

Re-membering the Body: Reconstructing the Female in Surrealism

By

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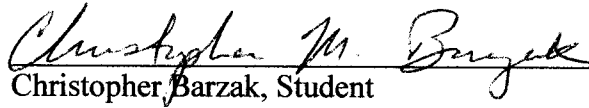
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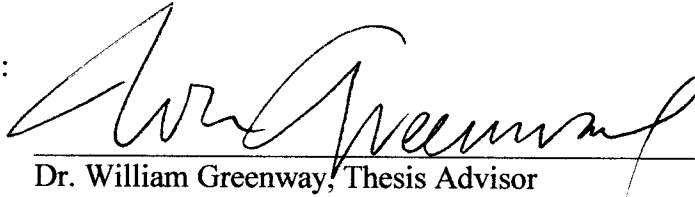
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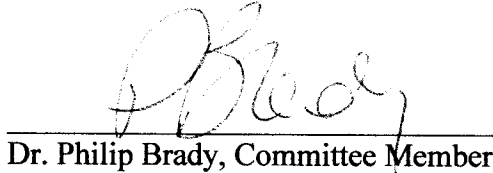
  
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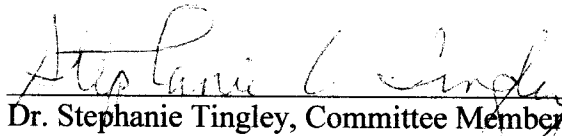
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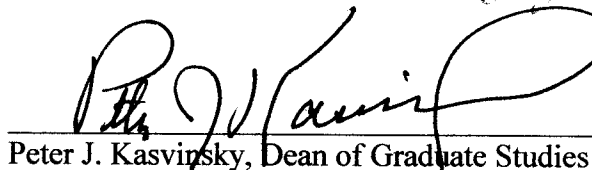
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a hybridized construct including both critical and creative writing in response to the body of surrealist art created by Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. All three of these women worked within the medium of surrealism, and all three of them, in one way or another, have been overlooked by critics of that art form.

Beyond their choice to represent life through surrealistic tactics, all of these women's artwork shares at least one thing in common. All of their work finds its center, its platform for representation, through the body: either their own bodies, women's bodies in general, the bodies of men and women, or through the bodies of androgynous characters. In their worlds, character's abound, strange streets teem with people, men and women engage in bizarre activities, but no matter how much the content of their paintings become irradiated with surreal representations, the human body and the human character remain as integral parts of that representation. Seen in the context of Modernist Surrealist art, this choice on their part to centralize their art's arguments around the human body or the human "character" is revolutionary, a critique of the Surrealist Movement itself, in which its male practitioners were fond of either dissecting the body, particularly the female body, or disappearing human figures from their landscapes altogether. Varo's, Carrington's and Tanning's paintings reveal not only a proto-feminist sensibility, examining the inner lives of women, but also a postmodern sensibility, in which science, reason and whole systems of knowledge become subjects for critique, for uncertainty.

## Introduction

Symbolically, women have always been associated with the ocean. The unfathomable depths, the strange life forms that inhabit this world are both profound and frightening to humanity in general. Though we concern ourselves with the exploration of outer space, the ocean still eludes our need to know with its own harsh physical conditions, making it difficult to get to the bottom of its self. We can send submersible vehicles below the waves, but we find that the further we go, deeper still the ocean plummets, so much that we still have not reached its limits, and what limits we have reached have been experienced voyeuristically through technology, our self-extensions; yet our bodies crave this knowledge firsthand.

For a long time, I often wondered why the attachment between the ocean and women. I honestly had no clue. I never felt that women were an unknown factor in the world, and now I have come to the conclusion that perhaps my feelings of closeness to women directly relates to the Women's Movement of the past hundred years. Before feminism, what was known of women in our culture? What did women know of themselves? The movement not only served to assert equal rights, but to define a female consciousness that had been absented by patriarchal culture. What we knew of women, what women knew of themselves, were prescribed roles that simply did not fit any longer, as female identity expanded, grew large. This consciousness expansion ignited in much of Modernist art. It is in Modernism that Virginia Woolf presents us not only with Mrs. Dalloway, but with Orlando. We tend to understand Orlando's character as a feminist critique of male hypocrisy and double standards, but what is most profound in Orlando is

the character's broad humanity, an inclusiveness of both genders, the idea that in each of us, male and female, we will find our opposites, and we will find these qualities of gender to be innocent but ravaged. Appropriated for cultural constructs, we have labeled genderless characteristics as "masculine" or "feminine". A world once existed in which the male hunted while the female gathered, and our identities were prescribed by the necessity of our biology and environment. But this categorization of traits, duties and roles is no longer valid, and in the past century, the boundary between genders has become decidedly blurry.

The male Surrealists had good intentions, I think. They adored women. Many of the women artists attached to the Surrealist Movement protect these men, their ideas, their intentions. They were men who had recognized something: a change of consciousness in the world, particularly after World War I. Women's roles had changed, and these men had taken notice. If the men's interest in women is flawed, it is flawed because they failed to listen to women, were not prepared to stop talking, creating a male discourse on the subject of Woman, and in doing so, perpetuating still a hierarchy. It seems rather silly in retrospect that they simply couldn't just stop and listen—look—at women's self-representations. Inherent in this is a distrust of women's ability to articulate their own meaning, and perhaps there is some truth to this, in that this was the formative period of raising women's consciousness. How many women were already prepared to articulate their own lives? So the keepers of language, a benefit of patriarchy, began to articulate for women. But because they could not understand Woman from the inside, they had to cut Her open. Surgical technique applied to identity, a forced entry. Here I am reminded of Magritte's "Le Viol", or "The Rape", a woman's facial features replaced with her

sexual organs. Perhaps even some of the male practitioners of Surrealism knew their own processes were, in essence, a violation, that they had not been given permission by women, but had gone inside Woman anyway.

What, then, were the purposes towards which these women artists employed the medium of self-portraiture? In Mirror Images, Whitney Chadwick states:

While male Surrealists rooted the disruptive and creative potential of erotic desire in the masculine libido and exalted woman as muse in fetishized images that celebrate her as Other, women artists turned to their own reality. They located the sources of Surrealism's disruption of rational boundaries within their own subjectivity, and gave it concrete form in works that explore the female body as a site of conflicting desires and femininity as a taut web of social expectations, historical assumptions, and ideological constructions (VIII-IX).

It is with this reflection upon their own identities, then, rather than allowing men to represent for them, that women begin to create a feminine discourse within Surrealism. Self-portraiture within Surrealism is not an innocent form. It becomes subversive when employed by women when, traditionally, men have used portraiture to project their own narratives onto the bodies of women. For women, it is a tactic of reclaiming their own bodies.

What were the roles of women in Surrealism? Most often they were the wives or girlfriends or lovers of Surrealist men. In fact, the original Surrealist Manifesto was signed by many, but no names inscribed upon it were names of women. The role available for women in surrealism was the femme-enfant, the woman-child which Chadwick, in her Women and the Surrealist Movement states is "...that enchanting

creature who through her youth, naïveté, and purity possesses the more direct and pure connection with her own unconscious that allows her to serve as a guide for man” (33).

Rudolf E. Kuenzli, in his essay, “Surrealism and Misogyny”, furthers this description:

Women are to the male Surrealists, as in the longstanding traditions of patriarchy, servants, helpers in the forms of child muse, virgin, *femme-enfant*, angel, celestial creature who is their salvation, or erotic object, model, doll—or she may be threat of castration in the forms of the ubiquitous praying mantis and other devouring female animals (19).

In limiting the role of women in the Surrealist world, the men perpetuated an aspect of the very culture they meant to reject in their effort to show the constructed nature of societal norms. Women remained the handmaid, the “other half”, remained the male artist’s caretaker in the service of his art. Throughout Surrealist historical record, we witness that nearly every female artist associated with these men, this movement, go onto to their own vision and mature work only when they have left the men and the inner circle of Surrealism.

Robert J. Belton, in “Speaking with Forked Tongues: ‘Male’ Discourse in ‘Female’ Surrealism?”, states that:

...the image of “Woman” was the most frequently used tactic in the Surrealists’ revolutionary strategy of articulating desire in order to reshape the world. Of course, the image of “Woman” underwent various treatments which made it clear that it (she?) was more a metaphor of language than a flesh-and-blood entity (51).

In this interpretation of “Woman” as language, Belton presents us with a less violating sense of a male Surrealist’s intentions, which I find a fair assessment. Yet the choice to

focus on the female body as language genders that self-same language, and in this it can be seen that the men felt more comfortable deconstructing language/the female body than including a deconstruction of their own maleness. Perhaps, too, they saw women changing after the first World War, and responded to that, but forgot that as women change, men's roles will also change in a necessary response.

Specifically, the trouble with the male vision of language and the female body is their treatment of it. Language, in essence, takes on gender to describe roles based in sexual difference, and yet those differences, for the most part, are constructed by social expectation. That the female body becomes the site of such dismemberment, I think, is the most distressing quality in their work. Perhaps a less upsetting reaction might have taken place, historically, if the men had included themselves in such a violent and amputated critique of language, society, and the body. In The Surrealist Look, Mary Ann Caws writes:

Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and almost always unarmed, except with poetry and passion. There they are, the surrealist women so shot and painted, so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed: Is it any wonder they have (we have) gone to pieces? (53)

Because of emotive responses to the male Surrealist vision, such as Mary Ann Caws' statement, the entire endeavor must be reconsidered, and corrected. Much of the correction was completed by the female artists whose work has been neglected until recently, which still does not receive the attention that the men's work enjoys to this very day. In focusing their vision on self-representation, these women have been able to articulate ideas about language and the self, particularly the female self, which otherwise



would have gone unheard. The next step necessary in this journey is for new generations to look at and to listen to these women's ideas and visions.

What you will find, as a viewer, or conversely, as a reader, in representations made by women Surrealists are a variety of ideas and considerations of a world that exist in a previously silenced population. Whitney Chadwick writes that:

Alienated from Surrealist theorizing about women and from the search for a magical Other, women artists turned to their own reality. Their many self-portraits reveal their rejection of the idea of woman as an abstract principle, and a substitution of the image in the mirror as a focal point in their quest for greater self-awareness and knowledge. However fantastic their imagery, it remains firmly rooted in their experience of their own bodies and in their acceptance of their own psychic reality (74, WASM).

And so the body remains the subject, as in the male representations; perhaps out of necessity the women continue to focus on their own bodies as sites of representation, to correct many of the ill-conceived ideas men had projected onto their bodies. If men had painted their own bodies, would women Surrealists have painted more representations of men and male bodies? Perhaps such a dialogue still could and should take place, here at the beginning of a new century, in our new bodies and new roles, which have continued to change since these artists began their documentations of gender role evolution. They would, most likely, find the world strange and alien even in the relatively short span of time that has passed. Only a few original Surrealists are still alive, two of which whose work I will be reconstructing in fictional narratives in this thesis, (Carrington and Tanning). I suspect that to many of these artists, even to those whose visions are most

oddball and filled with fantastical imagery, that our contemporary world would be a strange and alien place.

I realized a long time ago that this project is complicated by my own gender. Being a man, haven't I only accomplished what the male Surrealists of Modernism did: to cut Woman open and look inside?

Upon realizing this, I considered abandoning this project. I did not want to disrespect these women's visions of their own beings. I had done much research, had looked and looked and thought about their paintings, their writings, their own scholarship—all the sources of their own creations. If nothing else, I told myself, I've heard what they have to say, have looked upon their own ideas of self in earnest contemplation. In arriving at the threshold of abandonment, in reflecting on the project as "if nothing else, a learning experience", I realized that I had done what the male Surrealist hadn't. I had listened, over half a century later. What these fictions represent are the internalized conversations I've had with these women through their art. Something very different than opening them up with surgical precision. My subject is not Woman, but women's self-representations.

I offer back what I have seen in these women's paintings. This mirror is a male one, my perceptions necessarily partial, my word not the last. Tell me now: Did I hear you right?

## Remedios Varo

Remedios Varo is little known or remembered outside of art circles. Born in Spain, she left her home country in her early twenties to live in Paris in the 1930's, when that city was alive with experimentation in the arts and intellectual circuits. Varo grew up in a strict Catholic household, due to her mother, but together her parents encouraged her creativity and intuitive passion for painting and sketching from childhood. Although her father was not an artist, but a mechanical engineer, he taught Remedios the rigors of mechanical drawing. In her adult paintings, the precision and demanding construction of the architecture of her fantasy worlds seem more real than our own boulevards and bedrooms, our own cityscapes, most likely due to her father's early influence.

In Varo's paintings, a fabulist world akin to Gabriel Garcia Marquez's fictional town of Macondo or Angela Carter's surreal, off-kilter fairy tale world takes form. It is both consistent and absurd; inspired by flights of fantasy, yet limned with an inner logic. Men and women take on characteristics of animals, women leave their psychoanalysts with their father's head in their hands, stars and moons become commodities, the source of the Orinoco river turns out to be a cup of ever flowing water. Strange streets teem with people, and characters become the focal point in Varo's paintings, which in turn offer extended narratives behind the moment in which we find them. Looked at in the context of surreal art made mostly by male practitioners, this idea is revolutionary. In much surreal art, bodies are either stretched to their limits, dissected or dismembered, disappeared or eroded altogether, and a sense of "story" rarely becomes a factor. Varo, along with Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning, remembered the body, the idea of

character, and in many ways “re-membered” these ideas into surrealism, much like Isis re-membered the body of Osiris in Egyptian mythology. Her work, and the work of other female surrealists, serve as yet another historical example of the mind/body split between male and female, wherein the male is associated with the mind (or conversely, dissociated with the body), and the female represents the body divorced from reason.

Here in the United States, we know little of Remedios Varo, who left her native Spain for Paris in the 1930’s, and then fled Paris during the Nazi occupation for Mexico. Her name, like many other surrealists, was included on the Nazi’s list of Parisian dissidents. Varo settled in Mexico with other surrealist exiles, but unlike many of them, chose not to return to Europe after the war. She, like her best friend Leonora Carrington, had found a home in Mexico. Inspired by the undercurrent of folk magic in that land, also inspired by the creative freedom outside the strictures of a male-dominated surrealism, Varo began to produce her finely polished, mature work in Mexico. Outside of the tightly knit circle of surrealism, no longer subject to the idea of woman as a *femme-enfant*, “the naïve woman-child whose spontaneous innocence, uncorrupted by logic or reason, brings her into closer contact with the intuitive realm of the unconscious so crucial to Surrealism,” Varo found her own vision (Kaplan, 56).

Varo’s “Creation of the Birds” is a painting in which a creature—half woman, half owl—sits at a desk, sketching birds which come to life as she filters starlight through an optic lens onto her drawing paper. The pencil she uses to draw her birds is connected to either a violin or a cello-like instrument that hangs about her neck. Her color pallet is mixed in a mechanical contraption that is shaped like two eggs. Janet Kaplan, Varo’s biographer, writes, “Again the interaction of science, art, mysticism, and nature; again the

figure of an artist creating universal harmony with the elements at hand,” (179) as a description of a motif that Varo continually returns to in a variety of paintings.

As you view Varo’s paintings, a sense that each vision belongs to the same world begins to emerge. Often this is true of many artists. We recognize a Van Gogh due to his style, and this is true of Varo as well. But more accurately, not only do Varo’s paintings have a distinctive style made up of surrealist techniques of randomness restructured into organization, but another world like our own, with rules and a logic of its own, begins to form. Without referencing their languages or histories, Varo creates another world much like J.R.R. Tolkien did with Middle Earth. The language and style differ, of course—Varo’s vernacular is decidedly fabulist, rather than that of the highborn language of Tolkien. But her people’s mores and dynamics, their beings, are communicated without much effort on the viewer’s part. In many ways, it is a secret history of our inner lives.

Although Varo’s work is surreal in nature, it does not preclude a sense of naturalism. Each figure is drawn specifically, with personality and a sense of history; each setting that these personages, as Varo called them, inhabits are recognizable, not only as the settings we might find in dreams or fantasies, but in reality as well. The walled cities and spiral-shaped islands, the clockwork mechanisms echo backwards to the Medieval and Renaissance architectures of Western Europe. Varo never fails to include details such as tablecloths, silverware, needles and spindles, the flow of a dress or the curve of a neckline. Her paintings are meditations on reality, refracted through the lens of fantasy.

Because Varo’s work inherently engenders narratives, I decided to create a story of my own, based off of several selected paintings. Starting with “Creation of the Birds”, I moved on to “The Star Catcher”, which depicts a male, robed figure skulking down a

hallway, holding in one hand a caged crescent moon, and in the other, a butterfly net. This figure and the Bird Woman of “The Creation of the Birds” would serve as my two main characters. “Spiral Transit”, an island city formed in the shape of a spiral, became my setting. “Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst” became a sub-narrative in my story. In this painting, a woman leaving her psychoanalyst’s office holds an old man’s head by his beard in her hand, ready to drop it in a nearby well. Varo stated that the head was the head of her father, but I discovered that information after I’d written my own interpretation of whose head the woman was holding. I’d imagined it was the psychoanalyst’s head, in the sense that so often people leave psychoanalyses with someone else’s ideas (their psychoanalyst’s interpretations) rather than their own. In my story, the psychoanalyst’s head takes on a life of its own, indeed becomes a third character, serving as witness to the struggle between the Bird Woman and the Star Catcher, providing an outsider’s opinion on a subjective reality. I used this as an opportunity to reflect with irony on the so-called “objective opinion” of psychiatric figures in life and in literature, to reveal that no opinion is objective.

Through these paintings, I’ve developed a world in miniature that seems to hold a storybook logic, full of flights of my own fantasy as well. By the time I’d made it halfway through writing the story, I’d begun to develop my own surrealistic images that perhaps Varo might have painted herself. It became an act of mediating a spirit, a sensibility, after the initial inspired images demanded I continue their initial narratives to a logical conclusion.

What I find most striking is the theme of gendered oppression, a theme that Varo engaged with as well. I hadn’t gone into this story with any particular political agenda,

but before I left it, I'd created one. Most likely this is due to the inherent gender politics in Varo's work, never heavy handed, often forgiving of socialized inadequacies and oppressive behavior.

The story also begins the sequence of these stories as a whole, and in doing so represents on an almost allegorical level, the story of Surrealism itself—the male who projects his own fantasies onto the woman, invalidating, controlling her access to artistic endeavor. And through her art, the woman liberates herself.

## The Creation of Birds

The Bird Woman sits at her table with a long strip of parchment stretched out before her. She holds a quill between her thumb and forefinger, plucked earlier in the night from her own head. She has drawn the outline of a sparrow, has shaded in its curves and hollows. It has two beady black eyes that stare out from the page. This sparrow has spunk, thinks the Bird Woman. She licks her thumb, smudges a section of tail feathers to make them look fuller than usual.

The Bird Woman is not a realist. She has no time for that. She believes sparrows should have fans for tail feathers, that parrots appear more exotic when they hold silence as a virtue, rather than the prattle for which they are known. The one bird her imagination has left untouched is the hummingbird. Who would dare attempt to better such a creature, with wings that flutter a hundred times with each beat of its heart? That's art, so simple and evocative. It doesn't get better than that.

Beside her parchment sit two teacups. She cracks open a fresh egg, shuffles the white from the yolk, one shell to the other, then places each half in a teacup. She licks her quill, dips it into the yolk, and draws a small golden circle within the sparrow's breast. A moment later the sparrow opens its beak to warble, but only silence issues forth. The golden circle trembles and spins slowly, like a water wheel, within the sparrow's breast.

She paints each feather with egg white in long lazy strokes. The sparrow stretches its wings a little, clenches and unclenches its tiny claws, testing. "Tut, tut," whispers the Bird Woman. "Not yet, little one. I haven't even given you your colors. What would you want the world to mistake you for? A dove?"



The Bird Woman smiles down at the sparrow. In the next room, the cries and chirps of her last creations grow louder as the sun begins to rise. Today she will be taking them to the market. Usually she gives her birds away as gifts or as barter, but she's nearly out of money and soon her landlord will demand what she owes him, which he's been kind enough to ignore for the past two months.

The Bird Woman hasn't been able to make birds for a long time. Nearly four months have passed without one new bird. The birds in the next room were the last to receive the required teaspoon of moon and starlight needed to give them life. The stars and moons, a lot of them have been disappearing. It's because of the Star Catcher—he's been out there again, in the night sky, taking them down, so many of them, as if they were only ornaments or lanterns. The Bird Woman won't even be able to complete this sparrow, small and slight as it is. There isn't enough available light to make it live. Why did I even try, she wonders, if it's such a futile activity? Habit, she thinks. Wishful thinking, she decides.

She tries not to attribute anything to hope.

A swan strolls into the workshop, sidles up beside the Bird Woman's left leg, attempting to view the parchment, but its neck isn't long enough to stretch that high. "Shoo," the Bird Woman scolds it. "Back with the others, swan. We'll be leaving soon for the market."

She strokes the top of its head before it turns to leave the room. Her fingers come away damp, sticky with ivory.

#

It is a good day at the market—there are people everywhere. The Bird Woman thinks

she might sell a lot of birds. A difficult feat, considering the Star Catcher has returned from another long absence.

The Star Catcher's booth sits directly across from the Bird Woman's stall. The Star Catcher is whisper thin and his forehead is filled with creases. He sweats a lot for someone so skinny. He's covered in robes the color of night. On his table he displays an array of moons and stars kept in brass and silver cages. Half moons, Crescents, Harvest Moons, and a Blue Moon as well. His stars are small and sickly. They wink and blink, but they are known to die quickly after a sale. The Star Catcher never sits down. He stands behind his table, arms folded, and waits for curious buyers to crowd around.

The Bird Woman pretends not to see him. She inhales a deep breath of the stale market air. It has been several months since she last spoke to the Star Catcher. A long time ago, she tried to be his lover. But the Star Catcher, she soon discovered, didn't know how to love something he couldn't own. There had been moments that came close to love, yes, and, yes, also passion. She remembers his eyes holding her gaze steady as he moved above her, the smell of his skin, chalky and sweet like sugar, his breath fanning her feathers. "I love your eyes," he would tell her, and trace their contours with his index finger, two perfect circles in an owl-like face. "I love your everything," he would tell her, and move his hands down the length of her body and she would sing, sing, and blink profusely.

The Bird Woman knows where the Star Catcher likes to be kissed—on his forehead, like a child. She used to kiss each of the wrinkles on his forehead before they went to sleep. He never attempted to learn her own skin, or how to talk to her about her art. He never asked about her birds. The Bird Woman learned so much about the stars and their

placement and how the Star Catcher goes about displacing them, she could probably catch stars herself. For a while, she felt like one of his stars, clinging to his arm, on display for other people. He never asked about her birds.

The market is busy this morning, which makes it that much easier for her to ignore him. She hopes he will choose to ignore her as well.

The swan goes first. Someone is here to buy it for a storybook for children. She wraps a blue bow around its neck before sending it off. Then her silent parrot is paid for by a deaf mute. His smile is soft and gentle. She imagines the two of them will keep a quiet house. There go the lovebirds, as well as the cuckoo bird, which she notices is a little mad. It continually preens, stopping only to eat: not a good sign. She is glad it found a home though. Soon it will be laying eggs in other bird's nests, allowing them to raise its hatchlings. I'm a bit of a cuckoo myself, the Bird Woman thinks.

She is busy tidying up her stall, sweeping out feathers and birdseed, when she hears his voice.

"My dear Jessica. Jess. How have you been?"

The Bird Woman doesn't stop sweeping; she doesn't look up at all. She knows it is the Star Catcher by his deep, sonorous voice, and by the name that he calls her. The Bird Woman doesn't have a name like that. She is just the Bird Woman. But the Star Catcher calls her something human anyway. She decides not to answer. She has principles. She will make a point of sticking to them.

"Jessica, Jessica," he says, trying again and again. "Why won't you talk? It's been so long. Look up, it's me, Ivan. I have a gift for you. Really. No kidding."

The Bird Woman looks up. She is not immune to gifts, or to possible reconciliation.

She likes to think people can change. The Star Catcher stands just outside her stall, holding a small silver cage in his hands. Inside is a blue star the size of a pearl earring. He holds the cage out for her to take.

“For you,” he says.

“I don’t keep stars,” says the Bird Woman, looking down, beginning to sweep her stall again. She shakes her head wearily. “I don’t keep anything.”

“Keep this,” he says. “Please. A peace offering. For all our troubles.”

She is skeptical, but finally decides to take it. She cannot imagine this tiny star having much of a life with the Star Catcher, and anyhow, its light may help her sparrow live. Perhaps she can teach the star how to live on land, away from the sky, though not likely, considering she knows sky better than land.

“How long are you back for?” she asks, looking at him from beneath her eyelashes.

“A few days,” he answers. “I need to go back out again.”

“Thank you,” the Bird Woman says, eyes fixed on the blue star in its cage. “Have a nice day.”

#

In the Bird Woman’s city, all streets lead to the same place—the center. The roads are cobbled, and they travel ever inward, spirals, all of them, one after the other. The Bird Woman’s house sits near the center of the city, built on the riverside. The rivers here follow the same pathways as the roads; they move inward, spiraling. Between each street is a canal. From above—and the Bird Woman has taken to sky many times just to see this—the city looks like a seashell, floating in the blue ocean.

The Bird Woman’s bones are hollow, and because of this her step is light. She moves

through crowds quicker than others. She hops upon wagons and barrows as they wheel by, then wings her way to the other side of the street. Today, she needs to stop by the market, as well as the banker, to deposit the money from the sale of her birds. She also has an appointment with the psychoanalyst, that old man with the long white beard. He wears wizard caps, tall and pointy. For him, the mind and magic is the same thing. The Bird Woman has a friend who sees the psychoanalyst on a regular basis. This friend is an artist as well—a bit of a loon, really—but she swears the psychoanalyst is saving her life, little by little, one hour a week. She's suggested the Bird Woman see him, herself. For the sake of your art, if for nothing else, she explained.

The Bird Woman is a little reluctant. She's never needed therapy before. But lately she's not been so sure of herself as she used to be. Perhaps, she thinks, an objective opinion is exactly what's needed.

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These names are poetry: kookaburra, cardinal, cormorant, kestrel, nuthatch, warbler, flamingo, thrush. The Bird Woman keeps each name tucked under her tongue. Better than locking them inside her head, where she might not be able to retrieve them, depending on her mood. When the Bird Woman is happy, she'll make Phoenixes and Thunderbirds, which exist only in poetry and dreams. When she is merely content, she makes birds that are real and not imagined. When the Bird Woman is sad, she doesn't make birds at all.

The psychoanalyst stares at the Bird Woman through foggy spectacles. He rubs his hands together like a fly. "This, my dear," he says in his old man's voice, "is why you aren't working. You're sad. Depressed. Of course you can't make birds."

“But there isn’t enough light,” she explains. “The Star Catcher keeps taking the moons and stars. I need them. It isn’t just my own state of mind. The problem is circumstantial.”

“Yes, yes,” he says. “But really, dear, you must stop blaming others. If you are to help yourself, if you are to break this pattern, this self-indulgent sadness, this apathy, then you will have to stop blaming others and be able to point your finger back at yourself. For example, have you ever done anything to the Star Catcher that would make him deprive you of stars?”

“Moons too,” she adds quickly. “We were lovers once. It didn’t work out. But surely that isn’t a reason to strip the sky?”

“My dear, even the Star Catcher has feelings. I think you should set aside time to think about his feelings for once. As an exercise in self-abnegation. This is for your own good.”

The Bird Woman considers this carefully, rubbing the side of her nose with her thumb. “I did end things awfully fast,” she admits to the psychoanalyst. “Cut and dried, you know. That’s what my mother used to say is best in matters of the heart.”

“But your mother wasn’t a psychoanalyst,” the psychoanalyst points out, and the Bird Woman can do nothing but nod.

Before she leaves, the psychoanalyst stops her in the foyer of his office. “Wait,” he says. “You forgot your bag.”

“I don’t have a bag,” says the Bird Woman.

“Oh no, it’s just a little something I’m sending home with you,” he explains. “You might need it in times of distress.”

“Thank you,” says the Bird Woman. She smiles weakly and opens the door to leave.

In the square outside the office building, the Bird Woman pauses before continuing home, wondering what the bag holds. She reaches inside and feels something hairy. She grabs hold of the hair and pulls out the psychoanalyst’s head by his beard. The head hangs upside down from the beard like a pocket watch, dangling and swaying.

“Hello, dear,” the psychoanalyst’s head says, looking up (or down, from his own vantage) at the Bird Woman. “Are we home yet?”

#

The Bird Woman loves three things best in the world: birds, the stars that give them life, that give her life, and flying. When the Bird Woman learned to fly, her mother worried and worried, she cried in joy and terror to see her daughter soaring higher than even she herself had ever dared to go. On her first flight, the Bird Woman brought back handfuls of clouds for her mother, a shard of sunlight, and two swathes of sky to match her mother’s eyes. She weaved the sky into a dress robe, and years later, she wrapped her mother in that cloth for her burial. Her mother warned her not to fly too high. “The sky is not always filled with beauty,” she told the Bird Woman. “Sometimes danger lingers there, like storms and lightning.”

Later, she brought the Star Catcher home to meet her mother. She’d found him pedaling through the sky in a mechanical contraption, the wings made of wire and leather, pulleys attached to its wheels, which pumped the wings to take him higher. She admired a man who wanted to fly. Her mother, though, cast a crooked finger at him, its talon landing nearly on his cheek. “You have the stars in your eyes,” she told him. But it wasn’t a compliment. “This one,” she told the Bird Woman, “will take what he wants.”

The Bird Woman's mother died two months later. The Star Catcher brought a star to her funeral, and placed it on top of her casket, along with the flowers from the other mourners. The Bird Woman thought this a grand gesture. He had flown higher than she had to bring this gift for her mother's funeral. As he approached her through the mourning queue, she burst into tears, and he slid his arms around her. "Be still," he whispered into her ear, like a command but more gentle, and she was.

#

At home, the Bird Woman's sparrow is still struggling to lift itself out of the parchment. She holds the psychoanalyst's head by his beard in one hand, and the caged star in the other. She looks at both. Both look back at her. The psychoanalyst says, "This would be a perfect opportunity to practice appreciating the Star Catcher. Put the star he gave you to good use."

The Bird Woman sets the psychoanalyst's head on her kitchen counter, next to the cutting board. She takes her star to the worktable and opens its cage door. The star doesn't attempt to escape.

She reaches in and pulls it out. The star fits inside the palm of her hand, like a stone, or a kitten. She strokes it, and it vibrates, growing warm. She reaches for a teaspoon, spoons up some of its soft blue light, then sprinkles it over the sparrow's struggling body. The sparrow pulls itself the rest of the way out of the parchment, stretching its wings, clenching and unclenching its tiny claws, blinking profusely. It cocks its head towards the Bird Woman, waiting.

The Bird Woman places the star back in its cage. She's delighted that it actually worked. Here is a new bird, a new creation, waiting. Waiting for her to add the final



touches to its life.

She takes down a violin from the top shelf of her closet, props it between her chin and neck. A long plastic tube dangles from the front of the violin. The Bird Woman pinches the end of the tube between her fingers, brings it close to the sparrow's beak. "Open," she says, and the sparrow opens its beak.

The Bird Woman slips the tube into the sparrow's mouth, like a mother feeding a worm to her hatchling. She lifts bow to strings and begins to play something sweet and lilting, but no music can be heard. The music slides down through the tubing instead. Sometimes green and sometimes golden, it moves through the tubing into the sparrow, like a drip feed. The column of the sparrow's throat moves up and down, drinking greedily. When the Bird Woman finishes her song, she pulls the tube out and the sparrow begins to sing.

"Lovely," says the Bird Woman.

"Indeed," the psychoanalyst says, beaming along with her. "See, my dear. You just have to get on with things. Stop blaming other people. You couldn't have done that if the Star Catcher hadn't given you the star."

The Bird Woman looks back to the cage, where a small pile of ash lays inside it, steaming. The star has grown cold and died.

#

"This star is dead," says the Bird Woman, pushing the cage with the remains inside it towards the Star Catcher. "You gave me a dying star," she says.

"I did no such thing," says the Star Catcher. He stands in the frame of his front door, holding his hands up to his chest, palms out. "That star was fine when I gave it to you,"

he says, pointing a long finger towards it. “Did you use it to make a new bird?”

“I used a bit of its light to finish off a sparrow,” says the Bird Woman.

“Well there you go,” says the Star Catcher, throwing his hands in the air. “You killed it for the creation of your birds.”

“They aren’t my birds,” the Bird Woman corrects. “They’re just birds, damn it. And no star should die from giving up a teaspoon of light for a sparrow. Believe me, I’m the expert on that. I’m the expert on something!”

“Sorry,” says the Star Catcher. “That star would have been fine if you’d left it alone.”

The Bird Woman clenches her lips tightly. She grips both of her hands together, flexing the muscles in her fingers. She wants to lash out at the Star Catcher, but she’ll hold her hands to each other rather than touch him like that. The Star Catcher likes to be treated like a child. Violence towards him will not help matters at all.

“I’m sorry,” she says finally. “You’re right. My fault. My fault,” and turns to walk away, shoulders shrugging.

“Wait!” the Star Catcher shouts.

The Bird Woman turns her head back towards him.

He moves aside and holds his front door open for her, waving towards the dark foyer behind. “I can help,” he says. “Please. Come inside.”

#

The Star Catcher lives in a lighthouse on the edge of the island. Made from chalky white stones, it nearly touches the sky. It continually sends signals out to nearby boats to warn them away from rocks and dangerous waters. All the boatmen appreciate the Star Catcher. They call him brother, Guardian of the Light. The Bird Woman has passed by

ships in the boatyards, docking or unloading goods from other lands, has heard these men praising the Star Catcher's brilliance. Unable to remain quiet, each time she has called out, "Idiots! You thank the one who possesses your constellations!" They forget the troubles they've had navigating without them.

The Bird Woman herself has forgotten how much space the Star Catcher inhabits. She lives in that little cottage consisting of only two rooms. The Star Catcher's lighthouse goes up and up, catwalks climbing level after level. He ascends a spiral staircase that begins in the center of the first floor, his boots thumping every step of the way, and the Bird Woman follows behind his dark flowing robes.

As they climb to the top, the light inside the building grows stronger. The Bird Woman's breath grows shorter with each step that she takes. Her cheeks begin to flush, warm and ruddy under her feathers. Finally she asks, "Where are you taking me?"

"Just a little further," says the Star Catcher, looking over his shoulder and smiling. His smile is innocent and serious, which makes the Bird Woman smile back. She always liked it when the Star Catcher was happy or excited about something. He was always very sincere at those times.

They reach the top floor of the lighthouse and stand before a door where light for the signal originates—the lantern room. The door to this room is closed, but light seeps through the doorframe, outlining it in the dark stairwell. The Star Catcher flings the door open and steps aside, so the Bird Woman can enter before him. Inside, stacked up in large mounds, are heaps of moons and stars, no lighthouse lantern at all. The stars and moons lay together like pieces of gold in a treasure cave. Or, the Bird Woman thinks, like bodies. Dead bodies. Together they sigh and shuffle a little to one side or the other,

bumping into each other weakly. But even if they could move, where would they go? She almost retches, and throws her hand to her mouth.

“Ivan,” she whispers. “What have you done?”

The Star Catcher looks back and forth between the mound of stars and the Bird Woman, grinning and grinning. “They’re for you, my dear,” he says.

#

Down, down, down, and down even further. The Bird Woman hops and flutters down the spiral stairwell, whimpering at the thought of the stars locked inside the Star Catcher’s tower. Already she knows she will not be able to live with the memory of what he’s done, of what he’s taken from the world, from its people. Imagine their upturned faces, staring into emptiness, the sky reflecting nothing of their lives below, providing no guidance, no hint of life outside their own world. They blame me, the Bird Woman thinks; and in some cases, she is correct.

The Star Catcher follows with his robes flapping behind him. “Jessica, wait! You don’t understand!”

“I understand perfectly,” the Bird Woman squawks over her shoulder. She grabs hold of the brass knob on the front door and pushes it open. Warm light pours in from the outside. On the street a wagon pulled by two oxen creaks by. Two children, a boy and a girl of ten or eleven, sit on the back of the wagon, waving and laughing, legs dangling. The Bird Woman waves back, breathing deeply, sighing. She turns round and faces the Star Catcher once more. “Never speak to me again,” she says.

“But—” the Star Catcher reaches out to touch her.

“No, Ivan,” the Bird Woman says.

“I did it for you,” he tells her. “The stars are yours if you want them.”

The Bird Woman considers this. She cocks her head to one side, studying the Star Catcher’s face: the wide-set eyes, unbearably blue and innocent; the wrinkled forehead; the cherub lips; the hands, too soft for the sort of work he does. The Bird Woman sees what he says is the truth. How can he speak the truth though, she wonders, and still pry the stars from their homes. The Bird Woman suddenly wishes the psychoanalyst’s head were here. He would have answers. Possibly not correct ones, but answers nevertheless.

“For me?” she asks finally, and the Star Catcher nods. “If they’re for me, Ivan,” she says, “then I suggest you replace them. Put them back where they belong.”

“No,” the Star Catcher says. He shrugs. “They’re for you, Jessica. But here. You can have the stars here, if you like.”

The Bird Woman looks past the Star Catcher’s face, over his shoulder, at the lighthouse towering behind him, beaming, light stockpiled at the top level. She breathes deeply. Finally she turns back to the Star Catcher. “Here, then,” she says, brushing by him, head held high, back into the lighthouse.

#

Doves, bluejays, cardinals, canaries, jackdaws, falcons—soon the lighthouse is filled with the flapping of wings, the flash of feathers, the screech and holler of birds. Two owls call back and forth to each other, measuring the night together. The Bird Woman sits cross-legged on the cold flagstones at the top of the lighthouse, sketching, shading, painting, filling the mouths of her creations with notes from her violin.

The Star Catcher brings her tea, plates of toast spread with cream and honey. “Busy, busy,” he says, stoking her cheek with the tips of his fingers. Then he disappears for an

hour, only to return with his hands empty, smiling, waiting, peering over the Bird Woman's shoulder. "What's this one to be?" he inquires.

"An ostrich," the Bird Woman tells him. "Please. I need space. I can't work with you looking over my shoulder."

"Sorry," the Star Catcher says, stepping backwards until he reaches the door. "I'll just be downstairs, then, if you need me."

"I don't need you," the Bird Woman mutters, after he's closed the door.

The Bird Woman stares at her canvas until tears begin to fill her eyes. "Stop that," she whispers. "Stop it. There are better things in this world that deserve your tears."

"What a situation you've gotten yourself into," the psychoanalyst says. His head sits propped on a nearby bookshelf, his beard trailing over the shelving, almost touching the floor. "I'm beside myself," he tells the Bird Woman. "Really, I can't believe how you put up with his constant attentions. It's disgraceful. You'd think he were a guard, some sort of sentinel."

"I tried to tell you," says the Bird Woman.

"But—" says the psychoanalyst.

"But you wouldn't listen," the Bird Woman says.

"Hmmpf," says the psychoanalyst. "Really, my dear. I've never encountered someone like him. Whatever attracted you in the first place?"

The Bird Woman considers this question for a moment, eyes rolled up slightly, finger placed carefully on her lips. Finally she begins to stroke brown into the ostrich before her. "I think it was his passion," she says.

"His passion? What passion?" the psychoanalyst says.

“His passion for me,” says the Bird Woman.

“That’s not passion, dear girl,” says the psychoanalyst. “That’s obsession. They can seem like the same thing.”

Footsteps sound on the catwalk outside. “Wonderful,” says the psychoanalyst. “He’s back again.”

The door opens on oily hinges, and the Star Catcher pokes his head inside. “Working?” he asks, tentatively, cautiously. The Bird Woman doesn’t look at him. She only nods, and continues painting.

“Could I bother you for a bite of dinner?” the psychoanalyst asks from his place on the shelving. He raises his eyebrows plaintively.

The Star Catcher nods. “Of course, of course,” he says. “But really—where do you put it?”

“Trade secret,” says the psychoanalyst.

“Jessica,” the Star Catcher says. “Tell me again why this person is here.”

“He’s my therapist,” answers the Bird Woman. “Please bring him some supper.”

The door swings closed as suddenly as it opened. Footsteps echo, grow softer, and the psychoanalyst—ahem—attempts to clear his non-existent throat. “You must do something about this,” he tells the Bird Woman.

Just then she is helping the ostrich out of its parchment, pulling it out by its flightless wings, one hand tucked under its belly.

“I have a plan,” she tells the psychoanalyst, grunting. The ostrich separates from the parchment with a satisfying pop. It peers around the room, looking for a hole to bury its head in. The Bird Woman directs it to the piles of moons and stars, and it saunters over,

thrusts its beak into the glowing chips of light.

“You have a plan,” the psychoanalyst curls his lip into a mock sneer. “I’m sure this will be interesting.”

#

The Star Catcher used to always bring the Bird Woman love tokens. Packages of exotic seeds from across the ocean. A new glass filter, through which she could direct starlight. Two lovebirds which she herself never made—they had hatched on their own, in the wild. “Like us,” he told her. “Wild,” he had said, nuzzling her neck feathers, and she pressed herself closer to his hands.

When the stars started to disappear, though, the Bird Woman asked him to stop taking them. “I don’t think that it’s such a good idea,” she said. “People are talking.”

“What do I care about people?” the Star Catcher rebutted. “I have you, Jess. What business is it of theirs?” He had placed one hand around her neck and brought her face to his to kiss it. The Bird Woman had pushed him away.

“The stars belong to no one,” she told him. “And neither do I. I choose to be with you, Ivan.” She had looked down at her feet, because she couldn’t stand to see the Star Catcher when he behaved this way, which, she discovered over months, was a common occurrence.

“They belong to me,” the Star Catcher told her, his voice firm.

“You can’t take them with you,” the Bird Woman whispered.

“Where?” he had asked her.

“To the next world, of course.”

#



Throughout the day, the Bird Woman rests on a nest of blankets, next to the mounds of stars and moons. She barely sleeps, though, because the Star Catcher insists on sitting next to her, cross-legged, hands folded in his lap, telling stories. His favorite stories to tell are from his childhood. This is nothing new to the Bird Woman. The Star Catcher told her stories all the time, back when they were lovers. Now that she's back, living in his lighthouse, he's resumed telling them. They are not lovers, though; they are simply inhabiting the same space together. Along with the psychoanalyst. The Bird Woman is glad the psychoanalyst is with her. Not for his advice, but because she never has to be alone with the Star Catcher. The psychoanalyst is not glad of anything, really. He sits on his place on the shelf, rolling his eyes as the Star Catcher tells his stories, sometimes snorting.

"When I was a little boy," the Star Catcher tells the Bird Woman, "I used to love summer best of all seasons. I would wait until the sun began to set, and the fog would roll into the island, and then the fireflies would appear, tiny green sparks in the mist, signaling back and forth to each other. They were so beautiful, the way the glow came from their own bodies. I wanted to glow like that, too, but I couldn't. I used to try and catch them, and put them in glass jars to make lanterns. I liked the feel of them in my hands, crawling on my skin. I'd set the lantern on my nightstand and watch them glowing on and off all night, until I fell asleep. In the morning, though, they were always dead on their backs, legs sticking up in the air."

"How sad," the Bird Woman tells him. Her eyelids flutter, heavy with sleep, but she continues listening. She's heard the story before, amongst others, but the Star Catcher continually returns to it.

“It’s funny, though,” says the Star Catcher. “Because it became harder and harder for me to catch the fireflies. After a while, I’d try to catch them, but they’d lift into the air just before I could get hold of them. They’d be just inches above my reach, and they’d float higher and higher, until they disappeared into the night sky. That’s when I noticed the stars. That’s when I started to catch stars instead. Stars don’t move, unless they’re dying.”

“It’s hot in here,” the Bird Woman tells him. She scratches under the ruff of feathers circling her neck. “Please. Open a window. Or else bring me a fan.”

“Why not go out for a walk instead?” the Star Catcher offers. He lifts one eyebrow and motions with his hands towards the door.

“Too tired,” says the Bird Woman, punctuating her explanation with a long, elliptical sigh. “I’ve been working so hard, so very hard,” she tells the Star Catcher. “Please, Ivan, bring me some fresh air.”

“Of course,” the Star Catcher acquiesces. “Besides,” he says, “this room is beginning to stink of your birds and their dung. You should think about selling some of them, Jess, really.”

“Why not release them?” the Bird Woman says. She looks down into her folded hands, locked together in her lap. If she looks at him, he’ll see through her; if she doesn’t look at him, he’ll know something is not right. Without knowing her at all, the Star Catcher knows some things about the Bird Woman. He knows the details she wishes other people would overlook: escape tactics, white lies, kindnesses to brush tension under a rug.

For several moments he is silent, and so the Bird Woman finally looks up, blinking.

The Star Catcher meets her stare.

“Release them?” he asks, eyebrows knitting together. “Wouldn’t you rather sell them at the market? They’re your birds, after all. You made them.”

“But I’ve made so many,” the Bird Woman says. “And anyway, why not? I’m here now, instead of renting the cottage. And sometimes I like to make birds for no good reason. Let them take to sky instead of hobbling around in this tower.”

“As long as you’re sure,” the Star Catcher says, shaking his head. He searches the folds of his robes for a set of keys and, finding them, opens a box on the floor, next to the doorway. Inside the box is a lever. Kneeling next to it, the Star Catcher pulls back on the lever, using all of his weight. The lever click, click, clicks into position. Gears churn, grind beneath the Bird Woman’s feet. She can feel the floor buckling beneath her. The dome of the lantern room slides around her until suddenly a sliver of black sky appears, its shadows deeper where the stars have been plucked. Slowly, the gap widens, until the lantern room is half-exposed to night.

“Ahh,” the Bird Woman breathes deeply. The air is cold, salty on her lips. It tastes of feathers floating to earth and fish leaping in spangled sunlight.

“Better?” the Star Catcher asks, still kneeling next to the lever, smiling.

“Much,” the Bird Woman says. Around the room, her birds hop and flutter in anticipation. She holds both hands in front of her, palms up, open, a private signal only she and they understand, and the birds rise up—all of them, except for the ostrich—each with a star or a moon clenched in their talons.

“Stop that! What are you doing?” The Star Catcher stands, stretching his arms out, grabbing after the stars and moons that hang lowest in the air. But each one eludes him,

floating into the night air like the fireflies of his youth.

The birds spread over the city, the island, higher and higher, fireworks opening above the boulevards and boatmen, until each star is set back into its proper niche. There are so many holes in the fabric of darkness, and each one fits like a jewel in an antique broach.

“Call them back, Jessica,” the Star Catcher pleads. He stands in the center of the lantern room, looking up at what took months for him to collect, then collapses into a pool of black robes, like a melted candle, and begins to weep. Openly, fitfully.

“Time for me to go, I think,” says the psychoanalyst. The ostrich saunters over and plucks him down from the bookshelf by his beard. The two of them trot down the stairwell, and the psychoanalyst’s voice echoes back, “Call me if you need anymore advice, my dear.”

The Bird Woman crawls on hands and knees to where the Star Catcher sits, head lolling to one side, arms splayed out in front of him, like an unstrung puppet. “All gone,” he mutters. “All gone. I’ll never be able to collect them all again.”

“No, Ivan,” she says, pulling him backwards to rest his head on her lap. “They’re still here. See them? See how brightly they shine?”

But he isn’t listening—it’s obvious from the way he shakes his head in disagreement, or with dissatisfaction. “No,” he says, eyes wincing with tears. “Gone, gone, gone. What am I going to do with myself now?”

“Let go,” the Bird Woman tells him. Stroking his forehead, she leans down and kisses his worried creases. “Let them go,” she tells him. “Some of them might come back.”

## Leonora Carrington

Leonora Carrington's early life was similar to Remedios Varo's. Both girls grew up in upper class households, and both girls were subjected to a strict Catholicism. Carrington left home early, in what has become an almost legendary story within Surrealist lore, and also in the lore of women artists in general. After meeting Max Ernst at a dinner party, she fled England to run away to Paris on her own, where she lived with Ernst and joined, as an attachment to him, the Surrealist movement.

Carrington's paintings are large and broad, gigantic in comparison to the small precise canvases that Varo used. The two women shared an affection for magical lore, which made its way into their paintings, albeit through different sensibilities and filters. Georgiana M. M. Colvile writes that, "...Carrington used her art to create a potential metamorphosis of the world according to the female and animal principle of the Goddess..."(170). This metamorphosis manifests itself in both Varo and Carrington's paintings, but through different lenses. Varo's encounters with the magical become internalized, and thus in Varo's paintings we find more personal journeys of escape through magic that arises from within the self. Carrington's visions was world transforming, an externalized vision of release on a cultural level.

I chose to work with Carrington's "The Giantess", or otherwise known as "The Guardian of the Egg". Creating a fictional narrative in which the image of a giantess standing within the confines of a rustic village, with the ocean tumbling behind her, Viking boats riding the waves, was a challenge. My processing of this image into

narrative was quite different from how I pieced together several of Varo's paintings like plot devices. Because I chose to focus on only one painting this time, the narrative grows into that image, rather than out of it. The story takes place in contemporary suburbia, rather than a rustic village. The people in it are as recognizable as your next-door neighbors. A young girl begins to grow a tree out of her head, and over a period of months becomes the young giantess of Carrington's painting. She becomes the magical nexus through which an "other world" pierces reality and transforms the suburban village into the rustic one of Carrington's painting.

I wrote the story before I actually read any history or criticism on Carrington's work. It was much to my delight to discover that my narrative analysis of Carrington's painting was similar to that of other critical interpretations. Evans Lansing Smith writes that:

"Carrington's work, like the poetry of H.D., can be seen as a quest for the recovery of a Goddess purified of patriarchal values who may serve as a muse and as an instrument of cultural and personal metamorphosis for women. In fact, Carrington implies that without the recovery of the Goddess, the modern world faces extinction and apocalypse" (48-49).

By looking at Carrington's painting without other interpretations informing my own impressions, I had reconstructed Lansing Smith's theory on Carrington's body of work through a fictional exploration of those images. Through her encounter with the magical egg, symbol of rebirth, a teenage girl transforms into a Goddess figure, and transforms a failing suburbia—its environment diseased and its social structure rigid and fossilized—into a forested land of fairy tales. In fact, fairies (though I do not name them so) become the new denizens of the former suburban landscape. I later discovered that Carrington's

childhood was filled with Irish legend and folk and fairy tales, so the use of a fairy race as new citizens of the country, so to speak, was actually an intuitive association, most likely noticed in other paintings of hers at which I looked. The geese that fly forward from the Giantess' cloak are the wild geese of Ireland as well, another imagistic cultural resource for Carrington, and they become animal guardians for the giantess.

In creating this story, I began to make decisions about this collection of re-inscribed narratives as a whole. This second story is told in the first person observer position. Its narrator is an adolescent boy, the brother of the Goddess-girl. Her story is told through his eyes. The previous story for Varo's painting was a third person perspective. In this switch between the third person narrator and the first person observer narrator, I felt a shift in closeness to understanding the paintings as well, as if I had gotten a step closer to admission to these painter's worlds. Here the "I" of the narrative is still a male, though a young one, who continually wants to control the narrative, and to tell his sister what to do, to have some importance in her story. But the sister, Hester, refuses his desire to take over her story, to have access to the power she wields. She does, however, allow him a closer intimacy than anyone else in the narrative, and helps to change him as well as the entire town. By the end of the story he loves and sees his sister as a truly amazing figure, not the embarrassing awkward girl she had been previously. In his acceptance of her, though, he also begins to accept responsibility and empowering positions within his own life as well. In seeing her as another human being, deserving of compassion and understanding, he begins to actually grow up, although only figuratively, unlike his sister's externalized growth.

## The Guardian of the Egg

My sister was the girl with the tree growing out of her head. You've probably heard of her. You might have seen her on TV. Her picture was plastered all over the place for a while. That shock of wheat ruffling around her face like a great golden mane, the weeping willow tree growing out of the top of her head, her skin white as chalk and smooth as porcelain, those tiny tiger lilies that grew in between her eyelashes. And all of those geese that she kept under her mossy cloak! A freak show, really, I understand why everyone thought she might be working with a foreign government, or that she'd been irradiated by the local nuclear power plant. But, really, she was just another ordinary teenager under all of that flora and fauna. I know, because she was my older sister. A lot of people might find this hard to believe, but it's true.

Hester was a straight A student. Top of her class she was to be valedictorian. No one was really surprised. She'd had straight A's since grade school. She wore white stockings and old-fashioned sweaters with pearl buttons. The girls at school used to make fun of her because of how she dressed and because of how smart she was. Also maybe due to the fact that she had braces and bad acne, and her hair might have been styled better, and she had a habit of looking down at her feet shuffling through the hallways, instead of watching where she was going. She bumped into people a lot because of this, which brought her negative attention. I was two years younger than her, in the tenth grade. I pretended not to know her. It was easy to do, because she never saw me in the hallways. Her head was always pointed towards the floor.



When the tree started growing out of her head, it was springtime. Only a few more months of school remained before she'd graduate and go off to college. At first, you could look right at her and not notice the tree, unless you got close and examined the part down the middle of her hair. After a few weeks, though, it was the size of a flower blooming, a little weeping willow. Kids started to call her Daisy Head Maisy, and they'd laugh and elbow each other when she walked by. Hester didn't pay them any attention, although I'd shrink back into the hollow of my locker whenever I saw her coming, those weeping willow branches swaying back and forth like a grass hula skirt.

Hester didn't seem to mind the tree. In fact, when she discovered it, I remember the strange grin on her face, like she'd found forgotten money in one of her jacket pockets. She seemed excited. So excited that she parted her hair down the middle instead of on the side, as if she wanted people to notice it. She walked with her head held high. She looked a bit like maybe she thought she was better than everyone. I remember asking, "Hester, why don't you get the scissors and cut it off?" and she winced as if the very thought of cutting the tree was repulsive.

"I like it, Stephen," she said, tilting her head one way, then the other, while she looked at the tree from different angles in the mirror.

"It's gross, Hester," I said, and she narrowed her eyes and said, "I don't expect you to understand this. Maybe you're even a little jealous?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. She sounded slightly religious, flipping her hair over one shoulder, then the other, examining the tree growing out of her cranium as if it were a pair of earrings. I'd never seen Hester so concerned with a mirror.

My parents took Hester to a neurologist and then to a psychologist, to ease some of their worries. But the neurologist said the tree couldn't be removed because its roots grew directly into her cerebrum. She'd suffer brain damage if we fiddled with it, and anyway, he said, it didn't seem to be hurting her. The tree roots conducted electrical currents, just like the other nerves in her brain. The psychologist said Hester was remarkably sane, considering she had a tree growing out of her head. "She's coping quite well," he told my parents, and all my mother and father could do was raise their eyebrows and smile.

#

Our high school decided to graduate Hester early. The school board said they didn't want any problems because of her. "Besides," said our principle, Mrs. Merriman. "Everyone knows Hester is the smartest student in her class. Graduation would have been inevitable, wouldn't it?" She shook hands with my parents efficiently, then asked her secretary to see that all the forms were properly filled out.

Reporters and talk show hosts stalked the sidewalks and fast food restaurants of our formerly quiet town. Paparazzi flashed pictures at innocent young girls who happened to be wearing their hair in a topknot. Topknots soon became stylistic suicide due to the first glance similarity they shared with a tree growing out of a girl's head. This frustrated and angered many female athletes who liked to put their hair up while they jogged or played softball. Now they had to brush their hair out of their eyes as they dribbled or leaped hurdles. My sister, of course, was the reason for all of these female athlete's troubles, and they petitioned for her to move out of town. The petition never made it through the court system, though. A judge threw it out on account that you can't petition people to

leave town. They have to do something wrong first, he said, and Ada McGowen, our school's best volleyball player, said, "Yeah? Well what do you call someone who grows a tree out of her head? I'd say that's pretty wrong, wouldn't you?"

Hester seemed oblivious to the troubles her tree caused other people. She said, "Really, Stephen, my tree isn't the problem. They create their own messes. They'd just like to think my tree is the reason."

She seemed very wise and old when she spoke like this. In fact, Hester didn't seem like Hester after a while. I would search her face as she wandered through our tiny backyard, running her fingers through the water in the bird bath, cupping the water in her hands and releasing it, the sun glinting through the water as it ran back into the bird bath, and sometimes I couldn't even recognize her as my sister. She seemed larger than she used to. Majestic, even. This was when her skin turned pale and chalky, and overnight her hair changed from silky blonde to a shaggy, golden wheat. This was also when my mother stopped Hester as she passed by the hall where our parents measured us each year on our birthdays and placed a pencil mark where the top of our heads met the wall.

"Hester," my mother said, "come back here a minute."

My mother took a pencil from the mug that sat next to our telephone. She marked the wall with a thin line of lead, even though she'd already done the same thing three months earlier, on Hester's seventeenth birthday. Hester stepped away from the wall this time and my mother shook her head in disbelief, her eyes widening.

Within three months, my sister had grown nearly four inches.

#

I don't know how to describe Hester before her changes started to happen. She was Hester, my older sister. She was plain and awkward and bad at conversation. You wouldn't invite her to a party. You wouldn't ask her to a dance. You probably wouldn't want to have a locker next to hers, either. You could become strange by association if you spent too much time near her. Hester didn't have any friends, and neither did I, but I had none because of Hester. Because of my embarrassment for Hester, I would never bring anyone home. I'd meet Alex or Ryan or Chelsea at the movies, or the mall, or else at a coffee house or the park. They never asked about my family, and I never asked about theirs. We were conspirators in covering up our own pasts. We respected each other's secrets, never prying or becoming curious. We knew our own secrets weren't that interesting, and what pain we harbored no one else would understand. We ourselves wouldn't find each other's problems to be problems, so we never asked what they were.

It was unavoidable, though. After Hester started to change, after the town itself started to change, and the media slipped into our lives, everyone discovered that we were related. I was now the girl with the tree growing out of her head's brother. You might have heard someone call me by that name. You might have read a reporter quote me wrong in any variety of news articles or docudramas, and I never approved of the actor they chose to play my part in the made-for-TV movie, "Wild Thing". He was uncouth, and my hair isn't even blonde. I never wear hiking boots either. That was a dramatic affectation dreamed up by the director, most likely. But people started recognizing me anyway. I could no longer exist anonymously. Suddenly my identity was more Hester than Stephen. I was more Hester than Stephen was ever Stephen. When people saw me, they thought of Hester.

“How is your sister?” they’d ask. Or else, “Is Hester still growing?” Or even, “Tell your sister that her sort doesn’t belong in our town.”

I’d nod and twitch a little at the people who held violence towards Hester in their hands. They seemed unforgiving, as if she’d done something to personally affront them. The postman in particular became decidedly spiteful. “You should get someone to start landscaping this crap,” he told me one afternoon in the summer. I looked to where he was pointing and saw vines growing round our mailbox. He pulled some vines away from the lid, stuffed our mail inside, then snapped the box shut.

“Sorry,” I said, as he stalked down the driveway. But all he did was flick me the back of his hand.

#

As summer wore on, Hester spent more and more time outside, in the back yard. My parents installed a small above-ground swimming pool, and Hester would often lounge on the deck with her feet curling into the blue water. I would swim along the floor of the pool and watch the shadows from the light above rippling along the bottom. I would watch Hester’s toes flick back and forth above me. Tiny roots grew between her toes, like potato tubers. They soaked up the water and Hester soaked up the sunlight, like a plant photosynthesizing.

Hester was now at least eight feet tall, a giantess by all standards, and she continued to grow without pause. One day, my father hired a lumber company to bring us a truck full of lumber, and over the course of a few days, he fenced in our front and back yard. The fence stood twelve feet tall, a virtual fortress. “There are too many people in our business,” he grumbled, looking up sheepishly at Hester, and then back to the work at

hand. He pounded another nail. Hester winced each time the hammer met the nail head, but she never said anything. Eventually, she looked down at her feet and walked back to the house, back to her bedroom, ducking her head under each doorframe.

#

Not much later, the first of the geese arrived. It was a large bird, sleek and sidling up to everyone's legs, but especially Hester's. Soon only Hester. It followed her around like a zealot. If someone raised a voice to Hester (which I often did in argument, even if she was over eight feet tall) the goose would flap its wings threateningly, hiss and bare its bill. I called the bird names like Brunhilda and Marta. I called it the Viking Bird, the Assassin, the Bodyguard. And eventually Hester asked me to, "Please desist in offending the poor creature. It doesn't have a name like we do, Stephen."

"I was joking," I told her, and she said, "I'm not." The discussion began and ended with Hester folding her arms across her chest in warning.

"Ice Queen," I muttered as I walked away.

"I heard that," she shouted. "Do not think your willfulness goes unrecorded!"

I stopped short, shaking my head in disbelief. Finally I said, "Are you protesting something, Hester? Because if you're protesting something, why don't you just say so, and protest, instead of acting all weird like this?"

Hester winced. I raised my eyebrows and waited. She didn't say anything though, so I turned and left her there, wincing.

In our town, every street has five lampposts lining it. We have a town square with a gas station, a grocery store, and a Super-Mart, which came to town three years ago, set itself up like an overnight circus, and began selling everything from household cleaners

to underwear. We no longer travel into the city for art supplies, books, birdseed, or to have our automobile's oil changed. It's a self-sufficient community. Children attend three different schools: one for the grade schoolers, one for the middle grades, and the last for high school. We are raised to be good, decent people, who know what it is to be practical, what real work is, and how to raise our own children someday with these same values.

If our town has any failing, the flaw is in our environment. For the past three years, most of our trees have been cut down. Dutch Elm disease invaded, infested, and because of this, shade in the summer is a commodity. The last refuge for our trees is in the town park, a mile wide and long, where they enjoy a small pond and a cannon used in World War II. Also a small memorial wall engraved with the names of all the men from our town who died in one of the wars stands in the shade of our remaining elm trees.

For a while, we had few birds in our area—birds and trees, I guess, belonging together—until Hester's geese began to amass behind her. She would take trips to the park sometimes in the early mornings, before most people had awakened. Watching the sun lift over the treetops in the park, her geese would stroll around the circumference of the pond, splash a little, eat breadcrumbs from her hands, and because of this, our park would sometimes look like a park, if you were there to witness Hester and the geese being in it.

One morning, I woke up angry from a dream of eight feet tall geese that nipped my ankles. When I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I realized it was the fern brushing its lacy leaves against my feet. The fern had been growing beside the foot of my bed for about a month already, coming up between the floorboards. I'd tried to remove it, pull it up by

its roots, but it only grew back within a few days, a persistent reminder that things were not right in the world. Ferns should not be growing in bedrooms, unless they are potted. Vines should not grow over mailboxes, unless the mailbox is in a jungle outpost, and maybe not even then should vines be growing on it. Tiger lilies should not grow in place of a girl's eyelashes. There are rules in this world. I told the fern this myself, but it pretended not to know what I was talking about.

Suddenly I heard Hester's geese in the back yard, and her voice ringing out for them to fall in behind her. When I lifted myself to look out of my window, I saw her back turning the corner of our street, with a line of ten geese following. I decided to follow as well.

They didn't go very far—to the park, only a few blocks away from our place. In the park, the geese wandered aimlessly, seeming without true purpose, just like real geese. I watched Hester slip into the pond and begin washing her face, her hair. The pond could have held twenty children inside it, but Hester filled the whole thing. It looked like a water hole with her inside it. I was going to call out to her, to tell her that she shouldn't be out alone like this, that there were still crazies around who would rather see her disappear than take a bath in this pond, but I stopped when I saw her rise from the water, look furtively from side to side, and step into the little grove of trees near the pond.

I followed her in secret, casting my own furtive looks over my shoulder. I felt like a spy, capturing enemy information. What's going on in that head of yours, Hester? I wondered. Besides a tree growing, that is.

I came down on the other side of the trees, in case Hester had placed one of the geese down by the pond as a lookout. She was hiding something—that much was obvious.



Luckily, the park was well groomed. “Managed”, is how the groundskeepers referred to it, so there was no underbrush to rattle through, which might have alerted Hester. There were well-trod dirt trails, and little flower gardens between trees, everything patterned like an English garden. I ducked from tree to tree, from bush to tree, my back pressed against the bark so Hester wouldn’t see me. I felt daring and invigorated by my own cleverness. I was primal and silent—I thought maybe I should try hunting. And then, all at once, I came upon Hester kneeling down in what appeared to be an “unmanaged” section of the grove.

Here were brambles and thorny bushes, vines creeping up the sides of trees that grew wild with branches; there were ferns and little wild flowers growing along the floor of the forest—and it did seem like a forest, not a grove or a park at all. There were even rings of mushrooms and toadstools. I was waiting to see a fairy arrive. Hester knelt down on a patch of moss near the base of a large weeping willow. The weeping willow that grew out of her head swayed above her, and the weeping willow that grew in the grove swayed along with it, but there was no wind. Hester picked something up from the mushroom ring in her pale white hands, and as I snuck closer to see what it was, a branch broke beneath my feet. I had grown too comfortable sneaking through the managed sections of the park, clear of debris and noisy branches. My dreams of big game hunting evaporated as suddenly as I’d dreamed them.

Hester’s eyes snapped open. She lifted her head and looked at me as if I were one of the crazy people who left death threats on our answering machine. “Stephen!” she shouted in surprise, staggering up from her kneeling position. The fear in her eyes reminded me of a deer caught in headlights, even though I hadn’t seen a deer in our town

in at least five years. I thought she was going to run from me, but she didn't. "What are you doing here?" she asked instead. "You shouldn't have followed."

"I'm sorry, Hester" I said. "I was going to call out, but then you came inside here. What is this place anyway?"

"Don't worry about it," she said, her face firm and serious. "It's a secret. So don't tell anyone you saw me here. Not even Mom and Dad, alright?"

I raised my eyebrows. "Do you seriously think I'm going to leave here, say nothing, and not try to find out what it is you're hiding?"

"I'm not hiding anything," she said, gritting her teeth. "I'm protecting something. There's a difference."

"Sometimes you have to hide something to protect it," I said, shrugging. "Come on, Hester. You can trust me. I won't tell anyone. I promise."

At that moment she peered down into her cupped hands at whatever she was holding. Then she opened her hands a little and lowered them so I could see.

She was holding a grayish colored egg. It was about the size of a football, but in Hester's hands, it appeared to be the size of a chicken egg. Blue spots polka dotted its surface. "An Easter egg?" I asked, which was the first thought that came to me.

Hester nodded. "Yes. But not how you're thinking."

"How then?"

"It's not an Easter egg, really," said Hester. "Just sort of. It's bringing something back to us. Something dead is coming back again."

I reached out to stroke the egg, but Hester pulled her hands back as soon as I made a move towards it. "No!" she shouted. "You can't touch it, Stephen. No one but I can

touch it.”

“I wasn’t going to hurt it!” I shouted back. “Don’t be so bossy, Hester.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that those are the rules. Only me, Stephen. Only I can touch it. I’m its guardian. I’m the guardian of the egg.”

“What are you guarding it from?” I asked, and Hester looked over my shoulders, then from left to right, as if there might be unseen presences eavesdropping.

“From them,” she said. “From the people in town. If anyone knew about the egg, that it was the cause of my changes and all the other changes around here, they’d destroy it. Just like they do with everything else.”

“Why not keep it at the house then?” I suggested.

“Because that’s the most likely place they’d look. If I keep the egg somewhere public, they’ll never find it. People always look where they’re not supposed to be looking. If I keep it where anyone could find it, they won’t even think to come here. Also, the egg needs a place with trees and clean water. The park is growing stronger now.”

It was true. The park was slowly but surely being overtaken by a new growth of trees and wild flowers. A surge of underbrush and brambles grew over and between trees like the strands of a spider’s web.

“But is this a good thing?” I asked. “How do you know the egg isn’t evil?”

“Because I know,” said Hester. “I just know, Stephen. You’ll have to trust me.”

Both of us had asked for trust from the other. This was something new to my relationship with my sister. We’d barely held a conversation before this one, except to argue and put each other down. Suddenly I felt like we understood each other, had jumped over the preliminary forgiveness rituals and gone straight into a deep and

meaningful friendship. I wasn't ashamed of this feeling. I wasn't ashamed of Hester anymore either, even if she was over eight feet tall, white as a clown and covered with vegetation. I knew to trust her, as she knew to trust the egg, and so I did that, and went home with her that morning, and said nothing to anyone about her secret.

#

Hester's growth became more problematic as each month passed by us. At eleven feet tall, she was quickly going to become visible to the outside world again. My father's fence would keep her from prying eyes and cameras for only a few more weeks. Also, we had no clothes that Hester could fit into, and autumn was chilling us into a sudden December. My mother went to the Super-Mart and ordered yards and yards of a stretchy orange fabric, and then sewed it into a shapeless dress for Hester. "You'll grow into it, honey," she said, and ran her fingers through my sister's yellow-brown hair. Kernels of wheat clung to Hester's shoulders. Now that the sun grew weaker day by day, Hester's hair fell out in shocks of dried brown wheat.

"It's a little flimsy though," Hester told my mother. She lifted the hem of the dress and said, "The wind will cut right through it."

"A coat then," my mother said, and rushed back into her sewing room.

Several days later she emerged with a white cape made from bed sheets and lined with flannel. "I'm sorry it's not a coat," said my mother. "I didn't have enough material, honey."

Hester smiled and tied the cape around her neck. She looked dashing, like a superhero. She thanked my mother and didn't complain about her makeshift clothes, nor

that she had to go barefoot. She knew her changes were costing our parents a small fortune.

Hester spent the winter inside the house, sleeping through most of it, curled up in the dining room, the largest room available. She seemed to be hibernating, waiting. Her breath came sparsely, but it kept on coming. Her geese flew south when the cold months arrived, and I wondered if they would return when it grew warmer, or if they would find other idols to worship come next summer.

Sometimes my parents and I would be in the living room, watching TV, snow falling gently against the picture window, and Hester would suddenly utter something incomprehensible from the dining room. I once asked her questions while she slept, whispering into her ear, "What is happening now?" to which Hester replied, "There are two creatures here with me. They sit in my tree and throw down apples for me to eat. I tell them to save the apples, I'm not hungry, but they keep throwing them anyway."

"What do they look like?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Hester. They're in my tree. The tree growing out of my head. They're above me. I can't see them."

"Tell them I see them," I whispered, even though I saw nothing in the tree growing out of Hester's head. It lay across the dining room floor, brown and withered, only the trunk still looking strong and alive.

Hester was silent for a moment. Then she finally spoke again. "They say you are lying. They say to tell you to stop meddling in their affairs. You are not the guardian of the egg! Be patient, they say. Some day you, too, may be important."

#

When winter died, and spring came to melt the snow piled in our yards and tree limbs, Hester finally awakened. My mother was cooking breakfast for my father before he left for work. She scraped eggs around in a frying pan and I stood beside her, spooning wheat flakes into my mouth. The eggs sizzled and foamed in the frying pan. My mother was telling me about a dream she'd had the night before.

"There were all these people in it," she said. "They all looked familiar and strange at the same time. You were in it, and so was Dad, and Mr. Jackson the school janitor—he was there too. And Ellen Darby, next door, I can remember her trying to give me a pitchfork. We were all standing in a forest. But our clothes were weird. Rustic. We all looked like farmers and farmer's wives, bonnets and linen dresses. It was very scary. I kept shouting for you and your father to run before we had to start farming, but you wouldn't listen. You already had a hoe in your hands."

Before I could laugh at my mother's dream or make fun of her, a groan came from the dining room. My mother turned the heat off the eggs and we both ran to the next room to find Hester pushing herself up from the floor. She was having difficulties, though. Her weeping willow tree was wedged in one corner of the dining room, and she couldn't back up far enough to dislodge it. "Help," she sobbed when we entered the room. "I'm stuck. I can't get out of here."

My father decided to take extreme measures. He went out to the garage and came back with the chainsaw. Hester screamed when he pulled on its cord and the chainsaw began buzzing. "I won't hurt you!" he promised. Quickly, efficiently, he slipped the saw through several branches, and they fell to the floor in a pile of sawdust.

Hester opened her eyes after he shut the saw off. "Is it over?" she asked, and my

mother patted Hester's rump and told her everything was ok now. We took the patio doors off their sliding tracks, and Hester squeezed outside into the sunshine. She took a deep breath immediately, and the wheat framing her face lifted towards the warmth. "Oh finally," Hester whispered, still kneeling on the back deck in the puddles of newly melted snow. "It is time," she said then. Whether she was speaking to us or to some unseen audience, I couldn't tell. But soon I saw a dark V-shape in the distant sky, coming closer, and within moments Hester's geese landed in our backyard, milling about, nibbling her ears, her fingers, as she stroked them.

#

It wasn't much longer before the entire town was bursting with spring again, and the rain was falling, falling, bringing up beds of forgotten flowers. The trees budded and unfurled leaves like banners in only a few short weeks. I saw a deer, a buck, one day on my way home from school, loping through the park, which was nearly unrecognizable anymore. The park had grown an unruly amount of trees around its perimeter, like the wall of thorns in the Sleeping Beauty story, and no one dared enter its darkness any longer. Children told stories about witches living in the grove at its center. Before the park became a forest, our witch stories were always set in the house of some old lady nobody liked. It was a strange phenomenon to see a story leave the comforts of our houses, our streets and cul-de-sacs, to take up residence in the new forest.

Hester was very busy at this time. She paced the backyard, chewing her fingernails with a worried look always surfacing on her face. Her geese flew in and out of the yard on what seemed to be missions. One would leave and another would land and waddle up to Hester to report its findings. Hester would kneel down and press her ear to the goose's

bill in order to hear it. New saplings rose from the freshly wet ground all across our town. They grew thick and strong, branching and rebranching over the course of a few weeks. Bushes and brambles sprang up between them. Ellen Darby found a large thicket of blueberry bushes in her back yard, and set a sign out by her driveway that said Fresh Blueberries, Pick Your Own!

My mother told me one morning, “Don’t go to school, Stephen.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because Hester is in trouble. I drove past the school this morning on my way to the Super-Mart. There were a lot of people there already. They were in the parking lot with picket signs. They were shouting horrible things about Hester. They say the property value is declining because of her. I don’t want you near a crowd like that, understand me?”

I nodded and she patted the back of my head.

My father stayed home from work that day, too. All of us gathered in the back yard together. We grilled steaks and skewers of vegetables. I chased the geese around the birdbath, splashing them with water. It was good-natured fun, though, and they loved it. Hester could see this, so she didn’t chastise. She leaned against one of the walls with her knees tucked up to her chest. She sighed a lot, and ate a lot, and seemed anxious. So did my parents, but they did their best to hide their anxieties. They were both good at that, and as one of their children, I appreciated their tact and skill at covering up their own problems. I had my own problems, and anyway, children shouldn’t have to worry about their parents. It’s supposed to be the other way around.

Towards evening, when the sky purpled and the wind started to buck, Hester told us



she was leaving. Somehow we had all been prepared for this, and weren't surprised at her decision. My mother resisted only once with an, "Oh, honey, don't talk like that." But Hester shook her head firmly. She was having none of that. My mother lowered her face and said no more. She just nodded.

"I won't be going far anyway," Hester told us. "Just to the old park, the new forest. I'll be safe there now. You can come visit me sometimes maybe. Later, though, after everything has settled down."

This cheered my parents up a bit. They both went to Hester and hugged her arms, her legs, tried to fit their arms around her neck. They cried a little, and then retreated to the house.

I was about to say my goodbyes, too, but Hester spoke before me.

"Stephen," she said, "I need you to come with me. You'll have to keep watch for a few days. If anyone tries to find me in there, you'll have to stop them, or else everything will be ruined."

"This is my job, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes," said Hester. "You are the guardian of the guardian of the egg. Please don't let me down."

I nodded gravely. I would protect her under any circumstances. In a matter of minutes, I had collected my whittling knife, rope from the basement, and my BB gun. I felt very much like an action hero gearing up for battle. Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger—why didn't the director of "Wild Thing" approach one of them to play me?

We left for the park later that night. In the darkest hours, our town was silent except

for the sounds of crickets whirring, night birds cooing, and the strum of frogs in their secret places. Hester's geese flew our route before us, then circled around to report that the way was clear. An unmarked white van was parked several houses down from ours, but the driver was slumped against the window, asleep from too much waiting for Hester. We followed the geese through the vine-covered streets until we arrived at the park, and there Hester slipped into a dark sliver of space between two towering elms. As soon as she passed between them, she seemed to disappear. I couldn't even hear her rustling in the branches. A moment later her long pale arm stretched forth from the dark place and the fingers curled inward for me to follow. I took hold of her pinky and Hester pulled me inside her realm.

It was strange in that place. The quiet of the suburbs I'd heard as we slipped through the streets of our town would have sounded like a parade in the forest. I heard nothing here but the wind in the trees and the gurgle of a nearby creek. Hester loomed large above me. Her breath came heavily, as if she were anxious. Suddenly she started walking at a fast pace, pushing through the treetops, which swayed and snapped back into place behind her. The ground beneath my feet trembled at Hester's step. I clasped the hem of her orange dress to my chest and followed as close as possible, so that I wouldn't get caught in the backlash of branches. And in this way, crashing through the forest, we found our way to the grove at its center.

Tiny lights awaited us in the grove. They shimmered in the dark, floating through the night like miniature Japanese lanterns. As one passed by me, I heard a slight buzzing sound, a hum like a bee as it skims your ear in the summer. I looked at Hester, who stood in the center of the grove already. The glowing creatures circled her, lit upon her face,

her hair, her shoulders, upon the weeping willow growing out of her head. She held her arms out at both sides and turned in a slow circle, a smile of pure pleasure washing over her.

The trees in the grove towered over Hester, unlike some of the smaller ones at the outside border. If I squinted, here among these giant elms and maples, she looked to be the right size again. For a moment, she looked like the old Hester, the girl who was once so awkward and quiet, books clasped to her chest protectively, ready to bump into anything if it meant avoiding other people. Hester still avoided people, but now it was for different reasons: now Hester shrank from the burdens of civilization in order to accomplish a task so mysterious even I didn't know all of the details or reasons for her secrecy.

"Here," she murmured, talking to herself really. She stood upon a small hill, and I saw that she held the egg in her hands once again. A pale stream of silver moonlight spilled over her figure, illuminating the trees ringing the hillside. She quickly slipped the egg into one of the pockets in her orange dress, then bent down and forced her fingers into the earth. She groaned and struggled, flexing her muscles. The wheat of her hair rustled over her shoulders, against the small of her back. The weeping willow tree growing out of her head swayed with her exertion. And then finally she pulled up a tab of earth, and continued pulling until she'd pulled up the grass and sod of the hillside in one long strip.

"It's up to you now, Stephen," she said, wiping the sweat from her pale brow. The glowing creatures circled her as if they were planets orbiting a sun.

"Don't worry, Hester," I told her. I trotted up to her and she bent down and lifted me

into her arms. “You’re so big!” I said, truly realizing it for the first time. Since she’d started changing, I never actually allowed myself to touch her. I was happy to touch her now. She was still my sister. She was still Hester underneath all of that flora and fauna. I wished I’d hugged her more often when she was still five foot seven, and I could reach my arms all the way around.

Hester placed me gently back on the ground, then laid herself down in the hole she’d created. She pulled the strip of grassy sod under her chin, like a blanket. She was getting comfortable, I could tell, in the hillside, wiggling her toes at one end, shrugging her shoulders at the other to make more room. She retrieved the egg from her dress pocket a moment later, then, holding it between her forefinger and thumb, placed it inside her mouth. She swallowed, and the egg traveled down the column of her throat and disappeared from my sight forever.

“Take care, Stephen,” she said, blinking soberly. Then she pulled the quilted earth over herself entirely and disappeared as well.

#

I maintained a defensive position in the days that followed. Hester’s geese helped to guard the perimeter of the grove, where Hester had buried herself in the hillside. The geese patrolled the outer borders, reporting to me at varying scheduled hours during the mornings, evenings, and in the night. I didn’t really understand their bluster, but I sensed that their posts were well watched. Only once did I feel an impending threat to the grove, and that came on the fourth night of our vigil, just when I thought things were going to be ok.

Brunhilda, the Viking goose, suddenly appeared in the grove at sunset, her wings

fluttering anxiously, her bill filled with and alarming honk. She led me through the forest until we reached a blind of brush that she'd selected as her vantage point. I kneeled beside her in silence and waited, and then all at once I heard the human sound of men moving through the forest, snapping branches beneath their feet, grunting, sometimes cursing. More than one voice. Perhaps three, maybe four. All male, deep and rough.

I looked down at Brunhilda, gave her the signal for our agreed upon plan of action, and she nodded gruffly and waddle out into the woods, awaiting the men. Once they reached us, she flew up into their faces, landed, jogged away from them for a moment until she was sure they were following her, and then took once again to air.

I caught only a brief glimpse of them. They were dressed differently from each other: one in flannel and blue jeans, another in a business suit, and also the postman. Two of them had guns, a handgun and a rifle. The postman held a large baseball bat, and slapped it lightly against the palm of his other hand. Two shots rang out immediately. "Blast her!" the postman shouted. When the silence of the woods resumed a moment later, he ran forth like a dog to see if he could retrieve Brunhilda. He returned to the other men shaking his head. "Missed her," he said, "but she's just up ahead of us." On hearing this, they began to track Brunhilda once again.

It didn't take much longer to capture them, because Brunhilda executed our plan brilliantly, leading them directly towards a pit Hester had dug for us before burying herself. We'd covered it over with weak branches and leaves and pieces of brush. The men ran over it, the branches broke beneath their weight, and they fell twelve feet into the earth.

What other disturbances we faced were minimal. Other geese had scared off

trespassers simply by surprising them, jumping out of their hiding places and chasing them out of the park. A week passed, and no more incidents occurred, and I decided it was time to venture back into town.

This was a trickier proposition than I thought it would be, though, because the town was no longer the town I remembered. As I slipped through the two towering trees that Hester had guided me through, it became apparent that the roads were no longer drivable—trees broke through the pavement, tumbled the sidewalk slabs this way and that. Vines grew over streetlamps, filtering their light so that it felt like you were underwater, like swimming at the bottom of our pool in the back yard.

I found home, though, eventually. My parents cried when they saw me, circled me in their arms and held me close. “We were so worried, so worried,” my mother sobbed. “Where is Hester now?” my father asked. I told them she was safe, that she was in the old park, that she said to tell them she loved them, but this was a call she could no longer ignore. They nodded, but I could tell they really didn’t understand. “Where did I go wrong?” my mother asked no one in particular. “Was it all those years of Brownies and Girl Scouts?” my father pondered aloud.

We toured the rest of the town, or what remained of it. Whatever Hester and her egg were up to, it had changed our home from its original refined and organized layout into a riot of wild things. A wellspring sprung up suddenly in the electronics department of the Super-Mart, ruining the TVs and computers and stereo equipment on the shelves. Deer roamed the strip mall parking lots, which now greened over with thick grasses and wild flowers. Our school found itself surrounded by oaks so tall they appeared hundreds of

years old. Bird songs filled the air. The chatter of squirrels. Overnight our town population tripled, but no one human moved in.

In fact, the opposite happened. Soon after Hester's metamorphosis reached its final stages, many of the people of our town packed their belongings into their SUVs and minivans, and drove off to other towns outside of Hester's influence. A few people stayed, though, and some newcomers arrived. It was a small settlement, and we lived off what the land provided, and tried not to overextend it or ourselves.

My parents decided to stay in the hopes that, some day, Hester would come back to us, a regular girl again. My mother held this hope really. My father indulged in it from time to time. I myself felt that Hester wasn't really gone. She was all around us, in the air and in the earth and water. I could smell her, feel her chest rise and fall as I walked the forest to visit her hillside, I could hear her voice on the wind and in the gurgle of the streams. I saw her face, just once, in the still surface of a small lake. I was fishing, and then I wasn't. I was watching my reflection in the water instead, thinking, Hester, Hester, show yourself to them, give them a sign. They miss you so.

Hester's face swam up at me then, floating just under the water. She smiled, tilted her head at a quizzical angle, waved, then swam to the bottom again.

The tree was no longer growing out of her head. Her body had returned to the young woman's body I remembered. I wondered if perhaps she had been showing herself occasionally to my mother and father, and that these brief visitations kept them here in the hopes that she'd return one day for good.

Sometimes at night, when my mother sews jackets and darns socks and mends buttons, when my father gathers firewood and guts fish for our dinner, when everyone is

home and the forest seems satisfied and restful, I go out to Hester's hillside, where the glowing creatures congregate in uncountable numbers—hundreds of them swarming the grove, faster fliers than most birds, brighter than most fireflies. I go out there and sit on the hillside with a book—sometimes school textbooks, sometimes an old paperback crime novel or a fairytale—and I read aloud to Hester and to the glowing creatures themselves. They hover over my shoulder, perch upon my head or on my legs, folded Indian style, and when they are still I can sometimes make out their faces, tiny and almost human, their eyes slightly slanted, their ears slightly pointed. They no longer hum like bees when their wings are at rest. Quiet and rapt, they listen to the adventures of detectives or to the mishaps of children lost in woods, abandoned by their parents. They listen to stories of terrible witches who live in large Victorian houses, not in forests at all, and wonder, I'm sure, at the utter strangeness of automobiles, airports, high-rises, factories, subways and cell phones, and return from these visions of a world not their own, hearts eased, home again.



## Dorothea Tanning

For the critical anthology, Surrealism and Women, Dorothea Tanning contributed a personal statement that defines her position as both artist and citizen of the world. Her statement not only reflects the nature of her own art and life, but the nature of this collection of stories as well:

“If you lose a loved one does it matter if it is a brother or a sister? If you become a parent does it matter if it is to a boy or a girl? If you fall in love does it matter (to that love) if it is for a man or a woman? And if you pray does it matter, God or Goddess?” (228)

The ideas presented within these few sentences may seem small at first. But what I realized as I began to write the stories in this volume is that these ideas are larger than the words Tanning used to describe them. She has a poet’s grace in using as little words as possible to contain meaning. I, on the other hand, wrote nearly a hundred pages of manuscript in order to dramatize the events that, I hope, contain answers to these questions.

Dorothea Tanning grew up in Galesburg, Illinois at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. She is still alive and living in New York City. Between Carrington and herself, they are the oldest living Surrealists. Tanning left her small town for New York City after finishing high school. There she met Max Ernst, one of the most talked about Surrealists of the time. He had also had a famous relationship with Leonora Carrington. Between these two stories, I think it isn’t too hasty to draw a sort of template, a pattern of women artists that belonged to Surrealism, but who belonged, especially at first, because

of their attachments to particular men who made up Surrealism's inner circle. Varo lived for many years with Benjamin Peret, a noted Surrealist poet.

Max Ernst was the person who actually named the painting from which my story originates: "Birthday". Tanning herself hadn't given it a name, even while it hung in a showing of Surrealist paintings at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1941. In it, a bare-breasted woman, Tanning herself, clothed in a sort of Renaissance bodice, unbuttoned, and wrapped in a dark skirt, vines clinging to it from her waist downward, stands in an empty room of doorways, peering out at the viewer. A very courageous stance. Her face shows no shame at being looked at, but perhaps accuses the viewer of something: the gaze with which the viewer attempts to entrap her will never be enough to define her being. Her body is her own, and she shows it, perhaps accusing also, that her breasts are simply a part of her body, not the sexualized image that men would make of it in their images of women.

In essence, Ernst named the painting correctly. This is an image of birth, of coming out, unafraid, of bringing the entire mystery of one's existence into being, yet refusing to be pinned down to any one identity. The doorways behind her reveal that she has her options. The strange winged creature beside her itself cannot be categorized, cannot be understood as any particular variant in either the real world or fantasy literature. It is an unstable signifier. What does it mean? Placed alongside Tanning's self-portrait, the question parallels her own image (and, by extension, anyone's image). What does she mean? Do representations of identity need to be so fixed? For Tanning, the answer is a resounding "No". Identity, the main subject of nearly any Tanning painting, especially from her early work, is a protean thing, capable of changing in a moment, capable of

opening a door onto a new vista of possibility. We can read “Birthday” as particular to women, but by reading it in conjunction with Tanning’s own personal statement, we must read it as universal to both men and women, to anyone.

In, The Surrealist Look, Mary Ann Caws writes that:

In Tanning’s work, the door as image develops from the literal (that which opens out or in upon something, either mundane or mysterious) to the psychological (that which excludes the outsider) to the formal and metaphoric combined in this diptych (the side of the door as division and the idea of division as the source of energy)” (79).

With this idea in mind, I created a character, Emma, who would make use of these doors. My narrative, unlike Tanning’s painting, is not static, although by the end of the story, we realize that however much Emma moves, that movement itself becomes routine drama. Static motion, in essence. She changes as a means of escaping fixed identities, out of fear, rather than out of celebration of this notion of self. She is modeled to some extent on Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, for whom no experience could live up to her expectations of how she had conceived of it in her imagination. She is forever at a remove from her own experience and desire. The Emma in my story, too, suffers from this. What possibility she may enjoy from her ability to create new lives for herself is crushed by her inability to experience experience *as* experience. But perhaps if she were able to do that, she might not also have the ability to create new lives for herself. Perhaps detachment is a necessary essence for creativity, not only in art, but in life. Perhaps detachment allows us to step outside the cultural forces that we have been born into, and create new lives. This, if nothing else, is the life of the artist. The remaking of a world, a self. Witness

Madonna, popular culture icon, yet we believe every woman she presents herself to be in her musical productions. She, too, is alluded to, briefly, in this story.

By the time the reader reaches, “Birthday”, they have moved, as I have moved as author, from the third person limited perspective, to the first person observer perspective, into the first person subjective point of view. Emma recounts her own story, her own ideas about her life. No one else disfigures or taints or dismembers her story because she has presented it herself. This movement in narrative perspective is a conscious choice on my part: it mirrors the story of women within Surrealist art itself, moving from object of male authorization to self-representation. I repeat myself here: my subject is not Woman, but the story of women’s images within Surrealist discourse.

In her memoir, also titled “Birthday”, Tanning relates a quality of curiosity and voyeurism, of wanting to know what it would be like to be other people, to inhabit other lives, that has always characterized her own personality. It has also characterized her painting of the same title, and my story as well. I found it a great surprise and also a great validation to have come to this passage near the end of her memoir, after I had finished writing the story, to find I had created a similar experience as the one she describes in her autobiography through narrativizing her painting. In this case, her self-portrait is the door. I walked through to the other side, where I met, if not the artist herself, then some aspect of her:

There are still times when the thought of distant and various unknown places cannot be contemplated without a clot of suffocation. The certainty that I will leave one day, having known so little of place, so few campsites; the unbearable thought that I may have been in the wrong rooms, that another front door, back

wood, side street held revelations I never dreamed of. Even as I ride on a train or bus with houses streaming past, it never fails to possess me, this queer longing: how would it be to live behind those two windows, with someone coming home at night? It is essential to know this, how it would be, how I would be (342).

## Birthday

On my tenth birthday, celebrating breaking into double digits, my mother and father threw a party so large and immaculate, with guests from the newly born to the elderly, that I grew nervous and uncomfortable and, ever after, cowered in fear of turning another year older. There were so many people, most of them from the apartment building my parents owned, and in which we lived. All day long, renters strolled into our apartment, bringing foil wrapped packages, jars of candy, hatboxes filled with toys and hair ribbons, and at first I thought, So many presents! But the immediacy of happiness by receiving gifts soon vanished, replaced by the anxiety that I needed to thank people, hold conversations, at which I have never been good. I did all of these things. If I hadn't, my parents would have been embarrassed: I would be ungrateful or impolite. So I assumed a way of speaking to everyone--from the babies to the mothers and fathers, to the shy, shuffling teenage boys and girls who had been dragged to the affair, to the very elderly stumbling along with their walkers--that disguised my own trembling at being so friendly, when what I really wanted was to be alone, saying nothing at all.

I loved my parents, though. I loved them more than anyone that came after them also. They were always giving me gifts, but never anything I wanted. At first I grew frustrated with their ignorance towards my desires, but I soon realized it was not intentional. By the time I turned sixteen I'd forgiven them. This is when they flew me to Alaska to see the Aurora Borealis, when what I really wanted was to eat dinner with them at the little Italian restaurant where they had their first date. The Aurora Borealis frightened me to the point of muteness. I could only stare and stare at those green and golden lights, my

mouth hanging open, realizing how small and ridiculous my life was and, in the end, will be. I cried. My mother put her arm around me and squeezed. "I know, Emma," she said. "So beautiful."

By then I'd become accustomed to receiving love that never matched my expectations. I was a bit disappointed, but not bitter. I painted, wrote stories, played the harp, and listened to culturally aware radio programs, culling comfort from these activities. Besides, I thought, they do love me. That was evident. And I'm glad I'd been so sensible and mature about my parents and their inability to supply me with the things I most wanted, because by my twentieth birthday, they were both dead. I would have taken undesirable gifts from them for the rest of my life if I could bring them back, but wishes like that cannot meet reality on any common ground. I decided to not regret their deaths, and to hope they were in a better place. But then I stopped hoping for the better place, too, because I started to wonder if our idea of heaven is also something that will be dashed to pieces on Judgment Day, which made me shiver a lot.

They left me the apartment building, which was a lot to handle, only being a young woman barely out of her teens. My relatives tried to convince me to sell it, to go to college and live off the profits, but my gut said, No. So I kept the building, and life went on normally, or as close to normal as possible, for the next year. The renters didn't hassle me. They paid their bills and would sometimes invite me in for a cup of coffee. Always on these occasions, they eventually brought up my parents. "Are you doing well, Emma?" they'd ask. "Yes, of course," I'd say. "Good, good," they would reply, and I would go back to my apartment, slide down the door as soon as I'd closed it, crumpling to the floor with tears already spilling.

This was a regular event until I turned twenty-one and married my first husband.

Joe was good-looking, intelligent and sweet. I met him in the library when I was checking out a book about locksmithing. Joe was the head librarian. He checked my book out, and asked me out at the same time. I said, "I thought you left the library with books, not men." He laughed and said that was how it usually goes, but could he buy me a coffee or a glass of wine? "Wine," I said. "Definitely wine."

We married several months later. I thought this was a good decision. Joe and I got along, we both liked to read, and he gave me his entire attention when I played the harp. I would strum those strings, plucking out my love for him, while he stared at me with a passion that I wanted more than anything, and was repulsed by at the same time. I grew afraid that he loved me more than I loved him. I grew afraid that he loved me more than he loved himself.

So we had Jenna, my first child. I thought perhaps a little one would take up some of his excess love. But Joe proved capable of having love enough for both of us, and then some. Our relationship remained as intense as it had been before we brought our daughter into this world. In fact, Joe's love grew even stronger. He no longer spent time with friends. He cut back on hours at the library so he could be at home more often. I would sit on the couch with Jenna feeding at my breast, and Joe would look at me from across the room in his armchair, newspaper cast aside, and sigh dreamily. "I wish I could do what you're doing," he once told me.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"You know," he said. "I wish I could feed Jenna from my body like you do. It's a bond fathers will never know."



“Shut up,” I told him immediately. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. It hurts sometimes, and sometimes I’m tired and she won’t leave me alone. One could describe the whole affair as parasitic.”

He grew angry with me then. His face darkened for many days afterwards, but somehow this relieved me. I felt freer to be myself again.

Even after this came between us, Joe was a dedicated husband and father. He deserved far better than me for a wife. He still spooned me in bed at night, held me around my waist, pulling me into his hips and stomach. He still kissed me goodbye when he left for work, and kissed me hello when he returned in the evenings. But after I’d revealed my true thoughts on motherhood, a flame died between us, and he never looked at me with that intense passion in his eyes ever again.

#

Not much later, I started letting myself into the model’s apartment on the third floor when she was out getting her picture taken. It happened like this: one day she left for a shoot with a famous Italian clothes designer, and asked me if I could take her dog for a walk at noon. “Of course,” I said, smiling, holding Jenna on my left hip like some Depression era mother--flowered housecoat, rollers in my hair. The model thanked me and thanked me, and at noon I put Jenna down for a nap and took the stairwell down two flights. The model hadn’t given me her key, but that didn’t matter. I had my own key since I owned the building. It wouldn’t have mattered if I didn’t have my own key, though, because I’d taught myself how to pick locks from the locksmithing manual I’d checked out the night Joe first checked me out. I could have picked my way into, or out of, any of the apartments in my building if I needed. In fact, I took great pleasure in

picking a lock, and kneeled in front of the model's doorway, slipping a hair pin from my rollers into the keyhole, letting myself in that way instead.

The model's dog was a tiny, yippy creature. I clipped on its leash and circled the block, allowing it to pee and stop to sniff other dogs out walking. Then I herded it back up to the third floor. I was about to close the model's door behind me, but a flash of something crimson stopped me from leaving.

The model had positioned a mannequin in one corner of her living room. She'd dressed it in this classy silk ruby evening gown. The dress clung to the mannequin's lifeless body like red water, washing over the curves of the breasts, the hips, the legs, held there, a second skin, a red skin. It made me feel naked. Suddenly I was unzipping my housecoat and shimmying into the evening gown. A pair of matching high heels sat next to the mannequin, and I slipped those on too. I didn't have the model's body, so the dress was a little tight on me, but the shoes fit perfect. I took my rollers out and pulled my hair into a French twist, applied the model's makeup, ionized a cloud of perfume from her perfume ionizer, pouted in front of her mirror like a film star with slightly too big hips. I posed: one hand over my forehead, palm out, a suffering martyr; two hands holding up my cheekbones while I puckered my lips, the party girl; arms folded under my breasts while I smoked a cigarette out of a long, black cigarette holder, mysterious and powerful, a Sphinx.

By the time I'd finished pretending, nearly two hours had passed. I hadn't realized how long I'd stood there looking at myself in the model's dress, trying on different facial expressions, talking to myself. Quickly I slipped out of the red dress and back into my housecoat, and hurried back upstairs to Jenna, who was, thankfully, still asleep.

There was a moment or two that passed before her eyes creaked open, and in that space of time I thought: I've gotten away with something.

My cheeks flushed with heat.

After this I began to let myself into the model's apartment, and other renter's apartments, on a regular basis. Each time I slipped into someone else's dress or business suit—each time I lay down on a stranger's bed and imagined myself being made love to by an anonymous lover—I told myself afterwards, that was the last time, as if I really had been cheating on Joe with someone. After the first few times, though, I became like an alcoholic: one more drink, just one more. I would be someone else and my daughter and husband and the rooms in which we lived would suddenly become a blind spot in my memory. If I tried hard, I could remember the scent of baby powder, the rasp of stubble on my back at night, the heat of someone else's breath on my neck as I tried to sleep. When I returned to my regular clothes and opened the door to my own apartment, though, the world returned with a crash of cymbals and broken glass. Yes, I would think. Now I remember.

It wasn't the easiest decision to make, but I finally told the model that I couldn't renew her lease. She was shocked, and immediately thought she'd done something wrong: thrown a too-loud party, not paid her rent on time. I explained that it didn't have anything to do with her. I was selling the building to a corporation that would restructure it as their headquarters. "Oh, that's so sad," said the model.

"Why?" I asked.

"You know," she said. "Family and all. This place has been here forever, Emma. Sorry to see you let it go, that's all."

“It’s time for me to move on,” I said, and the model nodded knowingly. Placing a hand on my upper arm, she squeezed gently and wished me good luck with my future.

My future was exactly what I’d been thinking about when I asked the model to leave. After she moved out, I moved into her apartment and ordered furniture to be delivered: zebra striped and leopard spotted, everything table-topped with glass. I paged through rich people’s magazines and picked out useless trinkets, mother of pearl teaspoons and brass candlesnuffers. I kept Joe in the dark about my proceedings, though I did try to give him a few hints. I was in the shower during one of these moments, while Joe shaved at the sink. I was singing a Madonna song at first. Then I broke into a song of my own, but Joe never noticed.

“I’m going to start a new life!” I sang out in a high soprano, peeking around the shower curtain to see if Joe had any reaction. He was concentrating on scraping his jaw clean, though.

“I’m going to be someone different!” I sang out, raising my voice another octave. But again no response from my husband.

Since Joe seemed unconcerned with my new plans, I didn’t feel so bad about leaving. And I moved out very slowly anyway, in order to make the change more bearable. That first night I spent an hour in my new apartment. The next night, two. Before the month was over, I was gone completely.

Except for visiting with Joe and Jenna, I spent my time alone. I left the harp and my books in the old apartment, and retuned my radio from NPR to a station that played only popular songs. I watched MTV and paged through Vogue and Maxim. I spent a lot of time painting my nails and arranging my hair in various styles. I exercised until my hips

began to melt and the body buried beneath the mother exterior re-emerged. Finally beginning to feel a bit of satisfaction, I decided to rejoin the world.

I started off by working out at a gym most mornings. Then I would spend my afternoons sipping espresso at outside cafes. I'd prowl shopping centers during the evenings and at night I'd slide into slinky dresses and go to dance clubs. I would drink and dance like I'd been born to do this. I never danced alone. Someone—a man or a woman—would always come up and ask me to join them. This felt really good. I was the kind of woman other people wanted to dance with. I'd never known I could be that before.

Sometimes I would take these men, these women, home with me. We would make love and I would find myself surprised at this as well: that I could make love to strangers, women even, and not feel a thing the next day. I'd always thought of myself as virginal. Before Joe, I'd only kissed boys and indulged in heavy petting. I wondered what the old Emma would think of the new one. She would probably be shocked and a bit afraid. Sex is scary to people who have never had it. People who have a lot of casual sex are scary. How do they do it? I used to wonder. How do they give themselves up to someone, like placing their bodies on a sacrificial altar?

#

I met August during my cocaine period. Like Picasso, I went through phases, only not on canvas. My cocaine period was like Picasso's blue period, both of us feeling mystical and sad and searching. My teeth and upper palate were so numb I felt pretty blue about it. My nose would sometimes bleed, and the blood was blue, I thought several times, when I looked in a mirror. Then I'd tilt my head back, look at the ceiling in some strange

bathroom—where am I, I'd say out loud—stuffing tissues into my nostrils. When I looked at the tissues a few minutes later, though, the blood was wet and red, not blue at all.

August was tall and lithe, with round brown eyes and hair as black and shiny as crow feathers. He had pale white skin and bee-stung lips, very kissable. He knew how to kiss me: lifting my chin with his thumb and forefinger, placing his other hand on the back of my head, like a cradle. Very controlled. Very strong, like a shot of whiskey. He disc jockeyed at Odalisque, a chic retro nightclub I frequented. One night his voice came over the microphone, saying, "This is for the gorgeous lady in the silver dress. Will you dance with me?"

I was, of course, the gorgeous lady in the silver dress. I looked up at the balcony where the DJ was positioned like a bird in a nest with a view of everyone below him. I grinned and nodded. August disappeared into the back of the balcony, and reappeared on the dance floor a minute later. He put his hand on my back, pulled me tight against him. We danced for six minutes straight, the length of the song, and then he returned to the balcony. Later that night, when the club closed, I left in a cab with him. He came home with me to the zebra striped and leopard spotted apartment, where we inhaled white lines of powder on my glass topped coffee table. I lit candles. Then we had sex for several hours, taking intermissions to snort another line. In the morning, I snuffed out the candles with the brass candlesnuffers. We walked around the apartment naked all day. Joe and I had always seemed to have our clothes on.

August moved into my place several weeks later. He brought his cat, Artemis, with him. The cat arched her back and hissed when I bent down to pet her. August was in the

kitchen, sliding his wine bottles into my wine rack. "Screw you, too, bitch," I hissed back. When August came out a moment later, I smiled and Artemis smiled, curling around his legs like a wreath of smoke, already purring. Later I caught her alone in the bathroom and called her a liar. She flipped her head one direction, her tail the other, and sauntered away without another word. I decided that we would have to make peace, or one of us would have to go.

"It's either me or you, Artemis, honey," I said several months later. She had scratched up my zebra and leopard spotted upholstery, had padded across my glass topped coffee table after dipping her feet in the water bowl, had puked up hairballs on my rugs, my bedspread. August, too, made many messes. He drank a lot when he wasn't doing cocaine, and would puke wherever he passed out, which meant his puke and the hairballs frequently showed up in close proximity to each other. He never washed dishes, never took out the trash, rarely bathed, borrowed money and did not repay it. He didn't know how to make love without cocaine or alcohol in him. He didn't know how to speak English, I thought on several occasions. One day I found myself sitting in my apartment alone with Artemis, on the ripped up zebra couch, my elbows on my knees, my hands propping up my forehead. Artemis lay on the other end of the couch, her eyes slits of pleasure, her purr a gloating song of victory.

"Fine," I said, "Fine."

I got up from the couch, fumbled through my toiletries in the bathroom, found my old hairpins, and left the apartment with my head held high.

#

Within six months, I had made a new life for myself with Ophelia, who wrote poetry

and painted self-portraits in which she was drowning. Ophelia was not Ophelia's real name. She had changed it legally when she was eighteen, after leaving the constraints of a small farming community in Indiana. I admired her a great deal, the struggle, the courage to leave such a small, defined world for one in which a person could lose themselves entirely. The city is no place for people who need answers or road maps. The streets change quickly. What you once knew as your route home from work or school may be a dead end within the passing of a day.

I myself hadn't left the small, defined world of my apartment building, but that doesn't mean I couldn't understand her. Sometimes you leave a place without ever actually moving. Ophelia understood this, understood me, I thought, which became the reason why I loved her. Whenever another person looked into my eyes and said, "I see you," a light flickered on inside me and I didn't know what else to do but love them. If not love them, then at least make love to them. When Ophelia looked at me, her gaze didn't feel the same as when men looked at me. She would look intently without staring crudely. This was a great relief. Also, she didn't make messes and leave them for me to clean up.

I met Ophelia while out shopping for groceries in the open market one afternoon. I was shaking a cantaloupe beside my ear and across the street, Ophelia sat in an old rocking chair, surrounded by paintings. She looked a bit hopeless sitting there surrounded by her creations, everyone passing by without a second glance. I bought the cantaloupe I'd been shaking and crossed the street to get a closer look.

The paintings were all of women, some of them nude, some of them clothed, some of them partially clothed, some of them metamorphosing into landscape, spirit women—part



tree, part wind, part water. Something about looking at them made me blink a lot. I wanted to look hard at them, but no matter how much I forced myself to stare, my eyes would slowly slide to the side and notice a crack in the sidewalk, a pigeon pecking at breadcrumbs.

“What do you see?” a small voice asked. This was Ophelia, now standing from her rocking chair, hands awkwardly slipping into her pockets. She was beautiful, wearing a tattered green sweater and paint-stained pants, her hair down and undone, falling over her shoulders carelessly. She wore square shaped glasses, framed in black. Her eyes were blue, and they sat in the center of both frames like two blue moons under glass.

“They’re very beautiful,” I said. “The paintings.”

“Thank you,” she said, extending a hand my way. I shook it. Then she said, “Which one do you like best?”

I looked at the paintings for a few moments, trying to concentrate so that I could give an honest answer. Finally I pointed to one of a woman’s face, half turned to the viewer. Part of her face was covered in reddish-brown feathers; the other half looked human.

“That’s one of my favorites too,” said Ophelia. “What do you like about it?”

“If she keeps changing like that,” I said, “one day she’s going to be able to fly.”

“Let’s make a deal,” Ophelia said then. I could feel my eyebrows furrowing. “You can have that painting, and in return, you’ll sit for me.”

“You mean like a model?”

She laughed. “Yes. Like a model.”

“But why?”

“I’m not quite sure yet,” said Ophelia. “I see something in you. I think I can capture

it. I want to try at least. What do you say?"

I said yes and took her back to my new apartment and made love to her. Both of us were a bit surprised but happy. The new apartment seemed happy too. Two months earlier, it had been occupied by a construction worker named Rufus who I had hoped might do some work in the building for me, restructuring hallways and doorways and elevators and stairwells. After our affair ended, though, I told him it would probably be best that he leave the premises. He did so, head hanging low as he packed his belongings and moved out. He understood that he would never be able to restructure this building in any way, shape or form that could make me happy. After he left, I stayed in his apartment, since August and Artemis were still in the model's old place and I could not abide their mess. Neither could I return to life with Joe and Jenna, who was now walking and talking and once I saw her as I got into the elevator and she said, "Mother," and pointed at me, and the doors slid closed, and I thought, Oh God, Oh God, she almost had me.

The new apartment was a bit bare when I brought Ophelia back, but within a few weeks we had covered its naked walls with her paintings. Women looked at me from every possible angle. I asked Ophelia, "Why don't you paint men?" and she said, "I can't see them."

"Really?" I said.

"Really," she answered. "It's like I have a blind spot."

I said, "Hmm."

She got to work right away, painting me each morning. The first one I stretched out naked on a burgundy plush couch, posing a hand over my forehead like I had that first

day in the model's apartment.

"No," said Ophelia. "That's not you."

"Paint it anyway," I said, and she did.

The next day I wore a silky white dress and stood over the ventilator shaft that blew hot air up, lifting the dress to my waistline. I held the dress down over my bare legs and blew kisses.

"I'm not sure what you're doing," said Ophelia.

"Paint," I said, "paint."

When I came out for the third portrait in a long black evening gown, with the model's long, black cigarette holder clenched between my lips, Ophelia said, "Enough. Take that off and let me paint you."

I sighed, but took the dress off and said, "What now?"

"Just sit in the window, where the light's falling."

I sat.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Ophelia painted me, while I sat on the window bench and looked down at the city, the people carving their way through the streets. The dogs trotting behind or before them. The wind blowing pieces of paper against streetlamps. What a sad affair, I thought, to be blown around without direction. I saw Joe leave the building several times, Jenna beside him, her tiny hand clasped in his. He had dressed her in a frilly pink thing that I'd never have chosen for her. But I had given up those choices long ago. I wondered, as they walked further down the street and turned a corner, did she like that dress? Did she feel right about wearing it? I would never know.

I rarely saw August leave the building. Only at night did he venture out, to disc jockey at Odalisque, which was no longer Odalisque. The owners had changed hands and the new ones had renamed it The Fool of Hearts. They placed a neon sign outside in the shape of a playing card, the Jack of Hearts, and it glowed like a radioactive valentine.

Rufus called once, but I let the answering machine pick up. He was in the midst of a coffee break downtown, where his construction crew had just demolished an old building. “I miss you,” he said. “Can I come back yet?”

I pursed my lips, guilt rising from my stomach.

Finally one afternoon Ophelia said, “All finished,” and I scrambled from the window bench to see what she’d made of me, and this was what I found:

A naked woman sitting on a red cushioned bench, skeleton thin, her ribs pushing at her skin, her hair framing the scythe shape of her jaw-line, peering out the window. Behind her, darkness, with the edges of other pieces of furniture caught by the light falling through the window. The light was warm and lit her face up, but there were no features, no eyes, no mouth, no nose.

“What do you think?” Ophelia asked.

I said nothing, but went to the bathroom, found my hairpins, and left her standing beside the canvas.

#

I was not sure where to go this time, my apartment building being occupied with so many of those I’d left behind me. I couldn’t afford to force more occupants to leave like I’d done before. I wandered through the five floors, very quiet, very calm, looking at each door as if what lay beyond it might be my salvation, but I hadn’t the strength left to

fit myself into someone else's life. I finally collapsed by a door I'd thought was a broom closet, but as I fell against it, it clicked open. Inside I found an unfurnished room, the hardwood floors unfinished. I started to think, *Mine*, but I soon discovered that the room had already been occupied by someone—or something—else.

Sitting in the far corner of the room was a small winged creature with shiny black fur, its round golden eyes set like jewels in its dark face. I thought of the winged monkeys in The Wizard of Oz, but those had frightened me to tears as a child, and this creature looked more like a sweetie than anything. It mewed like a kitten, folded its white-tipped wings, gave a loud yawn, and settled down to sleep.

“That’s a good idea,” I said, and crawled on my hands and knees into the room, shutting the door behind me. I stretched out on that cold floor and waited for sleep.

In the morning, the winged creature was still with me. Bleached light came in through a small frosted window high up towards the ceiling. I said, “What’s your name?” but the creature didn’t tell me. It didn’t say anything, only sat in its corner and peeled an orange very delicately, one long ribbon, spiraling. It offered me a wedge and I sucked the juice out of that orange piece like a starved woman.

I thought about leaving but I wasn’t sure what to do with myself. Instead, I decided to explore some of the doors in the room. One opened onto a bathroom. Another opened into a kitchen. And the last one opened onto a long hallway full of doors that opened and closed, opened and closed of their own volition. I closed the door on that hallway. I wondered if Rufus had done some of that restructuring I’d asked of him, but hadn’t told me. I hadn’t asked him to put in an entire floor, but there it was.

“I have everything I need,” I told the little winged creature, and it nodded, biting into

an apple.

I didn't order furniture. I didn't order clothes. I didn't do my hair in any particular fashion or wonder what color to paint my nails. I didn't have any mirrors. I didn't have a phone. What I had was a series of rooms, a bathroom, and a kitchen filled with food. And the winged creature, but I didn't really have it. We only lived in the same rooms.

I thought about naming the winged creature "Papoon", although I'm not sure if that word has any meaning. I liked the way it sounded, how the syllables fell over the creature's wings and fur like a coat of dust or pollen. But the winged creature didn't respond, and after a while, I realized naming it was stupid. It wasn't mine to name.

I did not know, nor do I now know, whether the winged creature was male or female. It sometimes seemed male, skittering about the room, climbing walls like a monkey, scratching its chest ponderously. But it also seemed female sometimes, curling up beside me like a cat, tucking its head beneath the fold of one of its feathery wings. After some time, I decided not to worry about whether it was male or female, and a while after that, I realized it didn't matter at all. Only that we trusted one another completely, respected each other's wishes, loved unconditionally. And we did come to love each other in our own ways. I would fix oatmeal for the creature, which it loved more than oranges and apples. It would scratch my back when I itched, and give me an affectionate peck on the cheek before I went to sleep. Its lips felt soft and silky, warm; it smelled like bread baking.

The winged creature and I shared a bond but never once exchanged words in each other's language. I sometimes wondered if it even had a language. But then I thought language is nothing special. I shared one with my husband and lovers, and never once

felt understood, or understanding. A word is a word is a word, but sometimes a word isn't anything.

That creature and I shared a secret. The secret went like this: I had no idea what it was and it had no idea what I was, and neither of us knew what the other wanted, so we had to just be. We took pleasure in each other's company nonetheless.

A few weeks passed, and then a few more, and I started to feel a little dizzy. I needed to do something other than cooking, eating, and passing time with the winged creature, which was wonderful really, but I realized I was waiting for it to do something incredible and I had to leave that fantasy behind.

One day I remembered how I once painted, and how I missed it, so I returned with my hairpins to Ophelia's apartment, picked my way in, and took her easel, paint, brushes, and the faceless portrait of me on the window bench. I rummaged through the closets, picked out a few items of clothing, and took the full-length mirror off the back of the bedroom door. I returned to the rooms where the winged creature spent its days drifting in and out of sleep, pacing the perimeter, and the first thing I did was to wipe down Ophelia's portrait of me with linseed oil. The colors bled into one another and soon her vision of me was gone.

I set the mirror up against a wall, set the easel up across the room from it. I put on an old costume blouse with puffy sleeves, like a Renaissance bodice, and left the front of it open, my breasts bare. I wrapped my legs up with a dark blue sheet, and draped myself with vines. My feet were bare. Behind me was the door that opened onto the secret hallway with all those doors opening and closing. These doors were still sometimes, but most often they flapped uncontrollably. I started to paint. I started to paint my portrait

on the canvas Ophelia had used. The winged creature crouched beside me and watched.

I'm not sure how long it took me, days, weeks, perhaps two months. But I finally finished the self-portrait, which included the winged creature as well, and what I did next was look at myself in this painting and cry for a while. What did she mean?

She didn't have to mean anything really.

But I didn't stop there. I had one more thing to do that I'd been avoiding for a long time. Quickly I gathered up stationery from Joe's apartment and sat down to address invitations to my birthday party. I hadn't had one since my parents died, and by now I was somewhere between my early late twenties and my late early thirties. I had lost count over the years, but I still remembered what month and day it was.

When the date arrived, I waited until everyone in the apartment building had gathered in my parents' old apartment, which I had left and not leased out again when I married Joe. To tell the truth, I didn't expect everyone to show. I knew Joe would come; he was ever faithful, and had Jenna there by his side. But everyone else had come as well: August and Artemis, Rufus, Ophelia, even the model. And all of the old renters I had turned away from all those years ago. I had hung my self-portrait on the wall, and they all gathered around it, chatting. Someone said, "What the hell is that thing standing in front of her?"

Someone else said, "I think it's a lemur, but I'm not sure about those wings."

Someone commented on my breasts and the strange garb. "Why is she wearing vines?" Joe wanted to know.

I, ahem, cleared my throat and everyone turned to find me standing in the doorway. Jenna pointed and said, "Mother", and though I had a pang of fear, I stayed.



I wasn't sure whether I needed to apologize or explain myself, or do both of these things, and if so, which first? Before I could say anything though, Joe said, "You look wonderful, Emma," and I blushed like a schoolgirl and thanked him. After that, things seemed to lighten a little, and the party, like all good parties, took on a life of its own. People mingled in the same ways they did when I was a child, making small talk, complimenting each other, commenting on the weather and the state of political affairs. I gave Jenna a gift of a set of paints, and she said, "I thought you were supposed to give gifts to the person whose birthday it is, not get them." I said, "That's usually how it's done, but I hope you don't mind." She beamed and I nearly broke inside.

#

You are probably thinking that I'm a crazy woman. There may be some truth to that, I'm not sure. Someone once said art is the mirror of life, but I've discovered this is not necessarily true. In this case it is in you, Dear Reader, that my reflection appears. In you, Dear Reader, I see the contours of my life. In your tears, my tragedy. In your laughter, the folly of my absurd enterprises. In that serious look you sometimes get, the furrowed eyebrows and pinched lips, a judgment on my character. Am I moral enough? Forgivable? Able to be redeemed?

A thin veil separates our worlds, but the more you read, the closer we come to passing through it. Any moment now, these words will fade. In place of them, my eyes will appear, searching out your own. Any moment now, I will come, I will come, I will come to the place where you are, through your doorway, my blouse unbuttoned, my breasts bare for all to see, and then what will you do, Dear Reader, to greet me?

There is only one proper answer. The thing to say is: Happy Birthday, Happy

Birthday, Happy Birthday.

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