

ONLY THIS TORN ROOM FOREVER SLEEPS

Discovery:

We walk down the passage and open the door. Opening the door, we walk into the room. Inside the room, we find the bodies. One after another after another. The bodies hang from the walls on hooks, meat-slabs, butchered. Dressed in what was once called white. Six eyes, all blue. All cold dead. Once Papa took me with him to the market. A boar hung from a hook, headless. Blood fell from its jagged neck into the straw. Drip. Drip. Drip. The stone floor beneath them brown, rust, the leftovers of red. I vomit green on those rust stains at their feet.

Sighting:

She was working in her father's field, hunched over, bare toes dug deep into the muddy ground. Hair pale and waxy as the sunlight. Her pointed face, her wide blue eyes. A peaky girl, my old mother might once have called her. But not ugly, not ugly. Never would I have chosen one who completely lacks for beauty. Muted, pale and muted. Needing scrubbing, a fine dress, that certain hauteur that comes with being called "My Lady." All things I am well suited to provide. And quiet, she was—thin and pale and steady. Ready at every moment to be told what to do.

Betrothal:

He came on his big horse to see my father. My father in his nightdress in the candlelight. I sat in shadows at the top of the stairs. The beard of the count blue-black against the flickering light. Asking Papa for the honor of my hand in marriage, for granting the wish that would make him the happiest he had known in his life. That beard wagging up/down when he opened/closed his mouth. Papa's yes, Papa's eyes on the tip of the count's long beard, fingers opening and closing behind his back, hidden from the count's clear sight.

Fear:

My vomit is thin, watery. It spreads out from itself in a circle. Above the center of the circle, dangling, slippered toes. One is tall, a long nose and close-set eyes. Purple bruises ring her throat like jewels. Another's plump. Opened stomach leaking out between the pearl buttons of her dress, pressing skeins of guts against the straining silk. I do not look at her face. The third hangs farthest from the door. Body suspended from a hook in the back. Head hanging beside it by the hair. Her hair is blonde, long and smooth as silk. I close my eyes. I mop up my vomit with my skirt. My skirt stains brown, then red. I back out of the room. I close the door. Keys in my wet hand, I run fast and then faster, down the stairs and back along the hall.

Joy:

I looked into her eyes and she was not afraid. A wonder, this. Not like the others who have come before her. Sweet pale girls in white, eyes turned down toward their shaking hands. She looked back at me, her cheeks were flushed, and she raised her little hands, and unstrung the laces of her dress.

Memory:

When I was young, a woman fell in love with the man who made boats. She let down her hair as she walked by his shop toward the sea. But he never once looked up. She stood for hours in front of his shop, unmoving. His head stayed low as he polished wood. She stared and stared at the white star of scalp on the top of his head. She wept. So God took pity on her, and turned her into a tree. When the man at last looked up, he said, How beautiful, and brought out his ax. We used to gather around the door when he sanded and planed that wood. It moaned louder even than the crash of the sea.

Lesson:

Nothing is good that has not been tested. My mother taught me this, peeling back the skin of a peach, knowing my tongue itched for the juice I expected to pearl out, leaning forward to show me the mealy, rotten flesh beneath.

Love:

My husband is so handsome that it hurts me. His beard sleek as the skin of a seal. How I love you, I tell him over breakfast, how I love you so. His lips the softest I have ever felt on a man, his beard blue-black as the evening sea.

Spaces:

In this house there is a hallway, at the end of this hall a door. The door is small, painted blue. Paint peels from the door in chips. To this door, I alone have the key. All day, I fondle this key in my pocket. Feel it burning my thigh through the cloth. At night, far from sleep, it is too much to resist.

Hunger:

I have a dream, only the one dream, over and over. They stand in a line, my beautiful brides, my virgins dressed in white. They fold their hands over the fronts of their thighs; their eyes look downward, watching their fingers. I walk the line of them, wearing tall boots, holding a whip. Master. Happy. But always then it changes. My legs falter; I stumble in my boots. Go down on one knee. Then they rush forward, a fast falling line of white, avalanching toward my body. They sink to their knees beside me. They bare their polished

teeth. Devour me, biting slowly, delicately, carefully. Take turns now, they whisper. One by one by one.

Woman/Moon:

At night, the headless woman stands outside my window. She wears a white dress that balloons on the wind like a bell. Her hands float through the air as through water, rising up and sinking down. One finger on the window like a tree branch—tap tap, tap tap. If she had eyes, she would look at me. I stare at the hollow in the base of her throat. Her fingers beckon through the window—out out out they say—the moonlight pooling in the bowl of her neck, where her head should be, reflecting in place of her absent eyes.

Secrets:

Things I do not tell my husband: that I sometimes slip out of bed while he is sleeping. That I sit at the window and look at the moon. That I do not think we will make beautiful children, that his chin looks weak in candlelight. Yesterday, he asked me when was the moment when I knew that I would love him. I did not have the words, the heart, to tell him, This is not a thing I know.

Falling:

My wife walks down the hallway, opens the door. Steps over the threshold and falls into blackness, vanishing like a stone dropped into water. Her skirt floats up past her head as she falls, wrapping around her like a shroud. Its hem and her hair are the last things I see before she disappears from sight.

Touch:

I wake in the night and the headless woman sits at the foot of our bed. Her fingers trail up and down my husband's calf, where it has strayed from beneath the sheets. Stop that! I whisper and sit, try to shoo her away like a fly, a kitten tugging at my yarn. Go away. Shhhh, she mimes, putting a finger up to where her lips should be. Her hand disappears beneath the sheets. I move toward her, but she reaches her arm out and pushes me into blackness.

Bite:

At night, she bares fangs like a cat. Let me kiss you, she says, her small hands strong on my shoulders, pushing me back against the sheets. Not just now, my darling, I say, trying to roll her over, off me, back to her side of the sheets. I am too tired. You lie, my wife tells me, her eyes flat and empty in the faint light of the moon. Her nails press again into my shoulders, and I sink back down against the sheets. Her full lips bend to meet my neck. They part. I feel, only briefly, the sharp sting as her teeth rip through my skin.

Key:

My husband takes me on his knee. He says, I must go away. Again? I ask him, and he nods, one finger wrapped around my curls. Yes. He puts his hands around my waist and lifts me off, stands, takes a ring of keys off of his belt. Keep this for me, he says, handing me the ring. While I am away.

Lock:

In this house, there is a hallway. In this hallway, there is a door. To this door, there is a key. For the key, there is a lock. For the lock, there is a turning. With the turning, there comes an opening. With the opening, there comes a price.

Absence:

He leaves me with a manservant, a cook, a carriage and two white ponies. A large basket full of ripened fruit. He walks out the window onto a cloud. He looks back just once as he floats away. Or there may have been a coach, six black horses, men in gold-trimmed livery standing tall as the fir trees that line the gravel drive, black spears against the gray sky, blocking him from sight. Or a dragon, a charger, a bridle trimmed with polished gold. He looks like a king on leaving. His beard gleams blue-black against the morning light. He puts his foot into a hand, a stirrup. In that carriage, on that cloud, he waves and vanishes quickly from my sight.

Story:

My mother said, there was once a man who ran with wolves. One night, the man got lost in the woods while hunting. Stumbling into a clearing, he looked up to see a naked woman with waist-long hair, claws on her fingers and feet. Struck by her wild beauty, he tried to approach. She turned on him, showing the teeth of a forest creature, curved and brown with blood. The hunter forgot his wife and home. Sleepless and hungry, he tracked the beast-woman through the forest. Hunched, long-haired and ragged, he had become more beast than man by the time she allowed him to join her pack.

Floating:

The headless woman's name is Maryanne. She draws the letters with her fingers in the dirt. Being without a mouth, of course, she cannot speak. She motions with her hands that she has something to show me. We float up from the garden using her skirts like a sail; we land at the end of the long hallway, in front of the locked blue door.

Wish:

To keep myself busy. Slide dried flowers inside glass boxes; embroider handkerchiefs with

my husband's crest. Cut fresh roses from the garden. I miss the manure stench rising from my father's pasture, the moist rush of air from the milk cow's nose. Potatoes, brown and bumpy, being thrown into a sack. Black dirt pushed far beneath my fingernails, staining the palms of my hands.

Door:

I meet the headless woman in the hallway. She takes my hand. With her free fingers, she writes a message in blood on the wall. Come, she writes me. There are things that you must see. The vein in her wrist is open, bleeding. I put my finger in her blood. It is warm, sticky. She shakes her finger back at me, admonishing. Pulls my arm. I do not resist. Together, we stand outside the door. The wood is painted blue. Chipping. From her waistband, the headless woman pulls the key. She puts it in the lock. Turns. We enter, her hand still tight around my arm. The room is dark. There are no windows. It takes a moment before my eyes begin to see.

Stain:

There is blood on the key. I scrub and scrub, standing barefoot on the cold stone floor, my fingers puckered, scouring the metal with a pumice stone. The stone flakes to bits in my hand. The blood will not come off. The tips of my fingers too grow red. I wash until my skin is flaking. In spite of everything, the stain remains.

Cut:

I come back early from my business. She greets me with a bandage on her hand. I am so sorry, she tells me. I cut myself in the kitchen, helping cook with pies. There is blood on the keys, she says, cheeks red. I could not get it to come off.

Question:

I pace the floor while she sleeps. Are my eyes dreaming, or is there still blood on her hand. Yes? No? No. So how can I be certain that she took it? And if I am wrong, how great the cost.

Missing:

When I wake up, my husband is gone. The cook and serving maid, neither of them has seen him. I dress. Do up my hair. In thick boots, I walk out toward the stables. My husband's great black horse is gone from his pasture. The stable boy is asleep in the straw. Alone, I wander the meadow. The wind sings songs at the tops of the pines. I wonder where it is my husband's gone. Once, on the wood path, I think I hear hoof beats. When I look back, I am sure to see him, riding toward me, smiling.

Girl:

For hours, I go riding. I slipped out while the stable boy was still asleep. Not since a boy have I saddled my own horse. The strain and pull of leather in my hands. The subtle cruelty of the bit, the girth. Yet still I thrill to the sight of his round nostrils flared to greet the air. I ride west, to a valley where a tiny village clusters tight against the hill. In an orchard, a young girl picks peaches, holding her apron out like a bowl with her left hand. Her right hand reaches, plucks, squeezes, drops. Rhythmic and easy. Her hair curls down her back in thick brown strands. How healthy she looks, how strong. I stand and watch for a while in silence. Then my horse, impatient, stomps his foot, shakes his neck. The links of his bridle jingle. The girl looks up. Smiles. I lift my hat to her, then turn away.

Sleep:

She moans in her sleep. When she kicks and screams beside me, I gently shake her back awake.

Stolen:

Maryanne pauses with her hands on the blue door. Wait, I try to tell her, stop. Her fingers scabble against her waistband, pull out the key. I reach for it, to take it from her fingers, but she has already placed it in the lock.

Want:

I spend hours in my sitting room, embroidering. Whenever a door opens somewhere in the castle I stop, expect to hear my husband's voice. My fingers cramp and I run out of thread. The serving maid is asleep and cannot fetch me some. Still, my husband does not come home.

Tapping:

Outside the window, Maryanne beckons. Her knuckles brush against the glass. Tap tap. Tap tap. Come out, the curl of her fingers seem to whisper. There is something that I wish for you to see.

Opening:

The door opens.

Recantation:

How beautiful my wife is when she sleeps. It is hard not to relent and forgive her.

Accusation:

My wife asks me, Who is she? after I have refused again to love her. Who is who? I ask. The girl, she says and starts to cry.

Trial:

My wife wears a black dress with a black veil. She sharpens an executioner's ax, swinging it high behind her head. I wake up hard, sweating in the sheets.

Ascension:

She floats up from the bed, her nightdress billowing like a bell. I have something to show you, she says and beckons for me to follow her. I take her arm, and together we float up toward the ceiling, out the window, toward the top of the castle walls.

Safe:

I keep my key in a new locked box. At night, my wife cries in her sleep. When I put my hand on her shoulder, she trembles. Beside her, I keep my eyes tight closed but cannot fall asleep.

Silence:

My wife is quiet in the evenings. Lately, I have not been able much to make her speak. I worry that I bore her, that already she has come to find me old, tired. Dull. My darling, I say to her, if there is anything else you need, anything you wish . . . She turns back from the fire, smiles, but I have lived long enough to know that this smile is only a reflex, a muscular tick, her eyes remaining flat, motionless. I want nothing, she tells me, her fingers picking at the knitting in her lap, shredding into fibers her length of yarn. Really. Nothing at all.

Following:

I begin to see the headless woman everywhere. In the pantry, along the garden's gravel walks. Outside the bedroom window. Always the same white dress, ballooning outward like a bell. Always she pauses, hesitates, as though she wants for me to follow her.

Forgiveness:

My husband's fingers are like water running down my body, his beard the slick of silk. He tells me, From the first moment we met, I have loved only you. In the dark, my fingers close around him. Outside the window, the headless woman taps, but I do not look at her. I pretend I do not hear.

Betrayal:

The headless woman wants me to believe she is my friend. Yet there are her fingers light on my husband's leg. The tight clench of her hand around my arm.

Song:

When I was small, my mother sang to me when I could not sleep. *She sleeps beneath the willow tree. My love, I live or die, I live or die for thee.*

Loneliness:

My wife locks herself in her sitting room, says she wants to be alone. She has stolen my copy of the key. I push my shoulder into the door, slap it with my palms, but no avail. The door will not give; my wife will not relent. I got to bed alone. Dream of the girl from the village, her brown curls, the peaches firm between her hands. I wake in the dark to the sound of her weeping.

Absence:

I left her alone in the castle. A new piano in her sitting room and ten new pairs of shoes. Chambermaid and serving boy. The cook. The stable-hand. The laundress to come at one on Wednesdays. My little ducky, with that key ring to everything. For midnight wanderings in the pantry, for opening the ballroom door. For the library, the pleasure garden, trust. That room at the high top of the northern tower, she is not to open it. My hands on her shoulders and eyes on her blue eyes. *Only one lock, my darling, only one door you must not open.* Sweet, obedient child. She didn't even ask me why.

Punishment:

My husband sharpens his sword, the great blade gleaming four feet long.

Bodies:

In the room there are bodies. One, two. The headless woman releases my arm. High on the wall, there hangs a head. The edge of the neck is jagged, crusted with old blood. The headless woman walks over and stands beneath it. Stepping on a wooden stool, she loops the back of her dress over a hook on the wall. She kicks the stool away. Jagged edge meets jagged edge, a bloody puzzle.

Death:

My husband comes home and catches me as I run fast and faster down the long front hall. He reaches out and grabs hold of the back of my dress. Or he meets me tremblingly

composed in the sitting room, asks me for the key. That bloody stain that won't remove, he knows. Then it's off with my head, and off and off. Or it's a blood stain on my forehead, a mark I cannot wash away. My doomed darling, he calls me, kissing me on my bloodied forehead before lopping my head clean off.

Beauty:

She is more beautiful every minute I spend away. How could I have ever thought her plain? She is loveliness itself; she is grace, divine. How could I have thought her face too pale? Her cheek is an apple, a plum, a globe of polished fruit. At noon, I eat grapes on a plank table overlooking a lake. I think: all the world tastes more beautiful whenever she is here.