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World of Stars and Bone is a manuscript of poetry, written and compiled over two years, that treats the evolution of female selfhood through various folkloric, historic, or mythological personae, both classical and contemporary.

WORLD OF STARS AND BONE

by

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Committee Chair

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For Corrinne, who chose the path of dragonhood with me

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by MICHELLE ROSQUILLO has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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and yet—and yet—
after Issa

Say instead this world
of bone & we cling to each
rib and knuckle. No,

say it is a face
with eyes shut & we are lines
marking age & ache.

Or say world of snow-
melt, green pond-ripple, world of
rivers that flood &

tides that drown, this salt-
water world of what persists
& what disappears

without faltering.
& never shy from the dark,
speak of it as you

do the light: with love
and reverence. It passes
as we & all things
pass, gradually. Say that—
this time with your eyes open.

PART I:
THIS WORLD OF BONE

Things I'd like to believe in

Anything. An almighty hand wielding an omnipotent brush. A cosmic firework wreaking grand spirals over canvas stretched to trembling. A critical

hum, as if the hand or the fire approves of itself— and in that sound, the first note of pleasure in the universe, the first to say *good, it is good*.

The abrupt dilation of a celestial eye shifting focus to something distant. One seed waking then the field, the forest.

Or: the certainty that if I drive this road forever the horizon will be always far and small, and each gold flicker spinning past, red in the rearview,

will be proof of someone else searching for home. Proof that home exists, and the way there.

Promised Land

Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted . . .
until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

—Isaiah 6:11-12

Whom shall we send? You, eighteen

green and wet as the stains you earn
being crushed into the fifty-yard line

or your father, broad of palm
and shoulder, or your lean-hipped

mother who labored and bore
your siblings before you

with their arsenal of rifles, blue-barred
flags and bumper stickers sneering

Speak English Or Get Out
or your cousin who moved to LA

to get famous but got pregnant instead
and is never mentioned at Christmas dinner

or your first grade teacher who recited
the Pledge of Allegiance without

saying *under God* until someone
found out and one day she was gone

or your first but not your only boy crush
whom you kissed in secret one time

then avoided in the hallways, deleted,
unfriended, ignored in line for communion

terrified that one day you too
would be found out, would disappear

or the lady on FOX who keeps saying

names in odd vowel sounds, *Ee-Rock*

Eye-Ran, spit like bullet spray,
like how she says it equals

a direct attack, like she is
the vanguard, like she can take

the threat away with her twisted lips,
is it her, should we send one of them

into the cities to tell the people *Be closed*
to the adversary, brothers. Be faithful, be as stone.

My Wife & I Decide Not to Have Kids

in whispers, because any word
will be too loud after this silence. *Okay?*
—flat as my tongue when I speak it,

except not a question. *Okay*, not asking
for answers, not asking for anything
but the space ballooning between us:

empty yard slick with burst soap bubbles.
Picket fence that protects no one,
keeps out nothing, only divides *we* from *it*

as in *It's going to be* from *Is that*
from *Are you...? Are we...?*

Her hand is slow crossing to mine,
knuckles bumping. I turn our palms
toward the dim ceiling light, exposing

the heartline. In Chinese palmistry
vertical grooves below the little finger
predict future children. Girl lines are shallow

& short; boys make deeper marks.
An accident when I was fourteen damaged
my left hand. The white scar

cuts across what lines were once there,
interrupts what should come naturally.

Expatriate

Onstage she pretends the world is the same
one she remembers: blue smoke stalks the room
and her name is not hers. When they play her song
she moves in circles; when it stops she keeps going.

Her body is a wreath, a laurel, a daisy chain—
the stroke of each silken lash brands the skin
as if the roots tangled like fingers in her hair
are keeping bones and flesh laced together.

She chases ghosts so they won't disappear, leave her
lost in small spaces, shrinking into herself, another pale star
tumbled from orbit by black holes and madness, light
refracted by foreign objects in the lungs, heart, throat.

Curtain rises, she descends. White lips part, white hands cradle
each golden head—strip them bare to reveal answer first, then riddle.

They do not know that we are seeds

so they cast us to the ground
we humble and thirsty born dark and dream-riddled

bury us in places of forgetting
but we wake remembering, suckle small mouths at breast

and march in precision to the drum
while we sing soft charms to the rhythmic pulse

they spread their works across and afar
we are with them, our roots tangled together

their proud towers grasp sunward
our limbs remain supple, our leaves hide the thorns

one hand lifts the torch high
we laugh at their fires, we drink deep the ashes, we grow

the other reaps the endless harvest
and we follow, hungry, searching out their wine and fruit

My Wife & I Decide Not to Have Kids

which is probably why I can't answer
the question, after the slender woman

wearing a costume introduces herself
then immediately hones in

like she scents weakness & can't help
the instinct to seek, to expose.

Her voice drowns the pounding music,
alcohol-infused white noise. She looks

between us, eyebrows raised. Dull light
speckles the plastic badge over her heart.

My wife says *Oh God no*. Quick & clean
like a fingerprick at the clinic where they divine

my high cholesterol & exclaim over
my wife's picture-perfect cervix. Something

to be proud of. Something to think about
when a stranger with fake handcuffs

interrogates us about children we don't have,
when my throat closes over & my wife's lips

blossom with laughter, the word *no*
& the song changes to a familiar beat.

Questions to Ask the Insurance Company

1.

What devastates us is not the flood rising through cracked floors, welling in cabinetry. No, the real

damage is the walls, peeling panels stripped bare, emptied of shelf and frame, gutted

of language and memory, the slow progress of years taken. Why? To satisfy which god, which hunger?

2.

Grief makes soldiers of us. In its wake we craft swords, temper shields.

But whose gates to charge?

Whose face to picture? The enemy has no face, only a name and a single covetous eye.

3.

We sift flotsam until our fingers wrinkle and sog with runoff. Stories always leave the hero standing, stagnant as a watershed, but at what cost? Everything worth rescue sank in the storm, leaving only derelict—things we abandon.

Hollow

Your wife and I hold hands across the table, fingertips touching but palms arcing away. Her eyes fix to the window. The server asks again if there's something he can start us with. I pretend

interest in the themed bar specials: *Frankenstein's Creature, Monster Mash, Bloody Mary Bloody Mary Bloody Mary*. You loved this holiday, would have ordered one of each & downed them like water, but your wife

only watches her glass sweat rings into the cocktail napkin. Gin & tonic was your drink, evergreen perfume on your breath, prop you brandished during stories that got wilder with retelling & refills. You're infamous

here; the server recognizes us. His eyes ask me where you are, why we sit without speaking, the third chair a gaping wound between us. I order another drink to replace the one in your wife's hand,

still untouched. Around us the dining room's low acoustics are muted without the polyphony of anecdote & percussive laughter. Who knew it was possible to feel the absence of sound like a phantom limb? You

must have feared that silence—is that why your stories ended so strangely each time, why you went quiet as if the ending made you let go before you were ready. Why I found you standing at the window

in your office one year ago watching pedestrians insect-scrabble from each side of the boulevard to the other. I asked *What are you looking for?* You didn't turn to face me when you answered,

didn't lift your voice to say how on Halloween, the dead walk among the living like they've forgotten in the rush how to be dead. *I'm looking for old friends*, you told me. No, you said *I'm looking for dead friends*. Maybe

I'm looking for my friends. I had no answer, just like I don't know how to explain to the server at your favorite restaurant what your wife & I would like tonight, how he can help, what else it is we need.

Bury my name in the graveyard

of your heart. Break ground
with your tongue, tear through
frozen layers & root rot. Dig
the bed deep. Lay it to rest beneath

the naked bloom of your ribs
where nothing grows
& it won't be disturbed.
Face it

backwards, so the feet press
against the arch of your spine
& make you shiver, so the hands
feel your lungs swell & empty,
so the eyes can see your lips moving—
the loneliest view.

Make yourself familiar
promises: You won't regret, will
be kind. Begin
a garden you will not tend.
Lift letter

after letter—the wide
round openings, hard
thin lines—with hands
that choose when to be

open, when
to be closed.

Kiss each scrawled
shape on the fullness
of bottom lip

like you did in early mornings,
before long absences,
to soothe or comfort
midnight fears. It will not
soothe here, where sleep
is shallow & a careful
farewell stings

no less. Here
in this dark
where comfort does not come.

Before you leave the land
curled into itself, plant
a cherry stone
deep, for when
the decay begins.
Remember it best
this way: the still, dark thing blooming
under the weight you bury it with.

My Wife & I Decide Not to Have Kids

so I give the box of picture books I've kept
to Goodwill where they are found by a stranger

who replaces my name inside every front cover
with birthday wishes for a boy
wearing Maurice Sendak pajamas.

She does the voices when he asks,
checks under the bed and in corners

and does not dream of wolves who wait
for someone to arrive, who howl for joy when he comes,
claw at air when he sails away again.

Walking Through the Caves at Lascaux

I run a hand along the walls,
 my fingers tracing ghosts. No blood
or bone in memory. No fire to bloom
 and pucker as it dies in rooms
where the air is thick
 with smoke and song.
Who filled these halls? Whose histories,
 layered on this canvas of pit
and crag, stone and seep, have endured?

 Each ancient profile thrums
at my touch. I recognize
 the faces, mouth names like rings
of smoke. I know the dancing
 horse, tiger who rears, bull's proud jut—
like crayon drawings from a child
 too young to render with grace
the bone-deep ache that echoes
 when I tell him of beautiful things.

Debating Morality with My Dog

She asked me what I meant by *good*, and I said *You know, well done. Obedient.* And she said no, she meant what is good, anyway. Is it ethical behavior, is it character, is it making positive change. And who decides good and bad and should it be the same person. And should they give out treats. I told her she was overthinking it, but she wouldn't let it go. So I took her to Center City Library. We wanted to look up Hume, Kant, Plato. But they don't allow dogs in, not even ones with pressing philosophical inquiries. We decided to try the bookstore downtown. I thought, maybe we can sit outside with some iced tea, debate Lucretius and John Calvin. But a man approached as I was tying her leash to the table. *Jesus* he said. *Look at those eyes.* He told us somewhere there's a tribe who believe all dogs with blue eyes can see into heaven. She said she'd have to believe it exists, first.

My Wife & I Decide Not to Have Kids

This morning she said *Your son*
didn't cry last night, meaning
the cat who's been waking
us at 3am for a week.

Before, I held him
purring against
my chest
& laughed
at the words.

My son. Now
they feel hollow,
a joke with no punch-
line. A sound that wakes me
in the night, only to fall silent
when I lie still beside her, listening.

Process

I am slowly learning the names of muscle
and bone, the fragile strings
with which I am woven

and what to do when one snaps.

Nights I lie awake to the sound
of your breath slowing, my hand drifting
on the tide of your body. I picture
a final swell and ebb, wonder how long
it would take me to ever asleep again

without the white noise of you. Listening
into the dark, I hear the gentle violence

of harp-chords: each strand holding you together
vibrating in harmony.

I scale your true ribs and your false,
modulate the clavicle to the sternum

where my fingers rest on the smallest part
in the center of the chest. It takes half a lifetime
for this triangle of cartilage to become bone;
the Greeks named it *xiphoid*, “sword-like.”
I think it looks like a plectrum. Like I could

strike your heart, feel the thrum across
your body into mine.

The human frame contains 206 bones, but this
is the one I write poetry for.

By the time yours has ossified completely
maybe I will have learned the other hundreds
of names and the spaces between them
and how to conduct
each one like a symphony,

but tonight
there's a gap somewhere
in me that aches
and I want your hands
to find it.

Afterimage

Mother and her blue-skulled shadow
extend thin wrists toward my brother and me.
We shake boxes piled on the bare floor, puzzle out
dull thumps and whispers, scratch at corners
to get at what lies beneath. 12 24 '94

Slow-blinking lights dapple the room
with starfire colors that flash then fade.
In the far corner Father slumps in his chair,
lips and chin overexposed, gaze angled
across to where the shadow's pale fingers

curl in negative space as if hooked
between edges, seeking a firm hold.
We shake them all, we rattle each figure
but they give no answer, they don't tell
where to begin tearing.

My Wife & I Decide Not to Have Kids

hours after the results
of my physical
are read over the phone
in a woman's
clipped, accented
English. Dissatisfactory:
an obvious lack
of exercise, portion
control, leafy vegetables.
I feel her clinical
detachment like lead
in my bones. What my body
can or cannot do on its own
has kept me awake
longer hours than this
three-minute summary
of my failure to stay
balanced. So far
I have rejected my wife's
attempts to regulate
my love of late-night burgers,
and soul-deep suspicion
of running for sport.
She fills the fridge
with kale, measures out
cups of trail mix, finds
my fast food wrappers
buried in our garbage
under her grocery receipts.
I hang up after
the woman at the clinic
prescribes a Vitamin D
supplement, to be taken
for twelve weeks along
with proper diet and activity.
Twelve pills to tongue
& swallow like the names
I will not give
our future children.
Twelve chances to prove
I can maintain, I can nurture
what is inside me.

Postcards from the Blue Ridge, Burning

Nov 10

Smelled the change this morning
first. Everything looked the same, diffused
light choking raised gray hackles of land.
Like mist but heavier. Could taste it
even down in the valley.
In the car, smoke-scent mixed
with wife's perfume. Pinpricked
my nostrils down to the lungs.

*

Nov 11

We came for the sway & rustle
of peak season. To thrill at colors like lit matches
in dark rooms. Parkway closed from Chimney
Rock to Pisgah. Flame travels how far, how fast?
Drove down I-40, saw a gauze cowl
on the mountain's face. Felt the sting
of breath held a beat too long.

*

Nov 12

Took the battery out of the smoke alarm.
Room to room the air thickened & we opened
the door, chased out ghosts. The hearth a belly
coiled full of kindling. We stabbed and scraped.
Then the unraveling, the exhale.

*

Nov 9

Gray foxes in the trees. Heard them
again tonight, calling. I went to the upstairs
window, tried to spot them scaling
the branches. But everything the color of ash,
couldn't tell. Where do they go?
Might look again in daylight
for dark shapes moving.

PART II:
A LADDER OF STARS

Market Song

My father spins gold with his tongue,
demonstrates my various charms
to passersby. *Breasts like new
peaches. Wide, strong hips.* He knows
his pitch—my mother's father won him
with the same tune: *Even flightless birds lay
precious eggs, kid. She won't get anywhere
fast but her wings spread just fine.*

I am fairly priced but no prize. Dozens
more like me along the square, young flesh,
lips pressed flat and dust-dry. The butcher's
son haggles with my father; the trade
is brisk. Heavy sky curls
like a serpent at the street's edges,
the gray of my mother's eyes, of mine.

Mother hunches behind
the stall. The spindle dances
against her gnarled knee. One
of her hands floats upward, yanks
a long hair from my temple. I flinch
but don't cry out. She plies the dark
strand against the twisted brown wool.
Her cracked whisper bleeds between us
like a bitten tongue, like womanhood. *Lies
are rubies, child, truth is toads.* My eyes burn
when I don't blink. The serpent coils tight.
When he asks for more, give it, girl. At the whorl,
the cop twined to the shaft thickens, grows heavy
and unstable. She frees it, begins to wind the skein.
I see a glint of black thread, know it's mine. Measuring
a length against my wrist, she wraps it around and around
until the skin turns white then red. In my half-curved fingers
my pulse throbs heavy. Mother hefts her shears, severs the cord.
Give him what he wants.

The butcher's boy hooks a dirty thumb
under my chin. *This one needs a firm hand.* His
hands are large, bones pushing skinward, sunken
valleys of knuckle. I meet his gaze, wonder if he sees
the serpent waiting. His nail pinches my jaw. I lean into the sting.

Cai Guo-Qiang's Wife Weeps

and turns from his touch
though she can't explain why
when he asks. How to say it?
She married a man who reaches
for sky instead of her.
When they were young he joked
that the powder was really a pouch
of magic seeds given by gods
who told him to plant a garden
that would grow tall as heaven.
She thinks now he must
have swallowed them instead,
cracked each bitter pellet
between his teeth. Fire and smoke
bloom at his touch like orchids,
ephemeral and vivid as bruises.
He plays a god's game: creator,
destroyer, bringer of light and dust.
But his are man's hands, man's
eyes, a man's wide legs rooted
to the flatness of earth.
What does this man know
of godhood? He has gone
the way of his father, lost
to the blood fever of his art.
Unrecognizable, backlit and black-
smeared, he stares like a stranger
with her husband's charcoal eyes, hair
cloyed with sulfur and saltpeter.
This is how dwarf stars must look
at the beginning of death,
the chemical becoming
of supernova. She is afraid
if she stands too close he will take
everything, she won't escape
his pull. So she stands without
touching, watches him build
a ladder of stars: white ropes
of fire her mundane hands
can't touch, so she won't
follow him when he climbs.

We are the daughters of the women you tried to burn

and silence, whose names were charred but kept
and whispered and shouted and written and sung
and given to us by our mothers, your mothers

who bore us backwoods and birth-slick in strange hands
sanitized and sterile. we yanked ourselves out of fields
like sweet onion grass, we tumbled from heaven like acid rain.

moving like ghosts in the walls, blight spreading long limbs
down wheat-grids, distemper in the blood,
we were at work long before you sensed the threat.

you cannot silence us, ignore the cause to stifle
the symptom. the dam has collapsed, the river is carving
new lines to the sea, and we will be

here, we witches, sirens, devils, harpies, serpent-
creator-gods. we fertile waters drowning
your torches, we will swallow you whole

and bear you anew in the vessels of ourselves,
anoint you with life, our sons, our daughters

Athena Grieves

Salt-sister, you're dying
here in my hands:

my spear trembles
like a bride at your breast.

I weep and cling to your body,
cooling to the touch

like foam gasping
on the white shores of your birth.

You taught me dances of bees,
named every star;

loving you, I learned
that insect wings

send heavy storms
the stars don't warn of.

O Pallas, you who shared
breath and heart

and bed on cold nights,
tangled brown legs

around me, pressed
kiss after kiss

to my throat, the curves
of palm and spine—

it's you I taste, saltwater
in the corner of my lips,

your name I call and I call
until the sound of it soaks

down to my bones: the only
part of you I can keep alive.

Winterskin

He prowls in the starving
belly of midwinter,
his eye a stone

his tail an omen, illusion
of coarse fur, blood-
bright sickle reshaped

by the slow-moving moon.
Cold lures him
from the trees, turns fox-tail

to wildfire, twisting gold
shadow that warns: snow
will bite hard on spring's flank,

hobble the thaw.
Like our fathers, we must endure
the sneering lip of frost

until the fox-tail blooms red smoke
from tip to spine, a promise
of life curling toward the light.

At year's end we hunt
the silent wood in his wake, track
the scent of blackened bone.

Winterskin, beast or ghost
or god who walks
these woods, find us

in the bitter season,
bring your
scarlet bounty.

Reaper

The girl fears the dark, so she weaves a basket & gathers the stars. All night she labors: the basket is deep & the stars are small. She plucks handfuls, scoops swathes from the night sky. Stars drip from her palms, slide beneath her sleeves, lodge under her nails. Slowly her basket fills. Slowly the sky empties & the night grows closer.

Demeter Warns Her Daughter

after Jeannine Hall Gailey

He will believe he loves you, child. Men like him
are not drawn to the fullness of bloom

but to the flush, tight curl of bud snapped
from branch. He'll see it as kindness, an act

of rescue: the helpless drape of petal against
briar's dark thrust will spur him.

He won't recognize the intrusion, the nakedness
in being stripped of leaf, stem, root. He only knows

that this way she is without thorns
and he must preserve that perfection, array her

like a queen. She will bear her own weight, sober
as a death mask: lips rounded

under the blank white seeds of her eyes.

Ophelia, Aside

A child is taught to become
a woman. No, a child is given
a stage & a role to perform
& words to deliver line by line
& directions to obey:
lower the gaze, open the mouth,
sing or be silent or agree
but keep hidden the hands, the teeth.

Scene by scene the child grows less
a protagonist, defined by a name
not chosen, not scripted a choice
between being & not being, overcome
by crescendoing knowledge that speech
is an action that cannot touch,
cannot change a daughter to a queen,
cannot return what has been taken.

Echo Laments

I.

I was a juniper, evergreen daughter
of Cithaeron, silver-crowned mountain
father who loved us well, his saplings
and satyr-children. As yearlings we played
in his meadows, drank his wine and his lilting
songs of men foiled by gods, gods bested
by men—lovers, liars, fools. I loved
these stories, etched the heroes
in dirt, traced their profiles, pressed
my lips to each graven image.

Soon I grew strong and ruddy, and I left
the mountain, shook my boughs free
of burden, pulled my roots up
into the light. I tried to carry the land
with me, black loam and red sister-seeds
cupped in my palms. When I opened
the hollow I held only stones:
the first of many cold nights.

II.

It happened in stages: I learned
desire before despair, your voice first
then your name. I pronounced the sounds
slowly, lapped at the flow, mimicked
but choked on the sibilance, lost
the innocence of vowels.
You called over and over, but never for me.

My father told this story too.
In his version, the lover plays the fool,
tragic suppliant of god-kings
and bitter brides. He warned me
the story needs a victim. I knew then
that I would be changed.

III.

I vanished as expected: first the throat dried
then the lungs. My hair like pine-needles

fell to blanket my naked feet, my breasts
grayed and shriveled like berries. I reached
for you and husks poured from fingers
even the light couldn't touch.
Narcissus, what you did not know

was what I am: neither spirit nor song
but the ghost of these things. Your lips
unbirthed me, unmade what other lips wrought.

Atalanta Ruts in the Temple

The boys kneels on stone
before me, shivering but handsome
in the half-light. He begins the worship

of my body. Rough hands & reverent
tongue touch as though afraid. He seeks
my softness, finds only hard

flesh salt-slicked. He prays
my name in short, hard bursts.
The walls flake & shower us

with ash from older fires, other tributes.
I taste them over the apple-cloy
lingering in my throat.

He trembles, cupped hands reaching
to take, but I will not give.
My nails pare long grooves into his sweat-

warm skin. I bear him to the floor,
chase the pulse with my teeth. Why always
do I crave the shine, the taste?

Musk curls in hot air. My wide hips pin him
to the altar, hungry, ready.
My palm flattens the thunder

of his heart. I delight in the strain, the bitter
tang licked from his teeth, the white
in his gaze that sees the wild in mine.

When he stirs I shift with him, laugh
into his mouth. He bucks to match
my weight. I bear down, take what I have won.

kamisama

Mizu ni nagasu. Let it flow in the water. (Forgive and forget.)
—Japanese proverb

When they finish draining the river,
the people at last build shrines for us.
The banks fill with these tokens: tiny
structures of carved wood and molded
clay, not big enough to house anything
but the palm-length wands of incense
they leave burning inside. A practical
gesture meant to compensate—tribute
scaled down in estimate of what remains
of their esteem. Why should we mind
the lack of reverence? All waterbearers
disappear under the weight of our own
momentum. The change comes slowly,
like smoke twisting away: the riverbed
bloated with stone after stone as if this
substitute could satisfy—as if they could
understand—our need for something to keep
us grounded. Something to anchor us to them.

Death Rituals of *Sirenia merewif*

These specimens come to us
from smaller parks across the world—
Japan, Alaska, Brazil—which specialize

in conservation. Scavengers, fiercely
possessive, and slow to adapt to change
in environment, most never return to the sea.

They divide the tank among themselves.
We don't know how this hierarchy is arranged
but they compete for status and for space

with extreme hostility. Each year we lose
one or two in territory disputes, but despite
these aggressive dominance displays,

members of all-female pods like ours
form intense sororal bonds, highlighted
best by the species' strange response

to death within the pod, whether from age
or illness or, most common, when a high-ranking sow
drowns her weaker sister. *Sirenia merewif*

surround
the body and begin
to dance

with tails and arms interlocked, mouths open
in a song of grief, all sisters swimming close
with hair tangling and flukes brushing together—

the only times we have observed this pod
to tolerate intimacy, the touch of their own.
This ritual continues for some time, though dependent

on the dead sow's social status. Most displays,
while haunting, last only several minutes
before the body is abandoned and the pod

swim away. Only once have we lost
a dominant female, and her death dance

lasted well into the night, the dancers

cycling tirelessly, each sow writhing
between her sisters as if grieving the loss.
The killer, new queen, was not shunned, not denied

the rite, and it was she who led and touched
and was touched most frequently, her dance
the first to begin, the last to end.

Our audiences comment on the unsettling
appearance, the curious resemblance to beautiful
young women, with obvious exceptions in physiology:

the pelvic and pectoral fins, cartilaginous fluke.
Even we must marvel at the talent of these creatures
to mimic our own species, to approximate emotion

though we know through careful study the dance
is not true mourning, only instinct, meant to strengthen
social structures, a ritual of binding,

what Turner and Van Gennep called *liminality*.
Due to the graphic nature of tank fighting
and the previously mentioned human-

like appearance of *Sirenia merewif*, we are
currently unable to show footage documenting
our specimens displaying this hypnotic behavior,

though we are in the process of obtaining
the proper permits, and soon hope to advertise
a restricted on-site screening,

tickets available with day admission purchase
to adults eighteen and over. Please visit
the center's website for further information.

Estate

It has been many years since this mirror revealed a woman's fortune, yet witness the intricate phoenix-tail carved into the handle; how subtle the gold inlay against sterling, each feather trembling under the brush of a finger. See the great bird's neck etched on the back, its omniscient ruby eye over a beak stretched wide in song; and the rose-blush mother-of-pearl banding the perfect glass face, smooth as a maiden's even after a dormant century, and before that centuries of ritual use. No journeyman's labor but a master's craft: this was an instrument of gods—queens whose reign spanned lifetimes under the twin auspices of majesty and vanity before their daughters demanded right of birth, before both crown and mirror were seized from white knuckles and age-spotted fists. Note how the arm bows, the shoulder aches with strain, though the hand grips, the wrist hefts as though raising an apple to bite. Small wonder that every mistress feared its power, felt the inexorable draw, thought to break the *geis* by flattery or by force. But no command could hide or produce the warped light dancing across the bright pane, no witch or woman could evade the shadow that fell over pale brow and sanguine lip. Call its name—first entreat, then invoke. It will know the voice of its lady, will answer in tones like heavy silk dragged slowly down marble corridors—summoning to its service the fairest, the fallen.

The Queen Discovers Pleasure

after Angela Veronica Wong

Night after night, the consuming. Crystalline
walls puddle and churn rivers of black diamond
under her spine. The bed is the night sky
rippling in her fists like the hides of stallions
who bore her to this palace, empty except for what
beats between her ribs, her legs. Split, saturated,
she collects starlight dewed thick on her fingertips,
drives deep to expose the root. This secret her mother
didn't teach, her husband can't decipher. The taste
of touch, sugared bite of plump red seed: this is the love
affair she won't resist. The garden of her own body, ripe
weight of her name, its fragrant sweat on her tongue
before the blooming, the hollowing. Over and over
her bedroom fills with stars. She finds herself. She cleaves.

kitsune

call me demon vixen
 trickster witch
 green eyes hide
in forest moss smile disguised
 as thorns

Blue of evening.

find me follow
fleet black feet & flame-tip tail
my voice in the wind

Your blood-red bride.

hunger
 haunts these woods
like baited traps
 catch smoke
 & laughter

Soul or spirit?

fool
 my hunter
wary & watchful
 chase me
beyond reach

This. This.

my fool
 hunter
swift & sly
come to my bed
of twig & bone
 when I call

Now, tonight.

Beast

In the room where I lie
the walls grind together
until photos shake, bookshelves
loom backwards away

from the rising heat. My limbs crackle
to the rhythm of breath & blood
as if the bones want free of their dark.
I quake like an epicenter on the sheets

& thrill to the slide of cotton. An electric
web of nerves stretches from my heels
to the base of my spine to the saliva pooling
on my tongue. Each hard swallow pulses

another closing then opening.
Below my navel a new hunger
demands of me, *tighten, quicken, bloom*
& I cannot tell that voice apart

from mine. *Flee & the hunt*
will follow, it says & I leap

through the open window, swallow the scent
flooding the void behind my eyes like molten steel.
I want the bite of wild on my throat, the salt of it
burning. I want the host & their hounds

baying, the cry, the chase. I want
to be found too late, to be changed,
to become what they fear:
to become like them.

Stones beneath my feet, bracken thick
at my ankles. No, I do not feel the sting.
I am pads & dewclaws now. I vibrate
with the night's hidden danger. I am

its swift-flying fury, I am what
the moon howls.

The Fox Wife and the Crane Wife Debate Matrimony

after A. Van Jordan

Fox wife, consider
the facts: I was bound to him
not with love but thread.

Nothing bound you but
foolishness, feathers and skin,
both unwisely shed.

You know what I am—
a leaving bride, waning moon,
thing that must wander.

No, we are winter
brides: things that must change, cold bones
with soft hands, white throats.

You choose to fall or to fly—
I remain to fill the void.

Bloodstained bolt of cloth:
what remained of my honor
when the spell lifted.
 I left him as he left me,
 I became what he made me.

Veils, screens—no honor
in secrets. A wife's duty
is to bare herself.

It is my nature
to leave the nest, yours
to return to earth.

Crane wife, remember:
to disappear, you forsake
more than crumpled silk.

Persephone Departs

Turning from my husband's kiss, I step into the ferry
and look across the river. He does not bid me goodbye,
watches with eyes half shut. I know he envies

the dead—their crossing, steady pull of current. He waits
on the bank, listens for the crack of thaw that summons me
to this pursed lip of land

set in lines hammered thin and flat over years.
My father's house in its bed of mud and mist, fallen
long before the gates grew brittle

choked with weeds, roots, soil—Mother sang of these
as earth's nurse milk, but was silent when I asked
what was the pulse, the breath.

I am queen now, not daughter of gods. They wouldn't recognize
my new name and woman's face, the way everything living bows
before me. The way every dying thing blooms

with grey beauty like my husband's eyes, like the taste
of cold wind calling me home.

NOTES

“Cai Guo-Qiang’s Wife Weeps” – The documentary film *Sky Ladder* follows the career of Chinese pyrotechnic artist Cai Guo-Qiang, as he spends several decades pursuing a particular fireworks display. The documentary ends on the image of a triumphant Guo-Qiang, having successfully achieved the feat, standing beside his wife as she cries.

“Death Rituals of *Sirenia merewif*” – This poem is an ekphrastic response to a photograph by Lucinda Devlin, “Mermaids, Weechi Wachi Springs, FL 1989” from her series *Habitats*.

“*kamisama*” – The Japanese term *kamisama* refers to a Shinto belief in nature spirits or gods that act as guardians of nature. It is generally accepted that every object, particularly organic or living, has a *kami* inside it.

“*kitsune*” – The title comes from the Japanese word for *fox*. In Japan, the sound a fox makes is “kon kon.” Outside of onomatopoeia, the word *kon* can be translated several different ways (notably, “now” and “soul”) and is found in many compound words like *kekkon* (“bloodstain” and “marriage”) and *kon’ya* (“this evening”).

“The Fox Wife and the Crane Wife Debate Matrimony” – The fox wife and crane wife are two folkloric figures in Japanese mythology. Both represent an archetypal female, the “woman who disappears”—that is, a mysterious, beautiful woman who appears out of nowhere and lives briefly among humans in the role of a daughter or wife. In these stories, her identity is always revealed to be that of a creature-spirit such as a fox or crane, both animals with strong associations to Japanese spiritual beliefs. The discovery forces the spirit to return to her supernatural origins, leaving behind any family she has in the human world.

“We are the daughters of the women you tried to burn” – On January 21, 2017, the Women’s March took place across the United States and elsewhere in the world. An estimated three million protestors participated in the event, carrying a variety of signs and slogans calling for gender equality and women’s reproductive rights. One such sign was photographed reading, “We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn.”