are adaptations that talk about our culture’s tendency to elevate men to celebrity status in spite of (or perhaps because of) their tendency to exploit women (I’m thinking of photographer Terry Richardson or R&B musician, R. Kelly). While some of my inspiration comes from current events, much of my writing also stems from personal memories. Although the personal process of creativity is still “taboo” or “too belletristic, journalistic, or simply Romantic” to discuss, I have attempted to focus my personal feelings and memories into poems that reflect a much broader experience (Hutcheon 108). As such, I am able to enter the “position of author” that Roland Barthes put forth as “a particular, vacant space that may in fact be filled by different individuals” (as qtd. in Hutcheon 106). Sexton, Carter, and Bernheimer have also filled this empty space. Their books, *Transformations*, *The Bloody Chamber*, and *Horse, Flower, Bird*, contain fairy tale adaptations that are influenced by the individual authors’ historical contexts and personal experiences.

Anne Sexton’s *Transformations* is a collection of poems that retells seventeen of the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales. Each poem is broken into two parts: first, Sexton’s contemporary interpretation of the story and second, the retelling of the Grimms’ version. Sexton’s poems tend to be faithful to the Grimms’ stories; however, Sexton uses the tales as autobiographic vehicles, often transforming the tales in unexpected ways. Ostriker observes that “Sexton does not alter Grimm’s plots....[W]hat she does with this material is to seize it, crack it open, and *make* it personal” (12). For example, “Briar Rose,” the last poem of the collection, is a reprise of Sexton’s childhood abuse at the hands of her father. Sleeping Beauty awakes:

not [to] the prince at all,  
but [her] father

drunkenly bent over [her] bed,  
circling the abyss like a shark,  
[her] father thick upon [her]  
like some sleeping jellyfish (111).

Sexton also forcibly drags these older tales into the twentieth century: Rumpelstiltskin has Truman Capote's "asexual voice," the deadly sickness of a princess makes the day "as dark as the Fuhrer's headquarters," the young prince in "Iron Hans" performs "like Joe DiMaggio" (17, 33, 49). The contemporary references often clash with the otherwise faithful retellings. Sexton retains the tales' dark aspects because she channels her secrets and fears through them, much like the original storytellers expressed their concerns about incest and child abandonment in their own fairy tales.

Although *Sea Foam* is somewhat linked to confessional poetry because it demonstrates my personal response to fairy tales, I am not interested in placing myself explicitly in the poems as the speaker or original artist as Sexton does. The characters must speak for themselves and the poems are continually given back to the reader as the final interpreter—she may or may not know the specific fairy tale that is referenced and she may or may not catch a glimpse of the author in the poems. Hutcheon says, "For an adaptation to be successful in its own right, it must be so for both knowing and unknowing audiences" (121). As well, there is a continual tension in fairy tales between the story the reader knows and the story the author tells, which are left for the reader to reconcile. I must trust my audience's understanding of fairy tales to lead them through the collection. Arthur Frank states, "The primary lesson from storytellers is that they learn to work with stories that are not theirs, but there, as realities. Master storytellers know that stories breathe" (as qtd. in Zipes 4). However, Benjamin states that "traces of the storyteller cling to the

story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (as qtd. in Hutcheon 111). I posit that both are true for writers of fairy tale adaptations—the stories are there, as realities, and we leave our handprints on them as we adapt them, and then the work is given to an audience to look for both the external “reality” of the story and the “handprints” of the adaptor.

Angela Carter’s handprints place her in the “demythologizing business” (“Notes” 71). Her short story collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, transforms various fairy tales by unmaking patriarchal motifs and creating new meanings. Her three retellings of “Little Red Riding Hood” are born out of her familiarity with Perrault’s “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge” and its warning to young women to protect their virginity, lest they be ruined by wolfish womanizers (Orenstein 38). Carter’s stories break down the motif of the wolf in order to change its representation of violent male sexuality into one that incorporates female sexuality as well. Cristina Bacchilega uses the symbol of the magic mirror as a way of understanding Carter’s work: the story is a mirror that both reflects the older story and refracts it (28). Carter’s stories emphasize the relationships between female generations and focus on the act of sex as a site of female power in order to refract traditional, patriarchal stories. In “The Werewolf,” the Red Riding Hood figure has her grandmother killed for being a werewolf, with the implication that Red can only “prosper” once her grandmother, a representation of a submissive generation of women, has died (110). In “The Company of Wolves,” the Red Riding Hood character is unafraid of the wolf; she accepts him completely and sleeps with him, becoming a wolf herself. Sex, in Carter’s stories, represents possibility, not destruction. Her stories demonstrate the need for adaptations of fairy tales that both reflect our traditional understandings and refract them in order to better represent our current concerns.

I am fascinated by the way Carter simultaneously juxtaposes two or more versions of a story in order to break down meaning and build it back up again. Her tendency to produce variants of one tale has been an influence on *Sea Foam*. The figure of the mermaid, from Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Little Mermaid," has surfaced repeatedly in my work. However, the mermaid is never the same. In one, she is self-effacing; in another, a creature of nightmare, and another, a symbol for a quest driven by desire. Her origin is not limited to Andersen's story either; she is also a siren, of those dark creatures who sing sailors to their deaths, and an undine who longs for a human soul. Fairy tales, myth, and modern life bleed into one another in my poems, creating a contemporary hybrid that both recognizes tradition and changes it.

Kate Bernheimer's *Horse, Flower, Bird* is a surprisingly poetic and transgressive collection of fairy tales. The stories are divided across multiple pages; the page length varies from a few words to a few paragraphs. It is rare that a single page is completely filled with sentences because there are constant page breaks, like line breaks in poetry. The reader is given a few sentences to meditate on before moving to the next page. The stories themselves are not recognizable adaptations of the well-known stories by the Grimm Brothers or Charles Perrault; they are about various characters: a tulip bulb, a girl who becomes a stripper and builds herself a bird cage, two sisters who role-play characters from *Star Wars*, and a girl who likes to atone and "wrongly envi[es] Anne Frank" (18). Bernheimer says, "fairy tales are everywhere you want to look for them, if you follow their breadcrumbs" ("Interview"). For her, fairy tales are made up of four key elements that "collapse and expand, disappear and transform, depending on author" ("Interview"): "flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic" ("Fairy Tale is Form" 64). Characters in a traditional fairy tale are often flat, while the stories themselves are

usually quite abstract, including only the barest details without explaining *why* something has happened (67-68). Bernheimer describes the intuitive logic structuring the tales as a kind of “lyrical disconnect” (68). She says, “[*t*]his is not logically connected to *that*, except by syntax, by narrative proximity” (68). A poet might call that metaphor. Lastly, the fantastic is normal in a fairy tale. It is not surprising that wolves can talk, for example (69). Bernheimer’s collection of stories pushes the boundaries of our understanding of fairy tales. To her, religion is a fairy tale, the Holocaust is a fairy tale, and *Star Wars* is a fairy tale. To say that all of these things are fairy tales does not mean that they are not true. On the contrary, good fairy tales may not always be realistic but they are always true. If Carter is ascribing new meaning to traditional motifs, then Bernheimer is demonstrating the way our realities—including history, iconic stories, and memories—are turned into fairy tales.

Bernheimer’s work has been instrumental in my discovery of fairy tale retellings because she does not limit herself to retelling the “old” tales; she makes new ones by operating within the genre of traditional fairy tales. She demonstrates what Zipes describes in his book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*: “These primary fairy tales [enable] humans to invent and reinvent their lives—and create and re-create gods, divine powers, fairies, demons, monsters, witches, and other supernatural characters and forces” (4). Bernheimer is my contemporary. I understand her historical and cultural references because I have also grown up with them. I watched *Star Wars* in elementary school, I learned about the threat of witches from Disney, and I learned about the concept of war from stories about Hitler.

The primary focus of my poems involves the parallels between the magical transformations that happen to fairy tale characters and the everyday changes that people go through during their lives. The title of the collection, *Sea Foam*, is taken from Andersen’s “The

Little Mermaid.” Just when the mermaid thinks she is dissolving into sea foam, as the sea witch told her she would if the prince married another woman, she instead changes into a spirit of the air and is given a second chance at gaining a human soul. It is in that moment of sacrifice, loss, and near-hopelessness that change occurs, for good or ill, for many of my characters. The poems not only show magical transformations but they also represent everyday transformations. Those transformations include deciding to find a new job (“Office Girl”), a first relationship (“Chick Flick), or the loss of a parent (“Origin Story”). Some of these transformations are based in the physical (“Birth of Beauty”), while others are purely psychological or emotional (“I Understand You, Stepmother”). These poems demonstrate our fraught relationship with change by framing each moment or possibility of change within a fairy tale.

While writing these poems, I asked where we see fairy tales in our daily lives. I believe I have answered that question in the third section of my collection, which begins with the birth of a baby girl and follows her life as she interprets it through fairy tales. In “Bedtime,” a young girl interprets her experience of a tornado warning through the story of “The Three Little Pigs.” In “Donkeyskin,” the skin represents the costume of femininity that women are taught to wear. “Witch I” and “Witch II” question and deconstruct the cultural myths surrounding motherhood by referring to the witch in Hansel and Gretel (who eats children), Rumpelstiltskin (who desires a firstborn he cannot have), and the story of “Babes in the Wood” (who are left in the woods by their parents and die). While these stories are violent and often shocking to adults who aren’t aware of their origins, it is important to me to demonstrate that they are still relevant today.

*Sea Foam* is my attempt to respond to the popular misunderstanding that fairy tales are only about princesses and happy endings. Pop singers, in particular, seem to have rejected the fairy tale genre entirely, rather than recognizing that fairy tales can be adapted for any number of

situations. When Taylor Swift sings, “I’m not a princess, this ain’t a fairy tale,” she reveals her misunderstanding of the fairy tale genre (“White Horse”). A fairy tale doesn’t have to end in “happily ever after” in order for it to *be* a fairy tale. While some fairy tales *are* full of princesses and happy endings, other fairy tales are full of “boys who are foolish, and girls who are nasty, and kind stepmothers, and wicked children” (“Interview”). The third section of *Sea Foam* is a direct response to popular culture’s misunderstanding of fairy tales. “Upon Marriage” references the tale of “The Fisherman’s Wise Daughter” as the speaker contemplates her impending marriage. “After Ever After” draws from “King Thrushbeard” while describing the challenges of the first year of marriage. Fairy tales have a remarkable capacity to talk about real life concerns and events in spite of the popular understanding of fairy tales as childish fantasies.

While writing this collection, I have been asked the same two questions many times. The first: why poetry? And the second: why fairy tales? My answer is deeply personal: I wrote my first poem when I was eight years old and I haven’t stopped writing since then. However, I also believe that poetry and fairy tales have something very important in common: they both began in the oral tradition. Poetry was often used as a mnemonic device; we remember words that flow and lines that rhyme. Fairy tales also use mnemonic devices: the repetition of threes, for instance. It’s possible that “Little Red Riding Hood” began as a simple story about a girl in the woods with a wolf. Now we have movies, paintings, Tumblr pages, novels, comic books, viral videos, and so much more, all offering their interpretation of “Little Red Riding Hood”. Margaret Atwood expounds on this connection between fairy tales and poetry in her essay, “Why Poetry?” She says, “what we long for and what we fear hasn’t changed—in essence—for a very long time... We want the purse that will always be filled with gold. We want the Fountain of Youth. We want to fly... We want to punish injustice. We want power. We want excitement and

adventure; we want safety and security. We want to be immortal.” I would add: we want to be heard, we want to transform ourselves, and therefore, to change the world.

## **I. Sea Foam**

## Undine

Wind down the seaside  
path, lit by the moon,  
notice a tail trace on the sand,  
a slight splash,  
ripples.

Follow the shadowed animal,  
a mystery in blue,  
an enigma,  
not ice, not sky,  
not you, not me.

## Letter of the Mermaid

My dearest,

If I could, I'd choose to be  
speaking,  
reassuring you I know how  
to make this world less  
full of leave-taking and shape  
our separate bodies into sea foam.

While I wait, there's a persuasive terror  
to these words drawing me out  
of this room, away from this table and my  
damned impotent lines. Yet your breath  
lures.

Your voice. Mine. Is all I can see on  
this weak paper. Already plotting out  
two word worlds imagined but aborted.  
They hang in the air like my own  
personal mene mene tekkel upharsin.  
What we need is a dreaming  
voice to bring us to ourselves.

With love, la sirenetta.

## Captive

When I caught her, bathing:  
scales slipping over pink skin  
like silk sliding over her waist  
or grain flowing over finger tips,  
the sting made its way into my blood  
where it burned.

I needed her in me  
so I stole her skin, kept it close,  
wove it into rope and bound  
her to me.

I thought I had her  
but when the light hit the blue-veined,  
butterfly skin around her eyes  
I was tied,  
again and again.

Siren

I understand the siren impulse  
to scream until you turn  
away.

If you responded,  
I would leave this rock  
behind.

Lashed to the mast,  
we will not yield.



Perhaps our definitions need  
to be revised.

Fairy tale = A hovel at the edge of town  
where children learn nothing  
but lies. They starve slowly.

The Little Mermaid = A fish in the sea  
who cannot cry or grant wishes, losing lives  
only to fishermen.

Choice puts our first skin  
aside and gains someone else.  
Do we know how to touch  
that foaming wave when it  
brushes our lips or do we  
slap it away, burst into water drops?

Fairy tale = A house in the woods  
where our children die  
from selfishness, only finding a way  
upon the sacrifice of bread crumbs.

The Little Mermaid = A girl who chooses  
to let a groom live, for we find  
that fulfillment floats  
out of our skin.

One is equal and one is not equal to.

Pool

I creep down the blue floor of the pool,  
    hands first, gliding over the smooth tiles,  
        pulling the rest of my weighted body along,  
            balanced on finger tips.

Silence beats my ear drums,  
    increasing with the slope.  
        Only blue surrounds me.

The black drain in the centre of the deep  
    is my escape; if I can reach it,  
        I know it will open a door  
            to the ocean.

But bubbles escape my mouth,  
    betraying me to the silent water.  
        My chest cramps.

I rise  
    with a flicker at the edge  
        of my eyes, which,  
            if I had turned fast enough,  
                might have been a tail.

## Human Perfection

### I.

In that green of the sea,  
it was nothing like those  
clear pictures of coral  
where bright orange fish glide  
among purple mushrooms.  
Instead, the murky depths  
draw you down dark jade reefs  
where silver black fish flow  
as one teeming legion.  
I chased one fish that  
    rippled iridescent  
    only when it turned.

### II.

This murky sludge played tricks  
when I saw a clear bulb  
and, terrified, breathed in  
the potent seawater,  
although remembering,  
"it's when you don't see them  
they'll sting you with pleasure"--  
while you're far from the boat  
and close to the deep floor.  
I see myself swarmed with fly fish—  
    empty eyes staring through green sea,  
    mouthing "the sea called you to your death."

III.

I swim alone today,  
in our light-dappled pool  
of sanitary blue  
that permeates my skin  
where it turns turquoise too.  
At least from the waist down,  
I have learned how to move  
underwater with ease--  
almost sirennetta.

The way I have to keep my head  
out of water where my hair waits, floating,  
tells me I'm only half transformed.

IV.

A hundred years from now  
when humankind destroys itself  
with mutations, the windows  
here are broken by time  
but softened by green vines  
bursting out and around  
mosaic, mossy tiles  
surrounding mold water.

Here transformation begins:

where we have lost our desire to say,  
*I can create anything from this.*

V.

Lone, feral,  
the pool eats through borders,  
creates a round lagoon,  
overrun by mistakes.

It quickly breeds new  
creatures slipping through drains,  
through abandoned silence--  
aimless and dangerous  
sucking rot from bodies.

They appear in hollows of water,  
    like this pool, where a cavern now yawns,  
    *Beware, what you desire to be done.*

VI.

They lurk in the darkness  
of this mutated pool.

Terrifying beauty:  
heads reared out of water,  
green mold streams down their hair  
    and when they turn this way  
    their faces are all slender dagger teeth.

## Three Girls

A stony beach, hard  
against a gossamer sky,  
dripping rain from grey  
clouds onto three girl figures  
walking along the coarse sand  
in feet as bare as knives.

Their thin dresses cling  
to their damp legs; their lips  
are closed.

A dragon-skinned sea witch  
rises from the shelled waves,  
beckons with her rounded head  
and silver eyes like twin mirrors.

*Join me here, enter my realm,  
bring me that shell from far below,  
and when you open,  
you will find a tongue.*

The first girl refuses; she turns  
and walks away:  
her feet bleed.

The second, cautious,  
glides in, lifting the hem  
of her dress from the wet,  
until a wave crushes

against her body,  
grasping.

She runs to land, collapsing.  
Her pale new gills  
quiver.

The third, waist deep, dives  
and sluices through green,  
lets the salt burn through her skin  
to the ache in her chest that called her  
here.

The water empties,  
fills her:  
she cries.

A Mermaid in Love with the Sun

There is no sun where I come from

and I'm swimming alone today,  
wrapped in a thought like seaweed:  
if there is light, could I see it?

Desire drives me upwards  
and, being blind, I trust my skin  
against water, cool and pliant,  
parting between fingers,  
and the delicate web of my fin.

It burns, black  
and icy hot, parching  
skin, shrinking.  
One flick of tail  
and I'm gone  
deep into the cool  
ocean,  
as black as the light.

She is a shadow beneath the surface,  
a blur, mirrored inward.

She breaks the water,  
sprays foam,  
screams.

She is the shape of hands  
outstretched.

It haunts me,  
the sun in my dreams,  
a light as ragged  
as the ocean is smooth,  
a touch I cannot reach.

She is a line drawing, sliver-thin,  
pressed to the under-edge of the surface,  
like a pane of glass  
over a painting.

The next day I'm back,  
just there,  
twilighted where I can breathe,  
and where I can burn.

She is embossed with water streaming  
on the surface,  
barely breathed into being, barely being.  
She struggles, there,  
unable to be.

I feel the sun,  
a ripple over lips  
that burn, a gasp  
through water,  
and it's there,  
the answer,  
and it's perfect,  
and it looks like light.

The sun catches her, then,  
in a lick of flame,  
and it looks like a soul,  
  
the way she streams  
  
apart.

## **II. I Hate Cinderella**

## The Step-Sister Speaks, or I Hate Cinderella

She smiles with her too-white teeth  
as she welcomes you to her table.

She volunteers for all the charities  
but heaven forbid she work  
for money when there's a prince  
in the house.

She's the superhero armed with big dreams,  
hard work, and the virtues of marriage.

She's the queen of happily ever after  
with six kids in the house  
and a well-pressed dress.

And I'd like to tromp dirt  
on her polished marble floors  
and tear at her clothes  
to see what's beneath.

## Meditations on Yellow

She spins again  
thinking of her father's  
fields, her mother's buttercups,  
the slim ring  
she won't wear.

When he appears,  
he rises like citrine steam  
from straw.

He fills her head  
like the cloying scent  
of rotting grain.

Some part of her  
wants to stay.

And if she stays,  
year after year  
slips by, spinning  
what she believes  
is gold.

Her face dusted by chaff,  
crevassed like a desert  
flower, a stagnant pool.

Her hands withered,  
sliced by hay,  
needled by stubble.

Still she spins,  
tied to her work  
or indecision.

The straw rots around her,  
its sweet smell rising  
like yellow fog.

## The Birth of Beauty

As a child, I was given a rose,  
trapped in a bell jar,  
topped by a tear drop.

When the first petal fell, I thought  
all the blood would leak  
from my veins, and my skin  
would shrivel like a waterless petal  
but the rose kept time for me each month.

The second petal fell  
to my expectation of fireworks  
but the strangeness overwhelmed my lips  
and spilled down my throat,  
shivering.

Then, the third, a tearing red  
that wept blood, leaving an insouciant appetite.

With the fourth came calm,  
luxury even,  
shimmering, raw—as if too new to the world.

The fifth never fell,  
it was torn,  
marring those around.

I lost count then  
so the petals fell, one by one,

each moon waning  
as I waited,  
for a vision or a body, unsure.

Desperate, I threw the rose at the wall  
where the glass exploded and  
one more petal broke off  
so I ate it, guilty.

With the moon, my belly swelled,  
gathered all light into my body  
where it pooled.

All broke loose.  
I lay gasping on the floor.  
From the blood,  
luminous fur and fangs gleam through.

"The Good People"

Pull back a curtain of emerald stems  
to reveal an other-vale. Tread carefully  
through a forest of fuchsia stalks—tart  
rhubarb sheltered by leaves like lily pads.  
There's so much sun in this green,  
it bleeds shade. A little red wagon  
lies rusted in the dirt, where two  
prairie lilies peek around a wheel.  
There are virginal buds, promises  
like ring boxes, blush with petals.  
Cement won't keep them out, stems bloom  
between cracks, surrounded by moss patches  
like an exploded orange on grey rivets.  
Slide down a curl of grass, a waterslide  
of raindrops to the clarity of a line  
of smooth rocks—sand dollar moons  
and the blackened blue of mussel shells.  
The tide could wash them away but  
spiky leaves hold the wave. Lie under  
a broken sky so fragmented a glimmer  
of gossamer wings catches the light  
and refracts. Remain cautious,  
throw crystal salt on your path  
and never  
say their name.

## Sleeping Beauty

Before I was born,  
the tale-tellers spun  
cloth with words.

At my birth, fear  
of a spindle prick burnt  
every wheel.

The stories melted in the flames.

The peasants cried out,  
bereft of words.

I knew what I was  
doing when I placed  
my finger on the point.

I awoke to murmurs,  
my ears kissed  
by yarn.

## Red I

There's a story I wasn't told  
as a child, and it begins  
like the one I was told:  
a girl in red enters a forest.

Teeth crunch at the end.

There's a story I'm told  
in everyday headlines  
and it ends the same way:  
Flashbulb teeth reflect  
off a red dress.

But there's a story we forget,  
somewhere between cottages  
and stages: Red trick-slips out of bed,  
ties her rope to a tree,  
and walks down the moonlit path.  
The teeth fade.

## Red II

Red never needed the huntsman before  
we started letting the wolf in.

Red knew the taste of blood  
and what it meant.

When did we decide to put the wolf  
    on the stage,  
too high for anyone to throw  
    down the well?

When did we stop teaching girls  
to trick and stick,  
then knot the ropes  
that tie wolves up?

## Father Ocean

My father is an ocean I never learned to travel;  
the tears I trace on the shoreline can't tell me  
what he fears.

When he dreams, does he remember?

He was married to someone else  
who didn't occupy a grotto.

We speak different languages, he and I.

In terse verbs, like seagull calls,  
we sometimes reach,  
but never touch.

## Ivory Tower

Her blonde hair shimmers  
from the tower,  
a blinding sun-white  
that doesn't quite reach  
the ground.

You hold out your hand  
and feel the strands brush  
and slip through the soft skin  
between your fingers.

You must weave a way  
to reach her fleeting strands,  
so you rip your own  
hair from its roots  
and tie it to hers.

And when you reach that high window  
near the roof, hairless and dry-mouthed,  
a princess nods  
and lets you in.

But your woven ladder  
ages and frays.  
The strands tear and you scream  
when you land.

The thorns pierce the center  
of your eyes.

You must wander the desert,  
knocking on each tower door  
until you complete the circle.

Even then, you can't know  
if you'll find a child in your place  
or an empty tower,  
its window releasing  
a final sigh.

## Jack's Forgotten Sister

I climbed the beanstalk  
first.

Alone, I leaped  
from bud to leaf.

Over the clouds, my legs burned  
as I reached for one slippery stalk.

I fell;  
I heard the crunch of my bones  
in the giant's teeth.

I left a hole  
in the cloud.

I awoke with a jolt  
every night, hearing the giant's  
teeth, and me, in my bed,  
not daring to breathe.

From the ground, I taught  
my brother to climb the stalk:  
how to cling with your feet  
and see green when you leap.

I saw the giant in my dreams:  
a hole where nothing grows,  
the stars torn out of the sky.

My brother didn't know  
I followed him that day  
he climbed.

I pulled my body after me,  
to listen from the shadows.

And when I heard the rumble,  
I fetched the axe  
to make the first cut.

## Diamonds and Toads

There was no sister,  
only me, walking to the well  
with the sunrise, spilling my words  
to the wind.

They flicked away, those round, refracting  
drops in the sun.

That day, they watered a fairy lily  
that grew a witch who gave me a gift.

Each syllable a shining jewel,  
abundant riches falling from my lips.

At the well again, I feared  
to speak my tangible words,  
and wished to keep them for myself,  
so the witch added a gift.

I became neither blessed nor cursed;  
I am blind to my own words,  
whether they fall as diamonds  
or toads.

## Wings

I let the crowd speak for me  
    when I could not allow myself  
to open my mouth  
    and let the words out.

My fingers stung  
    as they held the words in:  
the burns curled up my arms.

I walked with the dead,  
    though they turned from me  
as I plucked the nettled words  
    from their graves.

So I was not surprised when the mob circled me:  
    my eyes moved to follow  
their mouths like burning torches  
    that flame against my skin.

In my mind, I am still  
    alone on that rock in the ocean,  
gripping its slimy grit with my toes,  
    leaning with the wind.

The sun rises as their feathers descend  
    and I pass the nettles on  
from my scarred arms.

That first word I release  
    protests my bonds.

*Innocent*, it sears my lips  
    as it breezes past.

My throat burns.

Midnight

Once upon a time:

I fell for it too.

We all claim

we don't want that

    fairy tale.

But *the end* is never

    a wedding, unless

your name is Eurydice.

Even Cinderella can't stop

    this story.

The time will come

when she finds herself

under that tree, begging

    for more than a gown.

She'll be dressed in ashes

once again

for midnight always chimes

    more than once.

### **III. Origin Story**

## Origin Story

She begins like the stories:  
with a wish and three  
drops of blood: the oldest  
girl, cursed before birth  
with a hole in her heart. It beats  
half-time.

Her mother doesn't know  
if she'll live,  
but names her anyway,  
for the court  
she comes from  
by the shining sea.

Her mother stands at a window,  
framing her view of the farm land;  
she wills the land to shape  
her daughter from stubborn snow  
and wind: she'll stand  
on her own. She begins  
like the stories:

there are three

drops of blood

on the ground.

## Bedtime

I told the same story for a year  
while I shared a room  
with my baby brother.

It was the same year my mother  
cleaned out the cool room  
under the stairs one night  
as the sky turned green.

I pictured her weaving straw  
beds in place of sleeping bags;  
they would match the pale wood  
of the under-stairs. The brick  
floor cooled my feet as she  
stocked the wooden shelves.

Even then, I knew  
fairy tales come in threes.

My brother asked for few variations  
in that year of winds: more houses,  
more pigs, more chances to be  
saved.

The wolf always disappeared  
in the end, blown away  
by my brother's soft breath  
from the bunk bed beneath.

The wolf was always blowing,  
we knew,  
but we were asleep in our beds.

## Red Swingset

I remember the path I ran  
    around and over branches that reached  
for my legs. The playground was hidden  
    by trees and the villain hung  
me from the red swingset and revealed  
    a sword but the blonde boy  
from class swung in to match his sword  
    to the villain's and I could never  
decide, swinging there, which I wanted  
    more: the slice or the kiss.  
Dissatisfied, I hopped off  
    and ran further into the woods.  
But I don't remember any of this;  
    I'm only telling a story.

## Donkeyskin

Before I wore a donkeyskin, I set the chaff on fire;  
my father handed me the torch that flamed red  
in those black, furrowed fields.

Before I wore a donkeyskin, I wrestled my brothers to the ground,  
then airplaned their bodies over my head.  
I'd spin them dizzy, clinging to my feet.

Before I wore a donkeyskin, I slid the edge of my shoe  
down that boy's shin, where I slipped my foot under his  
and flicked the ball away, all before he knew.

But then a lady in pink entered our door.  
When she sat me at the mirror, I squirmed  
away from her fingers on my face, as they plucked  
and pulled my skin.

And when she stepped back,  
my cheeks were silky  
with the down of a donkeyskin.

I found my closet full of dresses  
to make me sit like a lady.

I locked my hands in satin,  
I wrapped my knees in silk,  
I kept my feet in slippers:  
too dainty to kick.

Sometimes, late at night,  
I strip off my dress and donkeyskin  
and stare at my naked body  
until it burns pink in the mirror.

But only for so long  
until I put it all back on again.

Little Moonlight  
after George MacDonald's "Little Daylight"

My mother cursed her body  
as I was born and so I reflect  
her moon-lit figure  
as it burns away.

I remember her emptiness  
before I was born.

We waxed and waned with the moon  
that shone through the trees,  
paralleled prison dream.

When I swell,  
I pull at my clothes,  
the choke of my jeans  
that grate against bones.

The lines on my waist  
mimic craters on the moon:  
dark circles on pale skin.

When I shrink,  
I delight in my loss,  
my black shirt floats  
around a white belly.

If I go too far,  
I slowly age,

a drooping branch,  
curving around the sky,  
a brittle leaf falls.

I wait  
for a moment  
I do not recognize:  
the moon absorbs the sun.

Dorothy

In that first year of blood,  
the pain clings to your body  
like a dark cloud, flashing,  
rolling over your belly.

You're still a child in a woman's storm  
and you beat against the winds of your pain;  
you drive your fist into the flesh  
below your belly button and knead your fingers  
in and out to fight each gust  
that wrenches the air from your lungs.

But your hands cannot hold in your basement room  
that spins and mocks. You stumble up the stairs  
where you retch on the landing.

Their door is barely open  
but it's enough.  
Your aunt will know  
how to hold the winds back.

But you recognize the flowering birthmark  
on your aunt's left butt-cheek;  
your uncle's legs are translucent below.

And you are blown back down the stairs,  
where you cling, without breath,  
to the carpet, willing your body to stay  
on the ground.



*Here's something  
for your nothing.*

Tissues rain  
like the ghosts of fog.

Poppies bloom in her  
paper skin.

She plucks tissues  
from the air and clothes  
her thin body.

They give her shape.

### **III. Attraction**

Back in class,  
she watches his lips  
shadowed by cobwebs,  
and imagines a lock.

When he passes,  
she lets her hand brush his,  
and says nothing.

When she unlocks her desk  
and holds it open,  
her key is stained.

#### IV. The First Kiss

In the tattoo parlor  
down the path  
made of breadcrumbs  
tossed by students  
finding their way back,  
the room is a riot  
of naked women in chains,  
with long white teeth,  
like sacrificial knives.

He stands with her, fingering  
the pictures in the book  
His hair is shadowed blue  
on the wall, like the skins  
in the pictures.

When the woman  
with large hands pulls the metal  
prong through her skin,  
his eyes widen.

*Nothing,  
something.*

He touches her later,  
circling the burning in her gut.

## **VI. Consummation**

It's almost midnight  
and she's wearing a dress.

She circles the fountain;  
the moon shines through  
her hands as she strokes  
the deep surface.

She mounts the edge  
and plunges  
into the dark.

He presses her down  
against the line of his body:  
they breathe together  
as the clock gongs.

In the morning,  
the small of her back  
glows; the mirror reflects  
her bruises like crescent moons.

## **VI. Liar Reveal**

She is not hers now;  
he shares her story in the halls,  
tying her to the stake.

They're after her now,

with signs that scream.

Her body, now, on their desks,  
trussed up by his words,  
stretched out like a lamb.

She holds a rope  
and a knife.

Which will free  
and which will cut?

We leave her now  
because she is me,  
and her end is yours.

### **VIII. The Chase Scene**

This is the part where he comes  
after her,  
but he doesn't

run through the school  
and the patch of briars  
decorating her door.

It wasn't the words,  
so much as the silence  
of the bleeding walls  
that echo

*You are nothing,  
nothing.*

### **VIII. Happily Ever After**

After he speaks, she draws  
a shape with her own blood  
on that neutered body  
prostrate on her desk.

She turns to him  
brandishing the paper,  
and asks,

*Nothing?*

## House of Mystery

At seven, you appear in the hallway of the same house  
Every time you dream. The wood panelling is dark,

Like the paintings on the walls. You know your family  
Is here, trapped in different rooms, but the doors shift

And lock. A witch awaits with her dogs; she only  
Chases you when you lose your way, breathing too

Hard to remember where you've been. At twelve,  
You realize you've never seen the witch: a shadow

On the wall with long teeth that recede each time  
You dream again but the doors still won't open

Or let you see where you are. At eighteen,  
You only dream of the doors, floating in air,

Stretching into clouds or fire. At twenty,  
The dream has stopped but you still walk

Down a hallway with many doors,  
Opening one after another.

## Office Girl

She asked for a dress the color of sunrise,  
never dreaming it would blind her.

She runs in darkness  
licked by the sun.

She hides in highlighter yellow  
with paper as luminous as the moon—  
the open sky taunts from the window pane.

Awash in ceiling white,  
she's sealed—  
where she waits  
for gravity or time  
or meteors.

Her phone voice coats her,  
silkie than sky.

She paints  
paper electric yellow—  
her body aglow.

She spins  
and papers fly,  
obscure  
her body behind their sheen,  
solar eclipsed.

Still blind,  
with no one to watch,  
she walks away.

Begins anew.

## Working Woman

At work, there's a woman trapped in the whorls of gray  
on the bathroom door. You can just make out her face  
through the swirl of her potion. She drowned  
her apple long ago. You're not sure if you want  
what she has but you're here and she hisses, you do  
what we say, don't you? You laugh at your hands, remembering  
your fist and a bruise, like a plum, on your knuckles, spreading  
to the wall. You agree to it all, your red lips shining. We all press  
against our walls, mouthing our imagined desire. And yet, she wants  
what you have, to piggyback out that door to your cottage  
in the woods. But the lights fizzle, throwing shades  
of walls and witches. The mirror tells you your lipstick  
will fade and the door swings closed.

## Camping Trip

At sunset,  
black outlines, prairie lily sky.

The sky lowers,  
brushing my lips.

I sleep in a sanctuary  
of dark pine.

Letters peel off the page  
at the level of ink,  
grow wings and soar.

When I wake,  
a wolf sleeps beside me.

Wolf

My mother warned me,  
*they can't change,*  
*until they do.*

Years later, he sits beside me,  
new skin, flayed open,  
his hand releasing the claw.

It wasn't supposed to be me  
in his bed, after all the others  
with more teeth than heart.

I did not know his former  
mates, nor the one with the original  
bite—he flinches  
when I touch his face.

I do not recognize that shadow  
he casts, bristled with fur,  
and so, absolve myself  
of finding him on the cusp  
of the woods, naked and new.

He tells me,  
*I can change,*  
and I echo,  
*until you do.*

## Princess Lessons

Once upon a time,  
she broke my heart first.

The boys had cooties, so it was  
this girl with perfect hair  
who taught me about loss.

I was seven years old, and couldn't  
understand why she didn't want to be  
my best friend, when I thought  
I was hers.

After a year,  
I found my fabled friend  
and held her hand.

She taught me how to give.

We fished for minnows  
under the graffitied bridge  
and splashed their silver bodies  
into a slurpee cup that we left  
on the neighbour's white step  
with a note:

*To keep us alive,  
blow bubbles  
through the straw.*

She taught me            how to adventure.

We rolled down a hill by the road  
and laid down on the yellow line,  
just to say we were faster than the car,  
and when we were too old,  
we still played pretend:  
our toy horses danced  
while the dolls looked on.

But the boy who kicked  
the back of our heels  
called us gay and I dropped  
her hand, not knowing  
how a word I thought  
meant the swing of our arms  
as we laughed, could leave bruises  
through our shoes.

She taught me            how to fight.

When I left her behind  
on a trip, she stopped  
speaking to me.

It hurt more than a curse.

A letter came later,  
with the word that's hardest  
to say out loud.

I replied with that halting word,  
it chokes in your throat:  
sorry means holding on  
and letting go.

She taught me how to love.

I never knew what to say  
on the phone, so we stayed  
silent on our separate carpet floors,  
listening for that intake of breath  
that meant we were about to speak.

Sometimes we shaped words  
dark enough for our fears  
and one of us would make  
a late-night drive:  
I held her as she cried.

We repeat pinky swears  
each year, as we lose  
our perfect hair.

## Not Like Fairy Tales

Before she was born, her heartbeat disappeared  
one night. She should have been lost  
in the woods but her mother knew  
how to place shining white pebbles  
to mark the path out.

At seven, she screamed  
as she jumped from every tree  
she climbed, until the story  
of the boy who cried wolf  
appeared at her side.

At ten, she charmed the cats  
with her piper's whistle.  
They would have followed her  
off a cliff if they hadn't been perched  
on her shoulder.

At fourteen, the werewolf from Thriller  
lived in her woods. She dashed to the door  
at the fall of twilight;  
barely escaping  
his claws.

At eighteen, she fought  
her way  
out of Bluebeard's bed.

Her mother helped a little.

At twenty, she was kissed  
awake by a boy with blue eyes  
and a swagger.

He turned into a frog.

At twenty-four, she married  
the reformed werewolf  
from her old woods.

Her mother knew,  
the pebbles led her home.

## Upon Marriage

I come to you having learned  
the difference  
between mortar and pestle.

I have faced the three  
impossible tasks:  
I come to you  
neither clothed nor naked,  
neither walking nor riding,  
not in the street nor on the walk.

My body has been torn  
and I recognize  
your similar scars.

We promise to carry  
the other's body  
out of any house      we leave.

## Snow White Leaves

At the door of the cottage,  
she turns to her stripped-back room—  
the walls are a grubby white,  
shadowed by missing pictures.

The ride to the castle  
is scattered with snow  
offering up what has been  
left behind. A mattress  
on a drift, unneeded boxes,  
torn papers smeared with dirt,  
skimming over puddles.

Their new room is green,  
like a changing season.

After Ever After  
from "King Thrusbeard"

The first year is a hovel,  
not a castle.

In place of marble floors,  
you'll find packed dirt.

Sweeping won't unveil the ground.

The splash of a bucket  
mixes the gritty clay  
beneath your toes.

You throw the clay and it leaves  
a line across his cheek:  
your hands are spattered gray.

He throws your pots. They're smashed,  
ridden over, heaved, crash.

When you enter the kiln together,  
your bodies burn as your eyes  
glaze red. The clay takes  
its colour from your flames.

After the fire, you tile together,  
pressing shards into the floor.

## Dishes

They kept her safe  
in that tiny cottage  
but she couldn't wait  
for the day when they  
would have to do

their own dishes.

After years of cleaning up  
after little men, she thought  
her dishes were done  
but she still can't visit home

without washing the dishes.

## Witch I

She doesn't think she wants  
children—all that blood  
and sleeplessness.

She wonders if it's Disney  
that makes her afraid  
to lose her waist and tiny feet.

She knows it's selfishness  
because the papers tell her  
about her child-need.

She's not enticed by breakable necks  
or toothsome skin—  
maybe if they came out talking,  
she'd let her foot descend,  
like Rumpelstiltskin,  
and rip herself in two.

## Witch II

She thinks she might want  
children—all that chatter  
candyng her cottage.

She wonders if it's Disney  
that makes her afraid  
to live with an empty belly  
within gingerbread walls.

She knows it's insanity  
because the papers tell her  
of those babes in the wood.

She's not enticed by the chocolate cottage  
or the frosting sugar windows—  
maybe if she didn't need a push,  
she'd open the oven  
and climb right in.

## I Understand You, Step-Mother

I understand you, step-mother,  
scrutinizing your pores in the glass,  
magnified every year  
where dirt gathers just beneath  
the reach of your ragged fingernails.

You've driven out the blemish  
with blood; when it scars,  
you dig again.

Your skin covers a death's head:  
those generations before.

You memorize your mothers' lines,  
the creases from their eyes  
and down their cheeks.

Do they still see their former faces?

Your mother's anorexia  
pervades your bone-fear,  
your grandmother's breasts  
are hollow caves after cancer,  
while yours swell when you press  
your nipples into a fairy ring:  
if you go in,  
you'll never come back.

Your mother's madness  
made her calm  
but you are red and raging.

You know your children will carry  
the mark of blood on their foreheads.

And when they look in the mirror,  
they'll decide  
which mother to keep  
and which to smash.

Mother-Witch

Sometimes I hate them: my children  
and their chirping open mouths. I want  
to lead them from the page and back  
to the woods they came from.

But I know they will toddle back,  
a trail of crumbs in their wake,  
and I will lift their fragile bones to my lap,  
knowing each ribbed stanza against my fingertips.

The truth is that I starve  
without them.

I must press my lips to their budding mouths  
and let my chewed bread fall  
to their trembling tongues;

I must fatten them on the page,

until they leave me,  
burning in my empty oven.

## Grandmother

She is young and cold;  
the long lines of her body  
angling into the white sky:  
a stark tree in a field  
of curving drifts and crisp  
snowflake lashes.

She is a frozen wave,  
believing nothing  
could be other than what it is  
now: pristine and sharp  
as inhaling ice.

She grows old in a season,  
rounding out like the sky,  
suffusing icy angles:  
light drips down.

Her skin is latticed,  
and blue tinges the  
edges of her eyes,  
like a bud on a branch.  
She knows everything  
will end, even her.

She is a crashing wave,  
a snow drift dissolved overnight;  
we awake to a lawn of water  
stretching out before us,

blinking her blue, blue eyes.

Her cheek is soft and wrinkled,  
tissue thin.

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