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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Stephanie Tillman

May 2015

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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Completing such a large project can be difficult at times. At those times, I was able to talk to Cody Spraggins and my mother, Debra Tillman, about my struggles. They're my biggest supporters; they believe in me far more than I've ever believed in myself. My mom has encouraged me since I was very young to pursue writing, and Cody has been nothing less than an angel when it comes to my writing.

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There have been times when I felt like I wasn't getting anywhere, but both sides

of my family have been so proud and encouraging of me through all of this. I don't think I'll ever forget how interested in my academic career they have been. Each and every one of them has made me feel like I'm being worth being listened to, which is one of the most valuable things that you can give a person.

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Stephanie Tillman

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Directed by: Tom C. Hunley, David LeNoir, Ted Hovet

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

“Original Sin”—evocative and powerful words, but what if they were applied to one of the world’s most popular fairy tales? This thesis explores Snow White in the context of the Seven Deadly Sins and the grand fall of Adam and Eve. The forbidden fruit manifests itself in different ways, pulling the prim and proper princess into places she never could have imagined. But what of the Wicked Queen, here known as Lilith? She too feels the bite of the world’s sick sense of humor, exacting revenge on those who have wronged her.

Are these poems about them? Or are they about the author? Perhaps they are both: the innocent children learn quickly of life’s cruelty, handling it with equal parts grace and selfishness. Dive into the minds of Lilith and Snow White as they explore what it means to be themselves in a world that doesn’t care if they end up happy.

INFERNO

Genesis of Darkness

 wrath
 touches troubled
 Hell,
whose fury
hurled
 whirlwinds of tempestuous fire.

 a cocoon is formed:
 ambitious,
 nourished, breathing,
 suckling .

 disastrous twilight
and devils
 of dread
ran purple to the sea
here,
 blood staining, etching an
 ethereal temper
rifling the bowels of
a mind not changed by place or time.

An eternity passes all at once,
each moment hurtling as an egg,
 so fragile,
yet the ember remains .

A forest
in chains and flicking flames
 swallowed
 the falling star,
and the plains
 burned with liquid fire,
hurling hideous defiance
combusting at Heaven
with vain
 brittle earnest.

The calamity surges,
deliberate,
 by the choking moon
 and
 howls at

the setting sun
whether upheld by chance or fate,
an organ
of remorse
and lasting pain:

a baby named Lilith bloomed and broke free.

A fair portion of this poem belongs to John Milton's first canto of Paradise Lost. However, significant liberties have been taken with it; may Milton not roll around in his grave.

Blackout poems involve taking a piece of text and removing words in order to create new phrases and meanings, thus giving a different sort of life to something that may be difficult or uninteresting to read at first glance.

Tainted Phoenix

Lilith began life as a rag doll:
button eyes gleaming in darkness,
permanent smile sewn on,
would go anywhere as long as she wasn't
alone.

Her pudgy fingers were always o u t s t r e t c h e d—
for a hand to hold
or demanding gifts?

Pristine frilly frock—
lovely as a doily,
as fragile as vintage lace—
hand-sewn by a servant,

the barren one.

Dragged around,
neglected,
and beaten,
she grew dirty—
unclean by advisors' leers
and wandering hands.

“It’s a compliment, dear.”

Yarn hair in knots,
Mary-Janes scuffed,
she stands on her balcony,
arms spread out
and fingers splayed.

She longs to fly,
to re-forge her violated flesh
into fiery plumage.

Sweet Dreams

Lights out.
Who cares?

Leather-bound spellbooks—
Lilith's only friends.

People couldn't be trusted.
That was something she'd learned long ago.

Revenge would be much, much sweeter
than any mollifying, honey-bleeding cheesecake.

No longer would she let them force her to sleep.

No longer would she let them force their hands onto her budding breasts.

No longer would she let them force some sticky hard candy down her throat
just so she would be quiet and choke, not scream.

Her bed stinks of sweat and tears
and something she couldn't name—
it left too harsh a sheen
of bitter-twisted memories
on her shriveling taste buds.

The best book's scent of musky oil
with a hint of spearmint
soothes her mind's basilisk
that only wishes to unearth
the repressed thoughts of
what happened after every breakfast
and while the ladies powdered their noses every evening.

The worn table of contents
glimmers with potential:

- death,
- destruction,
- agony,
- a rain of blood

She smiles as she drifts off,
dreaming of her reign of darkness and pain.

Her time will one day come.

The Losses and Vanity of an Angel Falling Rapidly

Once upon a time, the beautiful queen Lilith
didn't love her husband's daughter.

It was always something with that pointless child—
a toothache,
 a hangnail,
 a nightmare,
 falling off her horse and breaking her ankle.

The queen couldn't quite figure out
why she was supposed to care.

(She had better things to do and worry about.)

But she had her looks,
and she had her love.

Lilith combed her hair
exactly 100 times
each morning
and each night.

Each day,
her husband would tell her
just how beautiful she was.

And the queen would feign
modesty and blush
every time.

The king would give her flowers for every birthday,
one rose for each year.

His daughter, however,
would try to mimic
her stepmother's routine,
tripping underfoot
as she pretended to check her teeth.

What a nuisance!
Lilith would snap at the girl
and tell her not to interfere
with grown-up things.

The child would snuffle,

produce a few tears, and shuffle away,
her porcelain head drooping
like the little glutton china doll she clearly was.

The king wished they would be civil,
but that was silly,
in the queen's *ever-so-humble* opinion.

She was an adult.
She could handle this.

The girl needed to learn how the world really worked.
It was an important lesson,
especially for one so *obviously* dimwitted and self-absorbed.

Lilith had *tried* to show the child how to paint her fingernails,
but the polish had ended up all over the woven rugs and carpets.

“You foolish girl!
Can't you pay attention?”
she snapped.

“It was an accident,”
the girl mumbled.

Lilith's warning dripped with venom:
“Don't let it happen again.”

As if in spite of Lilith's happiness,
the child would always get in the way,
a clueless interloper
like a dog in the kitchen
while dinner is cooking.

The child's whining
became much worse
when the king died—
worse than the queen
could have imagined.

Lilith never even got to see
the mangled remains.

The queen requested privacy.
She wanted to mourn in *peace*.
But the brat would sit outside

her door, crying dumb tears.
There was no way the child
could ever understand
her step-mother,
 the way bits of fruit
 would get caught
 in her throat,
 the way she felt her chest constricting
 when she had news and no one to share it with,
 the way she felt glass shards in her palms
 when she wanted her husband's hand to hold.

But she at least had her beauty left.

The mirror would confirm
it for her any time she wanted,
as it had always done.

One day,
the cruel pane changed its mind.

The queen's face turned
blister-red in rage.

No way would this brat,
this spoiled pre-teen,
take the one thing
the queen had left,
for she had certainly
lost her patience.

The Coming Purge

The crumbling whisper of failure as a woman
strangles Lilith's lungs and shakes her bones.

"I can't be seen like this."
Mumbles in the dark.

Who would even look?

She clenches her hand around the velvet curtains,
draws them to hide her shame.

A honeycomb of paths lay before her,
the possibilities gleaming in the hidden stars.

The only one she can see is *food*,
the only control she has left.

Chocolate ganache,
 strawberry shortcake,
 and black forest trifle
dance before her mind's eye,
singing a little ditty
she can't quite translate.

She can feel the bile bubbling,
her throat itching to grow raw
and burn, burn, burn
 just like her mind,
 just like the tendrils of anger that blind her,
 just like how she *craves*
 to see that foul goody-two-shoes burst into flames
 so the blame game can end,
 so she can stop feeling like it's her fault,
and the tears spill early,
long before the decadent, dreamy food can grace her lips.

The taste of icing lingers in the cracks of her mouth,
whispering that there is more,
 that there will always be more,
 more,
 more.

All she has to do is ask.

Her mascara bleeds down her face like tar
as she grasps at her chest.

Someone else must feel the same coarse strings of agony.
Someone else must spiral with her into the quiet-at-last abyss.
Someone else must suffer for her loss that came an eternity too soon.

If she must shrivel and shrink into choking nothing,
then she most certainly will not do it alone.

Lilith's Plan A(pple)

A sneer curled the queen's lips upward.
A fragile flower like her step-daughter
couldn't fight back against her favorite huntsman.

Bloodlust bubbled up in his eyes, pooling into a grim smile,
the kind that we all have on the inside
when we know someone will get what they don't realize they deserve.

He pulled his stringy hair back into a stubby ponytail
and grunted before he turned to leave.

"It should be simple.
It should.
It should."
the queen murmured with dead eyes,
knocking three times.

When was the last time the threes hadn't curled around her ears like expectant
smoke?

Lilith reclined in her gilded throne,
 sliding into the red silk cushions,
 stretching her legs out,
 and crossing her ankles
 as a sly smirk crawled like a millipede
 across her plump, ruby lips.

Brainless Snow White—
the sugar-laden name was nauseating
even in the queen's mind—

would lose her way in the twisting woods;

 or get ripped apart by wild branches,
 with twigs piercing that
 supple, delicate skin
 like sultry vampire bites;

 or even be gored by a mother bear,
 the lethal claws sinking into the girl's
 starkly pristine, alabaster flesh,
 separating her limbs into
 oozing, unrecognizable hunks

of sinew and crushed ashen bone.

No mercy for her husband;
no mercy for his daughter.

It wouldn't take long
for her huntsman to procure
the girl's dripping heart
and shake the blood away,
crimson droplets spattering and staining
the vile clusters of poison ivy.

A hoarse laugh rose in Lilith's chest—
oh, how her hands would shake
as she undid the heart-shaped latch
so she could see that foul leech
finally suffer as she had.

The organ would lie still
inside its velvet-lined box,
the cold enameling of the brass case
glistening as the woman acquired her prize,
her new treasured trophy
to embalm and display.

Even still, her mouth watered,
wondering what it would taste like,
wondering if the girl's beauty would become her own
if she were to pierce the leathery bulb with her canines,
ravenous for the sweet taste of Snow White's *untimely* death.

She drummed her fingers
on the hollow, rosewood armrest.

It was perfect.
It was perfect.
It was perfect.

"Once again,
I'll be the fairest
in the land,"
Lilith crowed.

She let loose a heartfelt cackle,
a rich gayness ringing
up to the vaulted ceiling,

but forgot her repetitions.

Her voice echoed with hollow pride.

*“Snow White will be
dead by nightfall!”*

Love at First Bite

*“One bite, and all your dreams
will come true.”*

Why couldn't Snow White have found
that magic apple years ago?

No more would she thanklessly clean cobblestone
on her hands and knees
day after day after day.

No more would she wistfully wish
her step-mother would see that
she isn't a hopeless pile of scum.

No more would she receive
hateful stares and judgmental comments
over the pettiest of perceived mistakes.

Freedom was finally ripe for the taking.

Snow White rubbed her thumbs along
the smooth skin of the apple:

a scrumptious, refreshing snack
after being chased through the woods
just yesterday.

The old woman's eyes
held a hint of something
that Snow White couldn't recognize.

*“Now, make a wish
and take a bite.”*

The young girl closed her eyes,
the way she always had
when she lingered over the well
with birds singing their hope
for their princess
to be happy at last.

Her teeth sank
into the saccharine fruit,
the juices lavishly filling her eager mouth

just like they had when she was small.

Her world faded
as she swooned with
visions of her prince
crooning to her
in the courtyard,
the forest,
the mine,
the village,
the kingdom.

The smears of her lipstick
perfectly framed
the crisp whiteness
of the fruit's succulent flesh
as the apple rocked

back

and

forth

after being dropped
by hands as pale
as moonlight.

Forbidden Fruit

One for love,
one for knowledge.

Both were held precious;
both, a dear wish.

Cast away from the arms of luxury,
a woman is blamed for her choice.

Stupid,
 dimwit,
 gullible,
 naive,
 foolish,
 selfish,
 worthless—
 “Look at your life;
 look at your choices:”

accusations spat like endless strings of barbed wire,
negativity tumbling out of everyone’s mouths
like a pyramid of gumballs.

“It was still *my* decision,”
she murmurs into the bark of the tree she slumps into.

“My body, my choice.”

The rains crash down upon them,
a torrent of a million choices gone sour.

PERSONAL HELL

Sunday Drive

With strings of fuzzy car lights
crawling down the highway
like brilliant caterpillars

and trees flying by
on wings of leaves,

the breeze is cool,
artificial.

Mellow music whispers
in distant memories,

the smell of a crackling bonfire
almost lingering in the cabin.

Red-gray sky looms above,
clouds obscuring all.

Can you hear the spruces swaying
to the beat of the earth
as they wail in agony
for their dead?

Can you feel the road beneath you
as it longs to tell you
its great deep yearning
to peel into the great beyond?

Can you see the flat street signs
crying for their constant warnings
to be heard?

STOP

Can you, please?

The screaming must end sometime,
even if we only silence
the voices in my head.

Apartment D306

There is nothing poetic
about a leather chair with stiff arms
that dig into your knees.

There is nothing poetic
about a ceramic cup
full of Kool-Aid, cherry limeade.

There is nothing poetic
about stagnant roommates
and Super Smash Brothers.

There is nothing poetic
about hard, scratchy carpeting
and noisy neighbors' techno.

There is nothing poetic
about daily pool parties
right out the living-room window.

There is nothing poetic
about ice cubes rattling
in a restaurant cup full of whiskey.

There is nothing poetic
about a flat-screen television
and not enough catfish.

There is nothing poetic
about a Skyrim map poster
and Warhammer 40K point values.

There is nothing poetic
about Pathfinder NPC minis
and a piranha's water filter.

There is a strange beauty
in a lack of poetry,
but even stranger still
is the smell of death
when all are breathing.

[Redacted]

How do I explain myself?

How is it that a scribble on a page expresses the idea just as well as [cliché]?

How can my deepest, most personal feelings
that rip me open on a daily basis sound just like a(n) [adjective] [noun] on [website]?

And when I try to make them poetic,
it seems that I'm just [-ing verb] [plural noun].

If [noun] [present-tense verb] the [body part] [present-tense verb] [-er adjective],
then why do I feel so alone?

If a(n) [adjective] mind is the devil's [noun],
but all [noun] and no [noun] makes Jack a(n) [adjective] [noun],
which one is worse?

Love Blisters

There is no gas mask for heartache,
no DayQuil for this pain.

Poison pouring through my lungs,
I cough,
I rattle,
I wheeze.

Each moment longer brings more toxic elixir,
pumping through my bloodstream
with bubbles of venom
popping in succession
with clouds of ash
and industrial smoke
of polyester remnants
from diseased child labor.

Joints creaking,
I age more every second.

The morning cocktail of pills is bitter,
but Nexium can't treat this heartburn.

My clavicle is downright clinical,
an egg forming in the nook between
collarbone and shoulderbone.

My hip feels a marble rolling around
deep in its cranny,
a knot you can't massage.

My arms are limp and loose,
muscles dangling
like paper cranes on the hospital ceiling.

Let me rasp and choke on dust
rather than live this way—
chronic pain only grows like an abscess
and peels at my nerves
like the first flaking tissue of sunburn.
Painless living is a pipe dream—

crammed into creamy sludge of garbage
compacting and traversing

the rusting Damascus ducts,

playing musical chairs
with molding newspapers of yesteryear,

oatmealing and coating the discarded Nokias
with highlights of yellowing marshmallow.

Squeeze my heart dry of tears
and drink of my cherry Kool-Aid,
sweet with the remains of positivity
that crumble and tumble out my pores
in salted sand grains of total failure.

Loss is a sword that keeps getting re-forged;
each time you think grieving is done,
it shatters its own brittle bones.

You heat and pour,
but you're weaker every time,
no matter the strength of the mold.

"Cast off your bindings," they say.

But how can I when they're fused to my skin?

What was life like before this vomit-inducing,
pickled cotton-candy,
non-profit circus
crept in and boiled my blood into steel,
tinged with the bile of despair?

The searing-hot fire,
the clang on the anvil,
the rush of steam—
it's all I know as the cycle renews.

The Claws of Life

Love is scrambled in my veins.

The only words I have are the ones I'd regret the most.

Heartbreak claws at my nerves,
rendering me numb to all but pain,
while death's sweet siren call drags me ever closer.

My nails scabble at the dirt in futility,
chipping away the pebbles
of what keeps me in this world.

The boulder of eternity looms
like an impatient parent past curfew.

The dogs that war in my spirit
chomp at my ankles.

They all know I am coming—
but it never feels like soon enough.

left breathless by perpetual sorrow

to the one who is deaf to my pleas:

i'm aggravated
agitated
weary
& worn

and all of these words
feel too tame
too sentimental

i need words that will shred like barbs
words that pierce your lungs and leave you breathless

i need words that will crush your ribcage
words that crack open your spine like a clam
like a crab on the dinner table

i need words that will flay you and decay your flesh
words that will fill your mouth like a baseball tumor

i need words that will peel away your toenails
words that pluck my hair out as each one counts
for a way that i am in pain

i need words that will crochet me a skullcap to cover my now-bare head

i need words that will whisper in my ear at night
words that will tell me that i will be okay
words that are so quiet i barely hear them

words that hold me close
and somehow drown out the deafening roar
that beckons me closer still to death

powerlessness.

Productive gophers burrow past,
ready to report to the
Goddess of Invisible Illnesses.

Pages peel back in her book
as she murmurs,
“Does she even know that she needs help?”

The canopy raises higher,
pushing like a crow in an egg,
shoving the glass ceiling a little bit higher.

Trials and trails of conquerors past bite at my calves,
while thieving curs snatch away my voice
with raking claws of demolition
designed to shred tongues and every hope.

Midnight licks at my thighs,
calling itself my mistress.

The boa’s veins are bulging,
brimming with anguish toxins.

Ink spills onto a page
in the distance,
calling forth the muses
to channel away the misery.

Panicked breaths are manifesting
into boas squeezing my ribs
with a subtle hiss.

The forest will have no leftovers.

Starvation

will gobble you up,
yanking you deeper
and deeper
into the bottomless pit of
NO FOOD

It screams and screeches and claws
as it bites and chews and gnaws
at your innards,
ripping your nerves
up like weeds
rooted deep under the grass and mushrooms,
holding tight to all they have left.

Fat boils away,
brain cells sparking into oblivion
with a faint hiss as steam.

The crackling whip of the fire in your belly
pulls at your feet like a puppet-
master.

Disrobe yourself into b-o-n-e-s
and clatter toward your freedom.

Deprivation

Torturous memories tug at me like children
on mothers' sleeves.

Every awful angle reveals itself,
a shower of bobby pins drowning me.

“Red Rover, Red Rover,
send anxiety on over.”

My mind is yawning,
gaping with vulnerability

as demons gallop in
with delighted grins.

My mouth is rusted shut
as my hand is taken.

My arm is limp with shame.

I'm zippered up and pulled into a cocoon of blankets.

I don't even remember what it means to love myself.

Thoughts

Slippery like soap dropped in the bath,
dangling
like a dust speck just out of reach,
squeaking like the mouse you just can't find,
flailing like a fish just outside the net.

I try to scan my fingerprint
to enter the House of Ideas,
but my arm is
loose and
unhin
ged.

My retina is no better—

what am I looking at?

Dis
jointed and drowsy,
I try to rouse myself from my fugue,
but
chessboard
stairs
keep
going
into
the
sunset.

Crystal chandeliers beckon me closer.

(Parentheses squeeze me tight.)

I have become
an after-thought.

Morphine

is submarine giggles
and poodle farts.

Lemonade courses through my veins,
an alkaline cloud tinting it all the way.

Brownie-batter lollipops
and arsenic-laced chainsaws
wallpaper Sir Chipmunk's master bedroom.

The ballroom is full of our shark friends
and weed-whacker chandeliers.

Trophies of feathers and acorns
adorn the teddy-bear picnic
past the velvet ropes.

War and love unite
at the end of the rainbow—
or is that just a toilet?

Pointless cameras dangle off chairs' arms
while the cats lick their dainty paws
as they wait to become useful.

"See Historic Rock Castle!"
But all anyone wants is watered-down coffee.

Reading Hicok

“I moved the nest to the top of a plastic box / ... / scooped the wasp onto a long, rusted hinge / that has sat for months on the porch railing, / placed the wasp on the nest, and came back to tell you / this is the poem I’ve been trying to write / about the man I stood beside during the national anthem / at a ballgame, who placed his prosthetic hand / over his heart, looking more like a boy from the outside, / where I was, and sang, in his uniform, harder / than I ever have, without a sense / of irony.”

I get it.

But “it” is not some word or phrase
that we can form
with our rolling tongues
as if they are bubblegum balls,
sweet but chalky
and hard but soft.

You’re lying
if you say they actually have a flavor.

It’s a taste I don’t know,
a color that I can’t quite describe.

It’s fifth-dimension,
ultraviolet light,
an honorable mention,
whatever music looks like to synesthetes.

It’s a clothespin holding shut a bag of chips—
it’s simple,
but it just *works*.

It’s a wordless connection,
from author to paper to reader.

These pages are anthrax in an envelope;

sometimes it catches you by surprise,

and sometimes,

it ends up in somebody else’s mailbox.

MARINES DON'T REINTEGRATE

ASH IN MY MOUTH
WHEN THE VET WILL LASH OUT

CAMEL SPIDERS
DRESS BLUES
AND SEARCH-AND-RESCUE
AND BROKEN LEGS
CRUNCHING ANKLES
AND LASIK SURGERY

ENDLESS DOCTOR'S VISITS

TELL ME ABOUT THE WILDLIFE

CALLS END
IN PROLONGED HARSH WHISPERS

WISH YOU WERE HERE

BITING MY LIP AS HEARTBURN BUBBLES
RATTLERS COIL AROUND MY LUNGS
MY RIBS ARE
CR
AC
KI
NG

LET ME BUILD MY OWN BACKBONE

The Anniversary: 9/11

Two years,
and I'm still no better.

This date means more to New Yorkers.
I'm insignificant against real death.

False death plagues me,
trailing after my feet,
a starving bony pup.

One attempt later,
and still I live.

Excruciating leeches suck my soul
while students are a beacon.

You may take away my pointed things.
You may watch me like a hawk.

But I can still do it while you sleep.

Vodka burns my throat like acid reflux as I try to forget.

Drown it in wine that looks like chocolate milk.

Bury it in poems of wickedness
and lost love.

I am but a ghost now,
yet still I live.

Memory

The whip of thorns
rips my flesh bare once again.

My throat is raw
as my nose floods.

“I’m just going to Arby’s and back.
I need to eat.”

Sure you are.

That’s all it was before—
hunger.

What would make today any different?

The kaleidoscope of anguish
twists into my heart
with a hidden dagger.

My cheek clenches
as it feels again the lonely sting of rug-burn.

Bioshock tingles my brain.

Never forget.
Never surrender.

Blank Slate

Easier said than done.

Why is it so simple to forgive
but so difficult to forget?

You can't erase permanent marker.

Your words still echo,
ringing in my ears
as a mosquito
starving for another chance.

Suck my blood all you like,
but take your drop of poison with you.

Tease out the remains
with a comb

and let me begin to heal.

DESCENT

A Graceful Silence

There was an echoing,
a deep banging in Snow White's head as she fell to
the wooden floorboards of the dwarves' cottage that
peeled away into the chasm,
the sweet crispness of the apple
still lingering on her moistened lips.

"Let the bodies hit the floor,"
something cold whispered,
and panic's icy fingers took hold.

Her hands were claws,
aching and reaching,
her fingers stretching
at the infinite blackness
that had fallen in front of familiarity.

Let the bodies hit the floor,
called a voice of echoes and gravel.

The racket of drums,
the odor of skunk, &
the skittering of beetles
invaded her senses.

This was no charming cottage in the woods.

Snow's skin was slimy,
frog spots crawling
up her arms,
while her eyes crystallized
with glazed caramel oozing and crackling
before falling away into cold, blue gemstones.

Let the bodies hit the floor,
it reminded her,
ripping deep into her ears
with screeching daggers,
stretching deep into her nerves
with cat claws let loose.

All at once,
her throat coiled up like a spring,
tasting blood and bile,

at the crunching of an apple.

Bite, munch, chew:

pounding drumbeats
of a call to action.

But who would hire the old woman?

The lecherous blacksmith
who saw Snow White as a rack of barbecued pig's ribs?

The sterile maid
who glared at Snow's ample hips?

The hardened stable boy
who stole the queen's pearls and longed to take more?

The cruel voice began to chant and cackle,
penetrating her weak mind with gliding ease.
Let the bodies hit the floor.
Let the bodies hit the floor.
Let the bodies hit the floor.

"Please stop saying that,"
Snow White whimpered.

Her fingernails bit into the palm of her hand
as she sucked on her cherry lips.

She pulled her straitjacket arms close to her body,
chest heaving,
ears pounding,
throat drying.

The howling silence grew like ivy,
creeping with chuckling cobblestone.

"Stay calm; stay calm; stay calm."
Her eyes rolled up toward the ceiling
of her tremendous starless coffin.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.

Her skin pinched and pulled and stretched,
luminescent opal scales popping up in painful patches.

Seashells crumbled in her fingers,
dusting her hands with powdered fragments.

From her back grew bones and leather flesh.
From her teeth, poison fangs.
From her eyelashes, fluttering emerald feathers.

*Let the bodies hit the floor,
the voice said with urgency.*

“*Stop saying that,*”
she snapped.
“Who do you think you are?”

Her claws flew to her mouth.
Had she ever spoken to anyone that way?
 Stabbing guilt wrenched her gut,
 twisting the memory of her mother
 into that of disappointment.
An amethyst tear fell down her spined cheek.

The voice became a hoarse whisper.
Let the bodies hit the floor.

“No.”
Her voice was everlasting stone,
harsh stardust crackling in her throat.

Let the bodies h—

“That is quite enough of that.”
Her prim, old-world charm
still wound itself tightly in her stomach.

She blinked her glassy sapphire eyes
and lifted her too-heavy hand up in the air,
visualizing her true self.

The princess had no intention of being a grotesque creature while waiting to be
awakened.

That layer of mucus, those gills, the fangs, her scales—
they all at once fell to the floor,

fading with a blur into the ink of eternal dusk.

She folded her twiggy legs up underneath her
like when she used to watch the sun set.

At last, the voices had stopped grasping for her sanity.

At last, the savage drums of war had stopped calling her name.

At last, the people who had expected so much of her had finally fallen away.

“It doesn’t matter
if this is Paradise
or if it is Hell.
As long as it is quiet.”

Inertia

Imagine:

a car
that won't
start
in the
crunching ice
on
c
r
u
m
b
l
e
d
pavement,

her glacial engine clicking,
clicking,
clicking,
as the key turns in vain,
and she's groaning,
becoming an old man
in the too-cold morning air,
gumming his oatmeal
and staring at the empty chair
behind the dusty place-mat
that hasn't been touched
in years.

Bones creak
as muscles stretch
with the instinctive reaching out,
to hold the hand
that is no longer there.

A plume of smoke
f i l t e r s
through the high-beams
streaking across
the frozen, silent ground.

She wants to see the light shine in through the window and gauzy curtains as

the other car pulls into the driveway.
She wants to see the headlights dim and hear the jingle of keys
just outside the door.

But it's always just more passersby
trying to get their bearings
before they too vanish
into the looming mist.

This shallow street,
this gloomy graveyard of the
in-between,

sits abandoned

and silent,

lingering like Plato's hollow cave,

full of vacant spaces

blighted by

echoes
((echoes))
((echoes))
((echoes))
((echoes))

of burnt rubber as she,
the dejected stranger,

s
t
f
i
r
d

toward the heavens in

lazy,

billowing

fumes

of toxic fog.

Paradise Lust

The tricky fruits of Hell seduced her.

Her silence had faded
into a car lot
and then a luscious orchard,
tempting her with delights
she had never imagined.

And so she sank into the earth,
her toes feeling the mud
squeeze in between them.

The huntsman's words
echoed in her ears,
a hollow warning
the girl never could have understood.

Her filthy feet could feel
the smooth bed-rock reaching up to meet them.

"Hello?"

The heat and ash baked into her pampered skin
as a warm hand slithered around her neck.

"My, my, what have we here?"
a male voice rumbled.
"Did you steal some of my pomegranates?"

Her voice got lost in her throat.

"Such a bad girl," he murmured,
the steam of his words curling into her ear.
"Didn't you know that you're not
supposed to take things that don't belong to you?"

She nodded, her lips trapped shut,
her feet snapping together as if he were a drill sergeant
who had just caught her slacking off.

"Do you know what happens now?"

She shook her head,
her neck still within the man's grip,

her breathing growing shallow.

“You belong to *me* now.
After all, possession is
nine-tenths of the law.”

‘*What a strange saying,*
she thought.

“You’ll understand
in a few thousand years.”
He chuckled to himself
at some inside joke
as he stepped in front of her,
his hair crackling like flames.

The way his jaw was chiseled so firmly,
how his nose jutted out assertively...
He was very different from the prince who had danced in her distant dreams.

“Ah, Persephone,” he said, pacing,
before the young girl could speak.
“It seems I’ve hit the jackpot.”

“The what?”
escaped from her lips.

“It’s nothing.
Do you know who I am?”

“I don’t even remember who *I* am.
Is my name really Persephone?”
She stared at her moon-dust arms.
There was something that she was forgetting.

“I am Hades, your new lord and master.”
He pursed his lips.

“Do you know what is different
about the underworld?”

“Besides the souls of dead people floating around?”

“Yes, besides the dead people.”
A ghost of a smile danced
behind his composed veneer.

The snow-white Persephone looked to her feet,
a small sprout withering and browning on her toes.

“Nothing around here is alive.”

No singing birds,
no scurrying mice,
no prancing deer.

“Good girl,” he breathed,
caressing her cheek
with just his index finger,
her skin tingling
under his gentle touch.

His hickory-smoked scent already made this place feel like home—
but far more alluring.

“Now that you are mine,
I’d like to ask you something.”

“Of course,”
she squeaked,
her face flushing
a stabbing pink.

The look in his eyes was bewitching
but, somehow, sincere.

Not in the same way as the prince from her dreams—
much more captivating than that dead-eyed royal.

He glided closer,
their noses almost touching,
his brimstone breath
filling her lungs
with the first exhale,

the second,

the third.

She gulped it in,
letting it course
through
her greedy body.

“You aren’t planning on
trying to escape,

are you?"

Where else was she to go?

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Her breath caught.

"Good girl,"
he said again,
his voice melting
with ambrosia.

Hades' warm, rough hands
cupped her face and tilted her chin up
so he could kiss her on the forehead.

"Things are very different around here,"
the deity murmured.

"We don't have springtime.
We don't have solstice nor summer nor snow.
The only things here are

you,

me,

and the suffering souls of mortals swimming around,
moaning and lamenting their former vapid little lives."

He shrugged.

"It's a living."

"This means that we'll have a lot of time
to get to know each other.
Is there anything you'd like to do
for your first act in the position of my mistress?"

Hades tucked her hair behind her ears,
his face so close to hers that her next breath
had been his previous.

Without thinking,
the virgin mumbled,

"I can think of plenty of positions."

In a mere instant,
she was in the arms of the deity of death,
who leaned down and whispered just above her lips,
"Good girl."

The Art of Misdirection

Sherbet unicorns

and seven swans are s w i m m i n g
through unending filtered

s
t
e
a
m

sucking for air but craving coal instead.

Owl eyes gaze

with harsh sunbeams,
casting judgment
on those ground-bound.

Peel away my sheepskin,
my magician's cloak.

Let false words roll on your tongue;
soften the blow before they spill out.

Pump the water out of my lungs
and scrub my clown paint away.

Listen to the ocean as it bubbles in my throat;
drink it up off my gums;
draw it out like poison.

Purge the saltwater as I come back to shore
and clean away the bile of falsehoods
and stagger back as you see my true face.

Linger over my burning lips of crimson;
brush your cheek against my ashen skin;
tangle your fingers in my hair of coal;
feel my heart erupt into fluttering doves.

I thought I was dying again,
but this time was much less like dreaming.

An Unseemly Fascination Drained

NARRATOR:

“The endless masquerades were growing dull.

The leeching parties had gone dry.

The vanity of courtiers could only stretch so far.”

INTERIOR: PRINCE CHARMING’S ROOM

(PRINCE CHARMING draws a single drop of blood from his left index finger with an errant sewing needle.)

ENTER: PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER

PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER:

“Charming!

You put that down, right this instant!

It’s time to put these silly games to rest.

Why can’t you be more like your older sister?”

NARRATOR:

“Mucus drained down the back of his throat
with sharpened blades;

his eyes felt the sting of tears
bubbling up at the brims.”

PRINCE CHARMING:

“Because I’m me.

Can’t you call me by my name?”

PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER:

“Nobody else does.

Maybe you should try to live up to this one first.”

EXEUNT: HIS DEAR MOTHER (with a flounce)

(PRINCE CHARMING crosses to the window.)

WINDOW: SCENE OF SNOW-COVERED PINE TREES

NARRATOR:

“He wagged his index finger at the crow atop the tallest tree.
Why could that bird be what it wanted to be,
go where it wanted to go?”

The madness grew deeper,
cutting into his wrists with cravings of agony.

A single last hope bobbed up:
the rumored vampire princess—
a girl with a deathly pallor unmatched by the living,
lips as crimson as blood,
hair as black as coal—
a woman shrouded in mystery and darkness.

The idea lodged itself as a fish hook into his mind:

his salvation,
his kindred spirit,
his darling princess of darkness—

someone who would share his worries and fears
about the futility of life.

Until the groomer came.

Day in,
day out:
proper pedigree
of princeliness—
boiling away
the gloom and doom.

No more needles.
No more talk of death.
No more dreaming of spirits.”

EXTERIOR: MEADOW
(PRINCE CHARMING stands over SNOW WHITE’s coffin.)

NARRATOR:
“When he finally found the princess,
he knew it was for the best.

Her crystalline coffin glimmered with dew,
the daylight shimmering across her perfect skin.

She was so perfect,
so peaceful
in her grim state.

He needed to be better for her.

He reaped his coldness,
melting it into dawn.

He closed his eyes,
swallowed the sun,
and chose to begin his life anew.”

Sleep Paralysis

Mouth clamped shut like a chastity belt,
I'm choking back dragons—
their slimy tails
 hook into my tonsils
 and latch onto my words.

I'm being yanked back under
every moment that I think I'm free.

My throat gurgles as I
 swal
 low
 my fears
 and lock them away.

What just fell?
The darkness will never tell.

My cocoon of blankets isn't enough.
 Abstract geometry creeps across my too-small ceiling.

A faceless entity,
some shadowed figure
that looks half-familiar
looms over me and
somehow peers into my soul,
the glass of my coffin coming into focus
and glimmering with the lilac smell of new beginnings.

Words unsaid bur
 row
 de
 eper into my skin,
scraping at my dignity with iron claws.

Windows clatter and shatter.

My nightmares have broken through.

The illusion of peace was far better
than stepping out into the harsh sunlight,
into the greedy arms of Charming.

A Dream I Had

Snow White was tangled between
linen and the smooth legs of death
when she awoke at last.

Yet instead of being naked and free,
she was enveloped in the silk of her coffin lining
and the cumbersome layers of petticoats.

A plain visage loomed over her.
He smiled.
How charming.

She found herself smiling back,
reaching to twirl one of her
long locks of hair,
but it was chopped short,
perfectly coiffed around her round face.

Oh.

“I’m here to save you.”

An embrace.

“How

comforting.”

A kiss on the forehead.

She flinched,
the memory of Hades
jarring her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just

remembering a dream I had.”

He pulled her close again,
burying his face in her neck,
wrapping his arms around her
with the kind of warmth reserved
for your favorite scarf in the winter.

Snow felt on her skin the first sensation of tears
springing from the prince's eyes.

"We don't have to be alone anymore,"
he said, his voice cracking like the caw of a raven.

The princess leaned in,
her heart trying to sew itself back together.

She let loose a sob.
The here and now took hold with a padlock
as Hades faded into the mists of her distant memory,
safely in the vault of things best forgotten.

Original Sin

Blood tastes like cherries and rubies on tainted sinking fangs,
crumbling into crystals on the cold unfeeling ground.

There's no real difference between right and wrong.
All that matters is who's telling the story.

Haunted hearts and sallow skin
stretch over stone walls
like crackled coffee-stain paper.

Dust begins to settle in the old nursery,
maids long gone.

Clutter piles up in the cottage of the dwarves,
Snow long gone.

The fallen queen vomits once more:
her body, her choice.

The risen queen vomits once more:
a baby was coming, whether she wanted it to or not.

She feels the apple and the pomegranate still lodged in her throat—
not in the physical
way,
but is there any real
difference?

Snow picks at her cuticles,
bored of Charming,
bored of perfect.

Lilith licks trifle from her fingers,
bored of hatred,
bored of violence.

Some violence is self-inflicted.

All is born of fear:

fear of decay,
fear of change,
fear of fighting back,
fear of being peeled to truth,

fear of the point of no return,
fear of the thoughts that silence brings.

Snow rubs the shiny plastic-like peel on an apple.

What had one bite cost her?
What had one kiss cost her?
What had Charming cost her?

Lilith rubs the bottom of a greasy baking bowl.

What had envy cost her?
What had revenge cost her?
What had vanity cost her?

Who can say?

“My life, my choice”
is what Lilith says to herself.

“My life, my tragedy”
is what Snow wishes she could say aloud.

The fallen fruit had brought them to this life.

Hades would be waiting for the queens,
salivating at their berry- and earth-scented returns.

Every angel loses its wings someday.
Some just take a little longer to hit the ground.

“You can’t take it with you,”
Hades chuckles.

The queens each sob alone.

They had had their chance to change the world,
but choosing freedom
meant choosing to fall from grace and
choosing to never return to paradise.

A Love Note to Myself

My husband is bringing me breakfast in bed.
My husband was long ago found dead.

There once was someone else, but that's a dream from long ago.
There was never anyone else in my tale of woe.

I've settled for "good enough."
No one else is up to snuff.

I'm told I'm beautiful in every way.
I tell myself I'm beautiful every day.

Sometimes I dream about the soundless nights in the void.
Sometimes I dream that life was something I enjoyed.

My husband is aging. My life is dull.
My hair is wearing down to skull.

I've gained more gems and gold than I wanted.
My home is shadowed, cold, and haunted.

Trembling Hell

Mirrors are smashing;
the gates are crashing;
puppets and purges,
lipstain and lashings—

all masks,
all failed schemes coll
aps
ing
into rum
bling rubble:

fists of flame and shades of shame—
further festering mechanisms designed in her own mind for
desolation of the countryside
but only ended in sore throats and dancing silhouettes in the dark,
hauntings of husbands and courtiers long gone, spattered with blood and bile,
stinking of sickly sweet passion and overripe dreams
spoiling in the sewage system.

Terror retching in intestines,
hollow desire boiling to fiery fever-pitch—

all for nothing,
all for nothing,
all for nothing.

The years since the brat had left
were etched into the caked dust
and mouse holes decrepit with bones.

Lilith's castle is rotting
with mildew and cavernous cobwebs.

*At last,
her heart purrs,
something that finally feels familiar.*

The world plunges into soothing cashmere darkness.
Candles appear in the air,
bobbing like fishing lures,
reeling her out of dismal reality.

The instant smell of brimstone
and the gravel of a warm, familiar voice:
“You rang?”

Snow releases a laugh she’s swallowed for years.
“You and your strange sayings, like always.”

A blush floods her face
in a crimson tide,
her fingers grasping for her hair,
something to cling to.

“Just like I remember you.”
Hades strokes her cheek,
relief etching into his expressive eyes.

“I’m ...”
Blush.
“... young.”

“For now,”
he says with a wince.

“Please don’t make me go back!”
she moans,
tears pricking at her eyes already.

The lord of the dead envelops her with a hug.
“You know I have to.”

When was the last time
she’d heard such emotion?

When was the last time
she’d felt brave enough to escape?

When was the last time
she’d felt in her belly
the rippling desire
for something unspeakably old

yet untainted by time?

“You don’t die for quite a while,
my sweet.

Him on the other hand?
He’s almost gone.”

“I have to be alone?”
Her voice resonates in the hollow chasm.

“Just like your step-mother before you.”

The words rip like burs.

The birds resume their song.
The old man resumes his dying.
The woman resumes choking on her words,
 trying to smell the lingering sulfur,
 trying to remember the feel of her luscious hair,
 trying to capture the image of Hades in her mind.

The king coughs out a chuckle—
death was easing in at last,
an old friend sidling up,
gently saying that he could finally rest.

His sagging skin rises and falls,
ribs mounting like the crests of the sea
just before the succor of daybreak
welcoming sailors to their final resting place.

His limbs grow weary,
sand trickling through his veins
as the hourglass runs dry
at the horizon of Eden
waiting for him
in the sweet cradle of death.

His lungs rasp for the final time,
phlegm rattling in the echoes
of all that has been lost.