

## Presumed Guilty

Born guilty, I heard the story  
of two sisters—the older one  
despised by the second wife, thrown  
into a well to find herself in an orchard  
loaded with pomelos, the trees  
like pregnant women flinging their limbs  
in torment, crying, pick me, pick me.  
And she did, for five years till every  
green tree was stripped to anorexia.  
Then entered the castle kitchen  
where staggered rows of brick ovens  
moaned through the brown mouths of loaves,  
oh take me, take me out. She did,  
the loaves so thick they tapped  
like hollow heads. Five years  
before the ovens gaped dark holes  
emptied of mouths. Then found herself  
in front of Second Mother's house,  
explaining where ten years had gone,  
while pearls large as rosary beads,  
undimpled, rolled out with her speech,  
and her feet shone in self-reflexive  
calcified pools.

Second Mother,  
wanting only the best for her own  
warted daughter, pushed the younger,  
screaming, into the smooth brown eye

of the willing well! Which blinked,  
and she was walking through the same  
plantation and through that steamy  
torpid factory of a hundred thousand loaves.  
Why bother when all she needed  
was an apple to bite into  
and one loaf for an afternoon's  
appetite? She was out of that well  
in a moment with Mother fainting  
as toads jumped out each time  
she told why it wasn't for her  
to do the picking.

I had learned  
one lesson, swallowing the entire  
well by eight: the water of make belief,  
reproduction stories, girl slavery  
redeemed by the gift of female speech,  
suffering that ends in marvellous  
narrative: the lie of one thrown away,  
returning with a mouth that spits  
what everyone—even  
murderous stepmothers—desire.

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