

Jennifer Calkins
A Story of Witchery

A STORY OF WITCHERY

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To my parents

Que aman cueste lo que cueste

Introduction

Amy Gerstler

In a sense sickness is a place more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow.

—Flannery O'Connor

Jennifer Calkins's *A Story of Witchery* is many things. It's a personal creation myth and survivor's story. It's part fever dream, part initiation rite, and part fairy tale, with whiffs of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and a dash of *Through the Looking Glass* in the mix.

The narrative consists of strange chains of events and wild environments that entangle and engulf our protagonist, an abandoned child, a raw, peeled soul called Emily. This heroine struggles for possession of her consciousness and body in a dizzying dream world dominated by magic, violation, helpers, adversaries, signs, and wonders. At times, competing versions of the narrative contradict and destabilize each other. The alternate, timeless universe of this long poem teems with communicative plants and animals, female archetypes (witches, mermaids, neglectful mothers), and malevolent male physicians. These doctor figures seek to remake Emily into something less than she is: a diminished, pliant, standardized version of herself that they might find acceptable. Emily's saga is one of a self obliterated and resurrected, of identity's destruction and rebirth, and of a strange, brave journey in which normalcy, deformity, volition, and wholeness are radically realigned in the protagonist's life and being. The book is thus a kind of vision quest of healing, individuation, and self-discovery.

Both poet and scientist, Calkins has an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in biological sciences. She currently teaches evolutionary biology at the University

of Washington. No surprise then, that the myriad fantastical elements in *A Story of Witchery* are based in the natural world, entwined with science facts and twisted clinical fictions. As we tag along on Emily's harrowing, hallucinatory adventures, we are privy not only to the interior of a mermaid's den or a fish and chips shop where the drowned hang out, but also to beach sightings of "flashes of single-celled bioluminescent creatures," and the machinations of physicians who perform sinister surgeries, including one that has as its goal removing Emily's "oddness." There is a sense throughout the book of a furious, high stakes tug of war over the protagonist's soul. Though its own unique entity, *A Story of Witchery* shares with Anne Sexton's *Transformations* and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* the use of fairy tale tropes to explore the darkness and endless complexity of a developing female psyche, threatened on all sides.

In reference to the Flannery O'Connor quote above, there is perhaps an exception to the rule that those who are well can never know or appreciate that sense of being jettisoned from the normal world and the supreme loneliness the injured experience. Via literature, or other art, it may be possible for the unafflicted (who sadly cannot accompany their friends through the rocky terrains of illness and recovery) to nevertheless closely follow the progress of their stricken loved ones, cheer them on, and trail after them, not the whole way, but some little distance into the lands of exile the suffering inhabit. Thus, *A Story of Witchery* is also a travelogue of sorts, providing an acute, surreal, firsthand experience through which the reader can become Emily's companion, witness, and shadow as she navigates her travails and passes through her darkness into the light.

—Los Angeles, 2005

Jennifer Calkins
A Story of Witchery

a story of sorcery, saucy and bold
an open mouth
a flash of white and bone

a bone a bottle
a stream of milk

a story of witchery
in which all stories start

the light turns off click

hissssssssss

Book I

The Book of Red





i.

IN WHICH THE YOUNG PROTAGONIST IS INTRODUCED

in a wild wood
she is sighted

ugly
not lovely

in a wild wood
our Emily

small and weedy
thin and sickly

our
sweet
Emily

she is
beside the path
 next to the path
 along the path
 quitting the path
quieting the path

she is seven
she is eight
she is nine ten eleven twelve
she is thirteen it is time

a story of witchery

ii.

IN WHICH ALL BACKGROUND AND NECESSARY DETAILS
FOR THE INITIATION OF THE JOURNEY ARE DISCUSSED

little Emily
though she knew it not
possessed her own
magical powers

they crept in occasionally
not so she'd notice
unpracticed
unformed

an example:
dust bunnies floating up
and out the window

an example:
snow melting
just before her feet

an example:
rain falling all around
 on leaves and branches
 cars and trucks
 phone-poles bird feathers
 cat fur

but not on her

our Emily my Emily

ugly not lovely
small and sickly thin and reedy
here Emily come here

the man with the blood on his hands

embrace her if you must

iii.

IN WHICH WE HELP INITIATE EMILY'S JOURNEY

now
bright lights and all that

a flash of insight

whoosh BOOM!

and

FIRE!

her house ablaze
her mother her father
inside and dying
burnt to a crisp
no evil parents here
just dead ones

and where is Emily?

out picking berries for dessert of course
a basket a cape, little red shoes
forward she steps and back she turns
lit up matchstick
in hand

iv.

IN WHICH SOMETHING ABOUT THE MATCHSTICK IS
REVEALED

in Emily's time
matchsticks were clumsy things
all sulfur
no spark

v.

IN WHICH EMILY RECOGNIZES THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF
HER POSITION

motherless fatherless
alone in a wild wood

a fire burning
the smell of leaves
burning fingernails

CRACKLE

little Emily heartsick
with the matchstick
she found it in her hand
only that moment

SPARK

smoke tendrils
caressing the sky

*they whispered, it won't come for us
it won't come now will it?
put the children in the box
don't forget to turn the lock
and leave stale breadcrumbs
for your troubles*

vi.

IN WHICH CERTAIN ANIMALS MAKE A POINT

as Emily stood
hypnotized perhaps
a wind crossed her back

and

rush by: a deer
rush by: a wren
rush by: an ant

all singing to Emily
follow us
their love a silent connection
skin to skin

Emily and her basket
standing

rush by went the animals

and with them went Emily

vii.

IN WHICH EMILY FINDS HER PATH AND IT LEADS
DOWNWARD FOR THE MOMENT

Emily followed the animals
darkness
silence settled behind her

the fire's existence snuffed out

so went the house
so went the parents

as darkness fell
the matchstick glowed blue
grew to the size of a flashlight
blue blue light

hot as all get out
but not to Emily's touch

viii.

IN WHICH EMILY REALIZES TWO THINGS

Emily followed the animals
but as she approached
the distance increased
soon they were out of sight

she slowed to a walk
and the blue light fell gently before her

a blue that lit up
brambles and brushes
wildberry plants and tree trunks
mushrooms and spiders

as she stepped a path opened
animals crept or crawled or fluttered aside
vines twined away like snakes
shrubs folded into themselves like hands
tree trunks vanished
and reappeared just behind her

Emily noticed this and thought
there is something unusual happening
is it the blue light
or is it me?

and Emily realized the movement
connected to something inside her
the rhythm was her rhythm
the rhythm of deformity

x.

IN WHICH WE REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT EMILY'S
PARENTS

Emily was born and, in fact
thrown in a dumpster

for what use is a child
with a hole in her mouth?

love can never embrace deformity

so, no parents
in the house that burned

or parents that Emily loved
parents of air and ash and stone
bones of birds and fallen leaves
sea shells and crystals of sugar

Emily was born and thrown in a dumpster
and her mother, who had given her soft hair
a straight nose
enormous eyes
grew up too
losing weight with diet pills enemas gumballs
until she was just thin enough to be lovely
and lovely enough to drift away
our airline attendant
our perfect hair
our diamond ring

Emily was born and thrown in a dumpster
and her father
who had given her black hair
dark eyes
a quiet mouth
did not grow up but rather
died in a car crash on a difficult curve
of route I-70
going east
the radio tuned to the Family Life Network

with the voices of children
not much older than the unborn Emily
singing *here comes Jesus*
echoing through the car
vodka in his right hand
steering wheel in his left
burning cigarette on the vinyl dashboard

kiss kiss kiss the old women whisper

xi.

IN WHICH THE BACKGROUND OF EMILY'S STORY IS
RESTATED AND REVISED

Emily in the dumpster
in the woods
and a trash fire brought it down

the butcher sewed the deerskin to the roof of her mouth

and the Jack-in-the-Box the McDonalds the burritos
and fries the burgers and shakes gathered from the
bottom of bags and styrofoam containers and cups

this
our adventurous Emily
our brave
Emily
walking through the woods
following the blue light

xii.

IN WHICH WE DISCUSS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR

an important factor at that time
was the predominance of rivers
running white with milk

unusual milk, thick and warm
almost cream almost butter
colostrum

Emily followed the animals to the river
drank thereof
and gently lay down
on the ground

to sleep shh asleep

xiii.

IN WHICH EMILY AWAKENS IN A DIFFERENT PLACE WITH
A DIFFERENT SORT OF QUESTION IN HER MIND

Emily awoke from the milk-fed-river-dream
to something new
something startling

as she lay on the earth
dirt and dust mingled with her hair
instead of the darkness of the wood
she saw light
instead of the burbling of the stream
she heard silence

all around her she felt roots of trees
crane to the sky
felt branches
caress the ground

she asked herself, eyes closed
what place is this?

she placed a finger gently against the deerskin
pushing it upward into the hole
between her nose and mouth

xiv.

IN WHICH EMILY STANDS UP AND SPEAKS TO A CERTAIN
SOMETHING

as Emily stood, her head
with a whoosh
emptied itself of fluid
she felt the blood moving
like the milk of the milk-fed river
down to her feet

she felt the bulge of her veins
her arteries

and she was dizzy
but only for a moment

(in that moment something flew by)

shh shh shh the old women hiss

on Emily's left
big and bold but toppled
was the largest tree for miles around
labeled with a placard:

THIS TREE IS OLDER AND LARGER THAN
ANY OTHER TREE,

Environmental Maintenance
by R.O. Shearer
Dust-Bunny Specialist

Emily walked to the tree's roots
which rose higher than the top of her head
roots which reached out
brown and gray
with hairlets and dirt
and little insects
a whole world on the dying brute

the wind whistled as Emily breathed
and she touched the roots
said to the tree
I know you

in the silence and stillness a moment passed

then
all was noise
and screaming
and the roots themselves
twined about Emily's hand
around Emily's arm
surged about her waist
covered her eyes
and, like a starfish
pulled her to their center

xv.

IN WHICH EMILY EXAMINES THE CENTER OF THE TREE
AND LOCATES SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

THUMP

Emily dropped into the center of the tree
cavelike of course
and landed on
and bruised
her bony young bottom

in this, the tree's center
candles burned (surprising, isn't it)
held up along the wooden walls by 13 metal candleholders
each carved with a different figure
a rabbit a bear
a beastie a bird

Emily sat
(not without pain)
looking from one holder to the next
a circular chamber
13 sticks

the floor was wood, smooth like satin
almost
the room was cool but not cold
empty

or empty
except for Emily
and a strange sparkling
just off there to the side

Emily stood
the ceiling was a gathering of roots above
large enough for her head to just clear
was she standing upside down?

the lovely object in the corner
shone with all the beauty Emily wished she had

a lovely glass foot
attached to a beautiful metal leg
polished silver

red foot
ruby glass
clear and shining
small as Emily's foot
and very
very, warm

Emily touched the foot
her hand warmed
her arm warmed her neck
her heart down through her belly
warmed

xvi.

IN WHICH WE TELL A LITTLE STORY ABOUT EMILY AND A
FRIEND

Emily once had a friend
who was missing a leg

(in the dumpster, in the house in the woods?)

Emily and this girl
knew each other from school
both thought the other lovely and crystalline
each found herself too horrible
to think about

this girl, Christine
had a metal leg
bounded by posts
that clutched at any tissue
they could find
a leg that did not look like a leg
but functioned, yes
it functioned

when they played, sometimes
after Emily begged
Christine would take off her leg
(the straps and such)
and hand it to Emily
Emily would run her hand
along the smooth metal
noticing the places where Christine's father
a blacksmith
had welded scrap together to make the leg
for his dear his only daughter

and, sometimes
after Christine pleaded
Emily would open her mouth
wide as a cave
let Christine gently, with a single finger
touch the deerskin

and sometimes
the two girls would just sit quietly
Christine with her leg
Emily with her deerskin
and chew through bag after bag after bag
of sweet bubblegum
given to them by the candystore owner
who felt sorry
for the poor little gimp

xvii.

IN WHICH WE REVEAL SOMETHING ABOUT THE
BUBBLEGUM

Bazooka bubblegum
could remind one
of something like
a lovely ...

xviii.

IN WHICH THE FOOT CREATES ROOM FOR COMPANY

Emily warm
 hand on the foot
 heard a near-silent sound
 a sobbing and sobbing
 growing slowly louder

tickling Emily's ears
 the basilar membrane
 the organ of Corti the thalamus
 the auditory cortex

sobbing sobbing sobbing

boo hoo thought Emily (not without sarcasm)
boohoo

closer until the sound
 was just on the other side of the wall
 loud enough so that not only
 were Emily's sensory hairs vibrating
 but so was the wood wall itself

suddenly the foot grew cold
 suddenly the foot grew light
 suddenly the foot became flatter
 and flatter

like a pancake

then a cotton shirt

then a leaf

then a slip

of the thinnest

paper

as the sobbing ran through a cycle
 the foot
 (and leg)
 drifted through a slot
 between the wood wall and the wood floor

the sobbing stopped

all was quiet

1, 2, 3

whooshh

xix.

IN WHICH SOMETHING OPENS

a little door opened in the wall
right in front of Emily
right beyond the drifting foot
right before the renewed sobbing

through the door Emily could see
silk and cotton in all colors and patterns
woven and stitched to make a patchwork dress
which covered the body of an old woman
a tiny old woman
whose face was lined and red
whose eyes were scarlet from tears
under whose skirt Emily
could just see
two red glass feet poking out

the old woman
grey hair plated and piled
arms bare and flabby
dark as the wood of the tree
smiled through the door
and the holes between her teeth
glowed black

as the sourceless sobbing slowed
the old woman spoke
hello dear
I've come to take you
to the doctor

XX.IN WHICH EMILY STEPS THROUGH AND SEES SOMETHING
BENT

Emily stepped through the door
and the old woman moved back with a rustle of cloth
and something else

on the floor lay a bent key
and as the old woman turned
Emily picked it up and looked at it
just for a second

GLINT

the top of the key was carved with
 a deer
 a wren
 an ant
the bottom of the key was curled and bent
and soft to the touch
into her pocket it went

the chamber was a hallway
long narrow, a short ceiling
barely lit, in red
by candles ensconced on either side

the old woman walked down the hallway
swish swish swish
and Emily followed
breathing in a scent of dirt and mold
and lavender

*those children never did listen
to what their mothers told them*

xxi.

IN WHICH EMILY WALKS AND LISTENS AND TRIES TO
AVOID THE SMELL OF THE OLD WOMAN

in the hallway there was a gentle screaming
a high-pitched wailing
that increased with the distance
from the center of the tree

the old woman continued
as though deaf to the noise
swish swish swish

and every once and awhile CLATTER
as her legs did not stay on well
and would sometimes fall off
and she'd have to stop and reattach one
or the other

(Emily stood back when this happened
if nothing else
the scent of lavender and death
was rather discouraging)

as they moved down the hall
the screaming grew louder
and more precise
shaping itself into consonants
and vowels

*move along move along here's a stitch
in time a needle a needle a heparinized
tube-full we just need a little blood
oops there goes the vein and
another and another
oh dear your arms are so thin
they cannot fit our pin
your legs so thin we can barely
abide them, my
my my drink this and we'll take a
nice nice nice
picture of your insides*

xxii.

IN WHICH EMILY AND THE OLD WOMAN REACH THE
DOOR AND THE OLD WOMAN MAKES HER STATEMENT
BEFORE DOING SOMETHING REMARKABLE

the far end of the hallway, a black ebony door
carved with the head of a deer

when the old woman touched this door
the voices stopped their screaming

what could be heard distantly was

Dr. Smith, Dr. Smith phone call on 9

the old woman turned and faced Emily saying
*this is the doctor take yourself inside
and he will do miracles
and it won't hurt a bit, really
but perhaps just a little bit but that is ok*

now kiss your auntie and away with you

the old woman reached her arms out to Emily
with fingernails and veins
and the swishing continued
and became loud
like blood in the ear
Emily was afraid but only just a bit
and she touched her key
as she leaned over to peck
the old woman on the cheek

at this, the swishing became even louder
and the old woman's dress billowed up over her head
and flew off through the wood walls
reds and greens and yellows flashing then gone
there was the smell of dying lavender on the fabric
and beneath the fabric the red feet
but also something that rustled
something made of skin and bone
rustling because of the insects crawling in

and around, arms and legs growing
as Emily watched
into whole human bodies
rustling rustling with insect lives
little, temporary worlds

xxiii.

IN WHICH THE OLD WOMAN BECOMES A NOVEL OBJECT
AND EMILY IS MOVED THROUGH THE DOOR

the insects and their host bodies grew larger and larger
until the passage was only death
then they vanished
leaving Emily and the old woman
clothed again in her patchwork dress

the old woman said
watch the door to your left
I am neither here nor there
Old Lady Bogul
remember me Emily

then the old woman shrank into her right ruby foot
which grew, then flattened
lifting onto a new breeze
and disappearing into the low, murky ceiling

on the door
Emily saw her mother
(the mother she knew? the mother she imagined?
the fire or flight?)
her mother raised up one hand
beckoning
come in

and the door swung open

there before Emily
(of course)
was a white room, waiting room
chairs, receptionist
magazines: Highlights, Ladies Day, Ranger Rick
and the smell of Simple Green and ethyl alcohol
(and blood and bile and cheap perfume)

behind Emily the wind grew and grew
propelling her inwards
and the door slammed shut

the receptionist looked at Emily and said
do you have an appointment?

xxiv.

IN WHICH EMILY FILLS OUT THE NECESSARY PAPERWORK
AND IS INTERESTED IN THE DOOR ON HER LEFT

although Emily said nothing
the receptionist reacted as though Emily actually spoke
actually said

yes I have an appointment

*yes I am 15 minutes early, in time to fill out
the mounds of paperwork*

yes I have insurance

yes my mother has signed for me

*to be treated for whatever I may have
measles mumps headcold ebola*

avian flu

HIV hanta virus

oh yes

*and yes I understand the copayment
and am willing to give a urine sample
a blood sample
a bone marrow sample
a little bit of my brain
for testing*

*no I am not wearing perfume aftershave or scented lotion
no I do not mind sitting in the brown (stained) vinyl seats
and filling out the forms
on the clipboard using the little pen
(labeled "Lomax, It'll Make You Regular")
no I do not mind the hair on the floor
the skin the little bits of scabs*

thus the receptionist handed Emily the necessary forms
Emily sat in the brown vinyl chair
and began to answer the questions
the 1,003 questions such as

*What is your birth date? What is your age? What is your
sex? What is your gender? Do you prefer top or bottom?
What medications are you taking? For what reasons? Who
prescribed these medications? How much do you pay for*

them? Do you write a check or use a credit card, or pay in cash? How often do you drink alcohol, smoke pot, do ecstasy, scratch yourself in unbecoming ways? Where do you live? Why? Would you like the doctor to use a thin scalpel? Do you suffer from dizzy spells? If you spin do you get dizzy? If we tied you, upside down, by your feet, using thick hemp rope, to the underside of a stone bridge (one spanning the river, built for armies) and left you there, would you feel dizzy? What do you mean by dizzy? Would you prefer to be sedated? If we took a razor blade and scraped it along the top layer of your skin would you be dismayed? Do you enjoy bad, I mean really bad, food?

at the end of the questions
there was a place for Emily to sign
just below the disclaimer which went on for 3 pages and
was illegible
except for the last bit which read:

*we are not responsible for anything unfortunate
that might happen to you
especially if you open the left door*

Emily looked up and saw the left door
the red left door



XXV.

IN WHICH A TONGUE IS INVOLVED

as Emily looked at the red door
something changed in the room
so slowly she barely noticed it
until she was hot, so hot
and dizzy
then a noise from the receptionist

a cough-gag
Emily turned to look
the receptionist's mouth was open
her eyes were closed
and every part of her was still
except her tongue which had started unrolling
it was a very very long tongue
and very red
it rolled out of the receptionist's mouth
down her blouse
across the desk
and started along the floor
toward Emily
who, wanted nothing to do with it
and had stood up
dropping the papers
and climbing onto her chair

the tongue approached the papers
moved over, back
and over them
drooling all the while

the papers shrank until they were little pearls
and the tongue embraced them
lifting
carrying them
and rolling back up to the mouth
of the somnambulating receptionist

as the tongue disappeared
and the mouth closed

the receptionist slowly
opened
her eyes

her face was what it had been
the room was cool again

the door to the left of the desk opened
and a short very fat woman
in a nurse's uniform
looked at her clipboard and said
Emily?
come on back

xxvi.

IN WHICH EMILY IS WEIGHED AND MEASURED AND
MEETS THE DOCTOR

Emily climbed off the chair
walked toward the nurse
and paused
just for a second
to look again at the red door

*soft, can you hear us?
we're weeping
and wailing
and waiting
for you*

the nurse smiled a broad, toothless smile
reaching her impossibly fat hands out to Emily
and led her through the doorway
to the scale on the other side

*off with your shoes
pee into this cup
give me your arm
[squeeze]
step up on the scale*

Emily stepped onto the scale, barefoot
feeling something creep beneath her feet

the nurse clicked the weights
first to one side *oh dear too far*
then to the other
finally balancing the scale at
A BIT LESS HEART A BIT MORE ACHE
and writing on her little clipboard
tap tap tap

the nurse then measured Emily's height
pulling the lever up (after spinning her around)
and resting it upon Emily's head
where it sat cold as ice, and wet

Emily again heard the tap tap tap
and a murmured
too short too skinny too short too skinny

then the nurse pulled her arm
dragging her down a hallway
barefoot
over scabs and fluids
hair and skin
endless it appeared with door upon door
upon door upon door upon door
on this side and that side and this side and that side

after they passed 112 rooms
the nurse opened the door to room 113
pushed Emily inside
and threw a paper towel in after her
saying
*take off your clothes
and put this on*

then the nurse
closed the door CLICK

Emily looked down
she was standing in liquid an inch deep
crouching, she saw tadpoles swimming
algae growing on the floor
and on the legs of the examination table
on the wheels of the doctor's wheely chair
and on the base of the cabinets
on the bottom of the door
and on the base of the metal trash can

Emily looked up
the examination table before her was covered with a
white drape
only lightly stained with brown spatters
and here and there
a dark fingerprint

Emily pulled off her clothes
placed them on the cabinet near the sink
and looked at the paper towel
suddenly it was larger than she had remembered
growing and growing
until it could almost be a sheet

Emily picked it up
and wrapped it around herself

then
a knock at the door
and the knob turned and turned
and turned
and

*Hello Emily
I'm Dr. Morgan*

xxvii.

IN WHICH EMILY PRESENTS THE DOCTOR WITH A GIFT
AND HE GIVES HER SOMETHING IN RETURN

Dr. Morgan was of average height
slim build dark hair
dark eyes
teeth white, flashing
a stethoscope
a white lab coat
when he entered the water evaporated
dissipated, disappeared
along with the algae
and the (nonhuman)
animals

if you'll just sit here
he smiled
lifting Emily up onto the examination table

*so you have been experiencing
headaches and clearly you are
underweight
heart palpitations?
and dizziness?
strange falling sensations?
tinglings?
relax
it will be a little cold*

he listened with the stethoscope
shh
on this breast on this breast
the belly
the back

*just open
say ah, that's good
again
good ...*

in went the depressor
 deeper
 and deeper
 and Emily vomited
 all down the doctor's shirt
 beans and rice
 and speckles
 of bright vegetables
 lovely! lovely!

*shit, well it's ok, it's ok oh shit stupid
 bitch, skinny piece of shit, don't worry Emily it's
 ok this happens to the best of
 never happened to me, pitiful pathetic bag of
 bones, let me just wipe this off, no
 problem, ugh awful disgusting
 how pathetic you people are
 ok, that's better, a little water solves everything
 no problem
 I think I have a good sense of your mouth
 don't need to go there again
 don't want to go there again, that's for
 damn sure! here, wipe yourself up
 ok, that's better, let me throw that
 away ok sit back it's ok, I'll just look
 in your ears now, and your nose, and shine this impossibly
 bright light
 right in your eyes*

for a moment the doctor wrote notes on the clipboard
 tap tap tap

Emily sat, feeling better after vomiting,
 wondering whether
 she heard
 what she thought
 she heard
 wondering whether what she heard
 really mattered

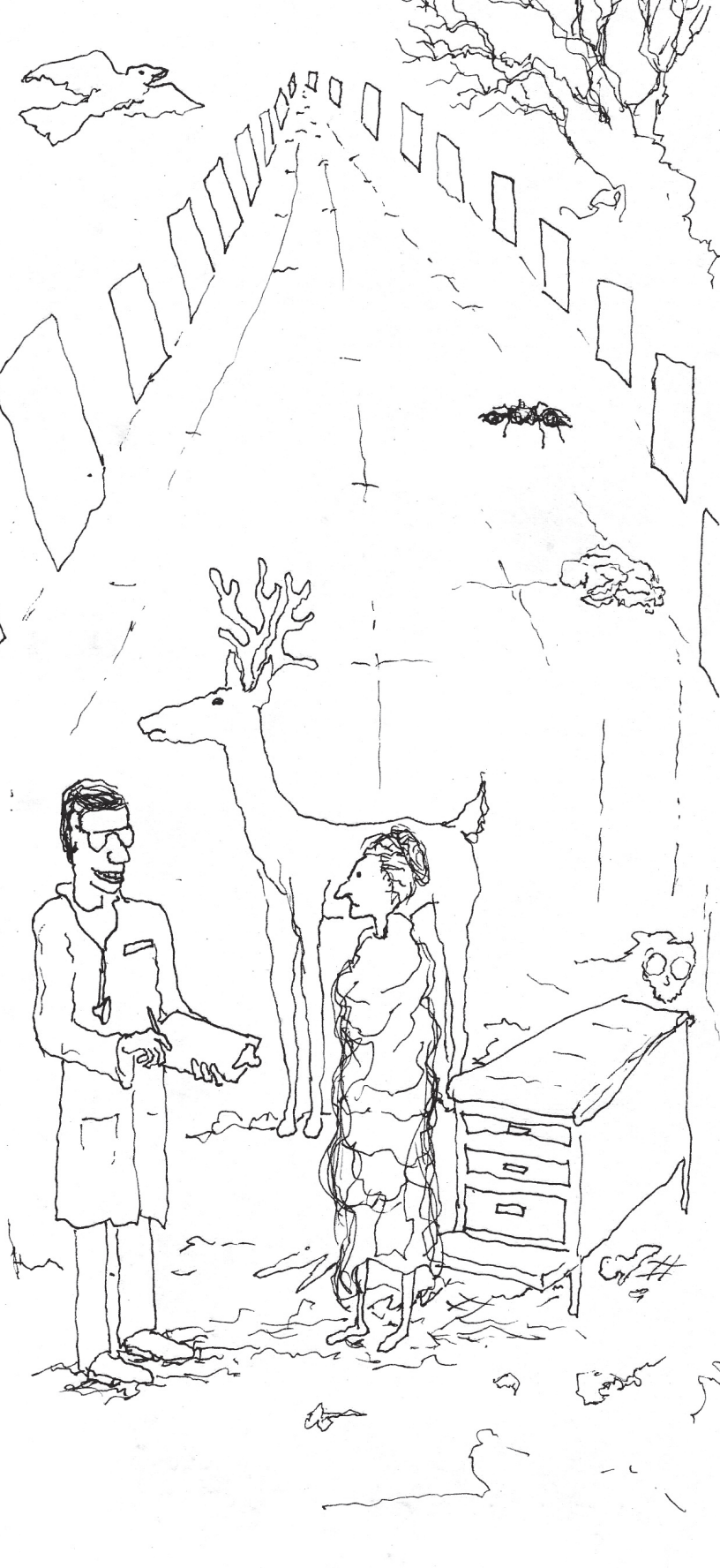
perhaps not

perhaps what mattered was that he was a professional
his little white tag read Dr. before Rex Morgan
and MD just afterward

anyway
what else was there
for her to do

(stay with us, Emily
stay true)

Dr. Morgan looked up
straight into Emily's eyes
for a second, a FLASH
she saw an enormous man
with a beard dark blue as a violet
his hands holding a ring of keys
then
FLASH
he was gone
there was only the doctor reaching
into his pocket
and handing Emily a small bottle
with the words
drink this
something might happen



xxviii.

IN WHICH THE DOOR CLOSES AND EMILY REACHES A
DECISION

Emily took the bottle
as he closed the door
Dr. Morgan said
dress yourself
and stop by the receptionist
on your way out

very very quietly, behind the closed door
Emily heard a whispered *cunt*

she began to dress herself
her black pants her white shirt
her little cape
her red shoes
her basket

then Emily picked the bottle up again
placing it in her pocket near the bent key

she exited the room
walking down past the other 112
inscrutable doors
behind this one a soft weeping
behind that one a quiet wailing
behind this one a loud laughing
and behind that one what?

to the final door
out to the empty waiting room
back to the receptionist
whose tongue
much to Emily's relief
remained in her mouth

you'll have to wait a minute

type tap type type tap

Emily looked back
at the red door
fingering her bottle
her beautiful key

type tap type

*ok, no copayment but 37 shiny American dollars
are needed for the laundry expense...
on your Master card? your Visa?
your Amex? no, cash
take these slips of paper
they're for the various tests the doctor would like
before surgery
go to the hospital they'll prep you in no time
we'll see you back here in four weeks
shall we make an appointment now?*

Emily was not expecting surgery
but that was the way things went
so she went with it

clutching her slips of paper
she turned to stare at the red door
then nervously looked back at the receptionist
who had spun around in her chair
facing the space behind herself
and giggling raucously with someone

Emily turned back to the door
and took the 3.5 steps
necessary to reach it

standing before it
she touched the knob
and found it locked

once more, Emily glanced
at the now-empty cubicle
then turned to face the red door

all was quiet
then Emily felt the three creatures
the deer the wren and the ant
rush behind her back
the breeze from their movements
rustled her hair

she reached into her pocket for the curled key
slipped the key into the lock
and opened the door

xxix.

IN WHICH EMILY DISCOVERS WHAT IS BEHIND THE RED
DOOR, AND THE DOCTOR AND THE RECEPTIONIST MAKE
ANOTHER APPEARANCE ALONG WITH SOME OF THEIR
FRIENDS

the door swung in
and the knob grew hot under Emily's hand
she looked down at a floor
sticky with clotted blood
and looked up at the heart of a blue fire
floating in the middle of the air
a contained fire
surrounded on all sides by space
and Emily
remembering what she had always been told
about fires and oxygen
dropped to the blood-soaked ground
and crawled beneath the fire
which, once her heart passed under it
disappeared
leaving Emily in darkness
with only silently
whispering
voices
to indicate
she was anywhere
at all

*she's just a child
you can keep that away from her
come here Emily
we are here to examine you
to tell you what you are
what you're worth
what you might be, look around
oh can't see, my but you must be thirsty
your sisters are here Emily
waiting, here
the doctor, too
you're thirsty aren't you
sister Emily*

Emily took the hint
pulled her hand out of the blood
grabbed the bottle from her pocket
uncorked it and drank the liquid down

it tasted
and smelled
and looked
an awful lot
like Jose Cuervo Tequila

it made her feel better and warm all at once
something like a dark flame
in her belly
the blood on the floor
didn't bother her anymore
and the lights in the room
started to rise

Emily could see vague human shapes
some small some huge some holding others
some only holding themselves
and two that had to be
just had to be
the doctor and the receptionist

xxx.

IN WHICH EMILY'S EYES ADJUST AND SHE SEES WHERE
SHE IS AND THE DEER ENTERS THE PICTURE AGAIN

after a few moments Emily's eyes adjusted
and she could start to discern
shapes in the space around her

the doctor in a smock smeared with blood
the receptionist
her tongue lolling on the tacky floor
others alive
and dead
all with mouths wide open
cleft palates exposed to the solid dark

her twins
some with bodies some with just heads
drooling laughing
armless legless
eyes on their bellies and ears in their knees
babies screaming babies wailing
babies, their skulls smiling open, crawling in the blood
babies with 3 fingers, babies with 19 toes
big babies, tiny babies, whole babies, broken babies
babies old as history, 1000s of years old
people holding babies and crying and crying
as the babies screamed
and drooled
and flailed around

the 6 year-old
blind baby
her dark hair shining
her eye-sockets empty
her mouth drooling
held tightly
tightly
in her weeping father's arms

Emily saw the cleft palate
of this final child
saw through the face
to the cleft

the doctor, his bluebeard shining
an axe in one hand
with his other wagged a finger

*oh you bad bad
BAD girl
we warned you against the door
yet here you are
well ok then, fine
all the easier for us
time for your surgery
you sneaky wretch
let's get started, babe
come over here
and take a look*

with this, he grabbed Emily
and forced her head around

as her head moved
she saw the eyes of all in the room
reflecting not what they faced
but what she saw
because she was in the people
and they were in her
and her brain was a jumble of cries and screams
and her body felt pain in phantom limbs
and in the back of her head
and in the back of her heart
she felt liquid where there was none
flesh where it was absent

and, in the middle of what was
essential chaos
she felt the key in her hand
heard the sound of the forest
behind her
and knew the deer was there

its warm breath touched the key
which grew
straightened
sharpened
and became a knife of metal
and bone

bone in the handle, love
bone in the hand

Emily turned the knife upward
and plunged it
with all the force of the room full of doubles
up to the hilt in the belly
of the blue-bearded doctor

the deer appeared beside her
nuzzled her
and all else
vanished

Emily and the deer stood
in open darkness
with bright star-like lights above and below
and all around them

Emily looked at the deer
the deer looked at Emily

Book II

The Book of Brown



i.

IN WHICH THE SITUATION CHANGES AND THE LAND
RE-EMERGES

there was no feeling or sense

then

after a moment

the deer, with a slight twitch of ears

a flick of tail

leapt away, all but vanishing

except for the fiery trail of blood

that rained down on Emily

as the drops hit her

she felt a searing

heard a screaming

and her feet pressed

solidly against earth

her knees buckled and she fell

onto a swollen and cracked ground

ii.

IN WHICH EMILY STANDS UP AND HEADS OFF

Emily lay on the ground
her mind her sense coming back
slowly, like a tingling
into her finger her toe
the edge of her ear

she began to see around her
a dry land
cracked swollen broken
not a single plant
nor tree
nor bird
nor powerline nor freeway, airplane
nor mobile home
nor ant nor beetle
nothing but milk-chocolate brown soil
baked into little mounds
ridged and cracked

the sky: blue no cloud
the air: warm not hot

was Emily thirsty? no
was Emily hungry? no

Emily sat up slowly
her head an hourglass turned over
and over

she was bruised there and here
but nothing throbbed
she reached into her pocket
 the key was gone
 the vial was gone
she reached into her mouth
and pressed gently
with a single pinky
against the deerskin

standing up she found the sun on one side
saw the moon on the other
and headed east of one, west of the other
slowly, trudging
but with purpose in her feet

iii.

IN WHICH WE DISCUSS AIRTRAVEL

at this point with tightened security
it should be noted that Emily
a small girl
albeit slightly dirty
would have little trouble passing through
and climbing onto a plane

despite who she is

iv.

IN WHICH EMILY HEARS IT

Emily walked and walked
and walked and walked
walked and walked
and walked and walked

the earth was so thick
nothing gave under Emily's foot
rather, the cracked soil pushed back at her

the sun went down the moon went higher
Emily walked and trudged
walked and trudged

as the sun fell below the horizon
Emily noticed a gentle flash of green
then the sun was gone
and the moon alone
was her companion

as she walked
she began to hear a slight humming sound
soft, barely discernable at first
then louder so in the deep silence
it was like a shock

as Emily crested a sudden rise in the land
breathing heavily
she saw a valley of brown chips
all moving, humming
in a single direction

v.

IN WHICH THE BROWN CHIPS TAKE EMILY SOMEWHERE

the brown chips gathered themselves up
some faster (at the front)
some slower (at the back)
until they became a cloud
powerful, brown, pointed, and humming
a being of chips
looking (yes looking)
up the hill at Emily

and suddenly
swiftly
the pile of chips ran up the hill
out of the valley
and swept around Emily
like a cloud
like a halo
like an aura
Emily was surrounded
lifted on the chips
carried up and over
and down again

during the flight
Emily was blinded
unable to see
deafened
unable to hear
and when she was set down
(gently)
by the chip-cloud
Emily knew her skin was flowering
little punctures
lightly covered by a woody dust

vi.

IN WHICH THE MOON SINGS A SOFT SONG

I see the blood
and the blood sees me
God bless the blood
and God bless thee

vii.

IN WHICH EMILY FINDS HERSELF OUTSIDE A HOUSE

Emily opened her eyes slowly
and found herself
sitting at the top of a jagged hill
surrounded by ragged trees
and just outside a house or rather
a mansion
and a creepy one at that
tall, lopsided, dark, and gabled

ravens
and a little wren
flying here and there



viii.

IN WHICH THE MANSION WELCOMES EMILY IN ITS OWN
SPECIAL WAY

Emily stared at the mansion
trying to pull her rattled thoughts together
(a toe here
a foot there)
she noticed a candle shining brightly
through a leaded glass window
on the second floor

this candle burned blue
bolder and bolder blue
like the torch Emily clutched
so long and far ago

as she watched
the light crept around the top floor
kissing first one, then another, window
finally flying to the bottom floor
hitting the front door
and illuminating the whole house

a blue light shining like a laser
right out through the keyhole

the birds stopped circling and winging
and sat in the trees
murmuring quietly
*a needle a vial a special secret
make her real again and lovely
or at least not so ugly
trust in the doctor in the doctor
we trust*

the door opened and the blue light reached out
enveloping Emily
and, at first, this light was something good
healing raw wounds
patching sad bruises
soothing sore muscles

but in time, the light turned cold
and rather than a laser carrying photons of light
became a ray of tiny ice crystals

Emily, finding herself blue
shivered

knowing the house
was calling her in

ix.

IN WHICH EMILY ENTERS THE HOUSE

Emily, blue and shivering
stood up, creakily
walked through the blue light
to the front door

a brown door
heavy
covered with baroque carvings
of ancient ornate people

*look closer child
these are people devoured by fire*

hanging open

because the light shot out of the house in a ray
Emily was unable to see in
but she smelled candlewax and roses
which rode behind the streaming light
like slower sisters straining to keep up

against this tide, a wren
fluttered in through the door
Emily could hear the creature's
quiet call
echoing through the rooms

and because she was cold
and because of the wren
and because, well
why not?
Emily entered the house

x.

IN WHICH WE DISCUSS THE LACK OF FOOD IN EMILY'S
JOURNEY

you may ask: where was the food?

all the time
foodless Emily
how could she survive?

one possibility:
magic Emily needs no food

another possibility:
skinny Emily accepts starvation

or, maybe, attached to her right arm
inserted into a vein in her right hand
is an invisible iv
pumping nutrients
directly into her blood

at least
we assume they are nutrients
we trust the hand that holds
the iv bag

in the iv bag we trust



xi.

IN WHICH THE BLUE BECOMES RED AND EMILY SEES
WHITE

Emily stepped inside the house
and suddenly
all was silence deep and dark
foamy and fuzzy
Emily was warm
the blue light was off
moments passed before Emily could see

in front of her an entry way
leading to a hallway
bordered by a stairway
to the left one room
to the right another

lit up, now, by pale red light
flickering candles in pale red hurricane glass
attached here and there to pale red walls, textured velvet
a pale red floor, bricks and mortar
red paintings of pale folks gone by
red red red

(a whiff of lavender
of lavender and death
here then gone
and all is rose again)

Emily hears a small noise
in the room on the right
a whizz type of noise
a fizzy noise
like a bottle of soda being opened

the noise is in this room full of love seats
and sofas, chairs, and ottomans
a fire in the fireplace
delicate tables stacked with geegaws
doodads, dancing fawns, and delicious milkmaids
the devil playing cards with a skinny man
a crucifix with Christ bloodied and brown

there, in the back
something bright
white
smooth

xii.

IN WHICH, DESPITE THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE
STAIRS, EMILY ENTERS THE ROOM ON HER RIGHT

Emily entered the room on her right
and stared at the flash of white
but no matter how she squinted
she could not see it clearly
so she walked closer
sneezing first at this step
then at that

on the sofas: no one
on the chairs: no one
on the love seats: no one
not even the faint hint of someone
cuddling his ducky, his lovely polywaddle
none of that
quiet as anything
and red

Emily stopped and touched the deerskin
fizz, snap, and a spark in her mouth
then she walked on to the white

†the devil lays flat the queen of spades
the blood drips down the crucifix†

and she was in front of it
what did she find?
bone? oh no
a rag? oh no
and certainly not a hank of hair

rather a stone smooth
spit-shined
and white as white can be
whiter than bone
(though, we all know bone
isn't pure anyway)

shiny stone, big as a man's fist
too big for Emily to carry easily
but pick it up she must
and pick it up she did

xiii.

IN WHICH WE TALK ABOUT ROCKS

chop chop chippety chop
smash open the bottom and break open the top
what we have left we'll throw in a pot
chop chop chippety chop

xiv.

IN WHICH THE STONE BECOMES WHAT IT WILL

Emily stood in the corner of the room
rubbing the white stone

as she rubbed
the stone began to glow
inside she could see wings fluttering
drops of water
the waves of an unknown ocean
a single falling star

warm warm warm
and smaller now
small enough for Emily's pocket
which is where she put it
these things seem to come in handy

as the stone touched the fabric
a yowling began
a cat buried alive
for good fortune
deep in the walls of the house

†the skinny man lays down the king of spades
Christ steps off His crucifix†

from the edge of her vision
Emily saw something shift in the fireplace
and, as the cat's yowling became a trumpet call
the corner of a gurney wheeled
into view

xv.

IN WHICH WE LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT METALS

typically, if a gurney were sitting in a fireplace
with a fire burning around and through it
it would become rather hot
and would not be particularly comfortable
(or even less so than usual)
for the poor patient

also, the straps on the gurney
used for tying the patient's
arms legs and other extremities down
would burn up

this particular gurney
in this story
is not hot
and the straps have not burned up
but are serviceable as ever
not because of the metal or fabric
of which these items are composed
(they are earthly materials
odd as that might seem)

but rather
because the fire
is something else

remember the match
the fire in the woods?

xvi.

IN WHICH THE GURNEY MAKES ITS GRAND ENTRANCE

a pair of latex gloves
filled by something hand-like
pushed the gurney out of the flames

Emily watched and felt
deep in her belly
something akin to unease

up till now, she was glad to be warmer
happy to have her new stone
and hoping to locate
the sweet sweet wren

but the sight of the gurney
and those powdered hands
sent little tremors along her skin

†the devil pushes the cards away
the thin man keels over
tiny red footprints carpet the floor†

isn't the doctor dead?
hasn't the receptionist drowned?

as Emily waited
the gurney wheeled itself right up to her
made a little bow
and stopped

the yowling was silenced
and the cat crept back
into its skeleton

xvii.

IN WHICH THE GLOVES ARE INTEGRAL TO THE ACTION

the gloves, latex, white
 snappy with powder
 released their hold and moved around to Emily
 one on either side of the gurney
 (in itself something
 to think about)

each glove grabbed an arm
 holding her tightly enough to leave little imprints
 gripping with surprising strength for presumably empty
 latex gloves

Gloves to Meet the Toughest of Challenges

then tossed her onto the gurney
 and strapped her in: arms hands feet head
 blindfold, earplugs

Emily could hear a voice in her head

don't want you to hurt yourself

that's our only concern

just stay still and be quiet

lay prone we'll return

stay away from your head

your sweet face your sad itches

do not sigh do not speak

do not move in slight twitches

Lord no

what we want, all we want

is to keep you quite safe

and...oh dear, watch the IV—

damn it

WATCH THE IV!

xviii.

IN WHICH WE LEARN MORE ABOUT EMILY'S CHILDHOOD

when the horrific hole in Emily's mouth was sewn up
 the town was out of anesthetic
 which was OK with everyone
 except Emily herself

but she was only 2
 and not speaking much
 so it didn't matter what she thought

the butcher
 after he had cut the deerskin so nicely
 and sanded it and softened it and tanned it
 so it was ready
 asked Emily's stewardess mother
 (her father already having passed
 to another level of objectivity)
 to hold Emily down while he
 stitched

stitched

stitched

the deerskin to her palate

needle in, push through
 tweezers up the nose
 hold the needle turn over
 push through the palate

how very nice it all was
 (we had such fun)
 dark chocolate and wine spritzers for the audience
 a big man feeding Emily's mother and the butcher
 for both of their hands were busy
 as one might imagine

and Emily?
 she was a good
 good
 good girl
 stayed quiet and awake
 the whole time

her eyes open big
taking everything in

such a good girl
and she didn't even
cry

when she
choked

on her own
blood

xix.

IN WHICH THE PORCELAIN DEVIL INTERRUPTS

mirror mirror all awhirl
where is Emily my silent pearl
my heart a'weeping my sweetest girl
mirror mirror see me unfurl

XX.

IN WHICH EMILY CAN FEEL HERSELF MOVING

Emily blindfolded
et cetera
could neither hear
nor see
all of her information
came in by smell, taste, touch
through her vestibular system
as her inner ear rocked
and rolled
in time to the direction she moved

though this might surprise you
Emily was not upset
in fact
at some level she was happy
not to have to process much
external information

yes, having her body tied down
was disconcerting
but really, how useful
is the body, anyway?

so she lay there
letting the gloves take her where they would
thinking nothing but
here's a right turn
here's a left
a bump now smooth
on the floor a little
groove and
what is that smell
that faint faint smell

xxi.

IN WHICH THE THIN MAN SINGS AND IS INTERRUPTED

and where is the vile wind
as it blows off of...

xxii.

IN WHICH THE GURNEY STOPS

just as Emily started to know
what it was she smelled
 lavender and garlic? sage and vanilla?
 roses, corpses? burning cloth, ethyl alcohol?
the gurney stopped and jarred her mind
the plugs fell from her ears
the blindfold from her eyes

and Doctor Rex Morgan, M.D. stood
right in the center
of her field of vision
his dark hair was combed nicely
and his white teeth
SMILING SMILING SMILING
he was dressed smartly in his surgical scrubs
with just the hint
the very faint hint
of a brown stain
opening across the front

needless to say
Emily was not pleased to see him
although she was glad neither her twins
nor the tongue-tied receptionist were present

instead, scattered around the room
were seven other, fairly short
medical looking people
with their medical-looking equipment
shining in the glare

the gloves were gone
and she missed them a bit

who do you love Emily?
snow white glow white
who do you love?

but she was glad she was the only
really deformed person
in the room
and relieved the doctor
was not bluebeard
anymore
and grateful he really didn't seem
particularly displeased at her
for stabbing him
with the knife of bone
and blade

xxiii.

IN WHICH THE DOCTOR OUTLINES THE PROCEDURE

*the procedure we will be following
is quite a simple one, Emily
and for it I will be aided by Dr.s Grumpy and Sneezzy
we will first excise some tissue
from around your heart—
that is, of course
after sending you on a nice little dream journey
with some particularly effective drugs
introduced intravenously by Dr. Smiley—
we will then
having attacked the machinery of your deformity
enter the control center, via your nose
using my special scope
which will allow me to navigate
aided by Dr.s Shorty and Skinny
the twists and turns of your nasal canal
past your eyes and ocular nerves
to your beautiful, though sorely misshapen, brain
where we will again excise some tissue
finally, with the help of Dr. Stitchy
we will investigate the cleft palate itself
remove some cells
and make our final decision about the full extent
of your various
and might I add
rather unpleasant
abnormalities
overseeing all this will be Dr. Shrinky
who is concerned both with the
physicality
of your problems
but also with the
chemical nature
of your mental instability
how does that sound Emily?
ok ok, no need for discussion
let's get on with the butchery*

xxiv.

IN WHICH THE INVISIBLE IV IS USED BY A VISIBLE DWARF

while Dr. Morgan spoke
 Dr. Smiley, the anesthesiologist
 began to disconnect the invisible tubes
 of Emily's iv
 from whatever food source
 to which they were attached
 he then hung a visible bottle
 to the invisible hook

and, when Dr. Morgan grew silent
 Dr. Smiley started up:
*a little mixture of my own, Emily
 they don't call me Dr. Smiley for nothing
 my anesthetic is the best in the world
 for speed and lack of major side effects
 (though death is always a possibility and
 darn it!
 the drugs still cause nausea
 and occasional muscle degradation)
 I include in my little mixture
 a lovely anti-nausea tonic
 that may or may not help you
 depending on how really abnormal
 and ill-equipped you are
 you might hope Emily
 that Dr. Morgan will have removed your oddness
 and in the process reduce the likelihood
 you will experience
 truly heartbreaking
 nausea*

by now the bottle was hung and attached to the tubes
 all that was left was for Dr. Smiley
 to open the valve

*black hair blood red
 black hair
 a comb, some ribbons*

*a lovely apple
mirror mirror as young as you are
to steal my beauty*

this he did
then stepped back to Emily
and pressing his hands gently
on either side of her face
whispered
count back from ten, Emily

his hand and the faces above her

(don't pass out)

this might be a bit cold

(they've got knives you know)

cold into the vein cold to the heart

you might smell garlic

garlic

it's all part of the.....

xxv.

IN WHICH THE DEVIL AND THE THIN MAN SHARE A
SWEET SONG

surgery smurgery
butter and lime
a tisket a casket
let's have a good time

xxvi.

IN WHICH EMILY IS ABRUPTLY AWAKENED

nothing (can you feel the nothing
it has a shape
it has a smell
a taste it fills your mouth)

then a burrowing into the head
like the light of a star
burrowing
burrowing
the beak of a brown bird tapping
tapping
a crash
and the bottle
broken on the floor

voices

*get that damn bird
get the wren
get it*

*the bird's destroyed my mixture
it's all over the floor*

*keep your masks on
it's volatile*

Emily's eyes opening
the wren flapping
its bill
 a bloody point
its body
 a flash of feathers

around her the doctors
or the doctors' smocks
filled with smoke
and shrinking fast

except Dr. Morgan
who stood within the shade
of an old woman
with the face of her mother
a knife in one hand
and maybe
just maybe
in the other
a piece of Emily's
sweet heart

xxvii.

IN WHICH THE WREN RELIEVES EMILY OF HER TEDIUM

as the Dr. stood
crying out in rage
and waving the scalpel
blinded by the smoke
from the dissipating dwarves
the wren dove around Emily
TAP TAP TAPPING on her bindings
releasing each extremity with one touch

Emily sat up
and felt warm fluid running down her breast
down her stomach

felt her pocket burning and reached in
pulling out the beautiful
white stone

inside it was a center of fire
that licked flames toward Emily's hand
and as the Doctor approached her
coughing and yelling all the while
Emily threw the stone at his heart
directly at the place where blood, her blood
lightly stained his scrubs

at the moment of impact
the Doctor was swallowed in flames
dancing and dancing
with his scalding hot heart

xxviii.

IN WHICH THE WREN INTERRUPTS EMILY'S ENJOYMENT

Emily watched the Doctor burn
with something akin to happiness
with something akin to joy
with something akin to love
and breathed deep in the smell of flesh
turning to ash

so she wasn't pleased
when the wren poked her in the back
and she found herself
and the wren
in the same outer-space
she had found herself with the deer

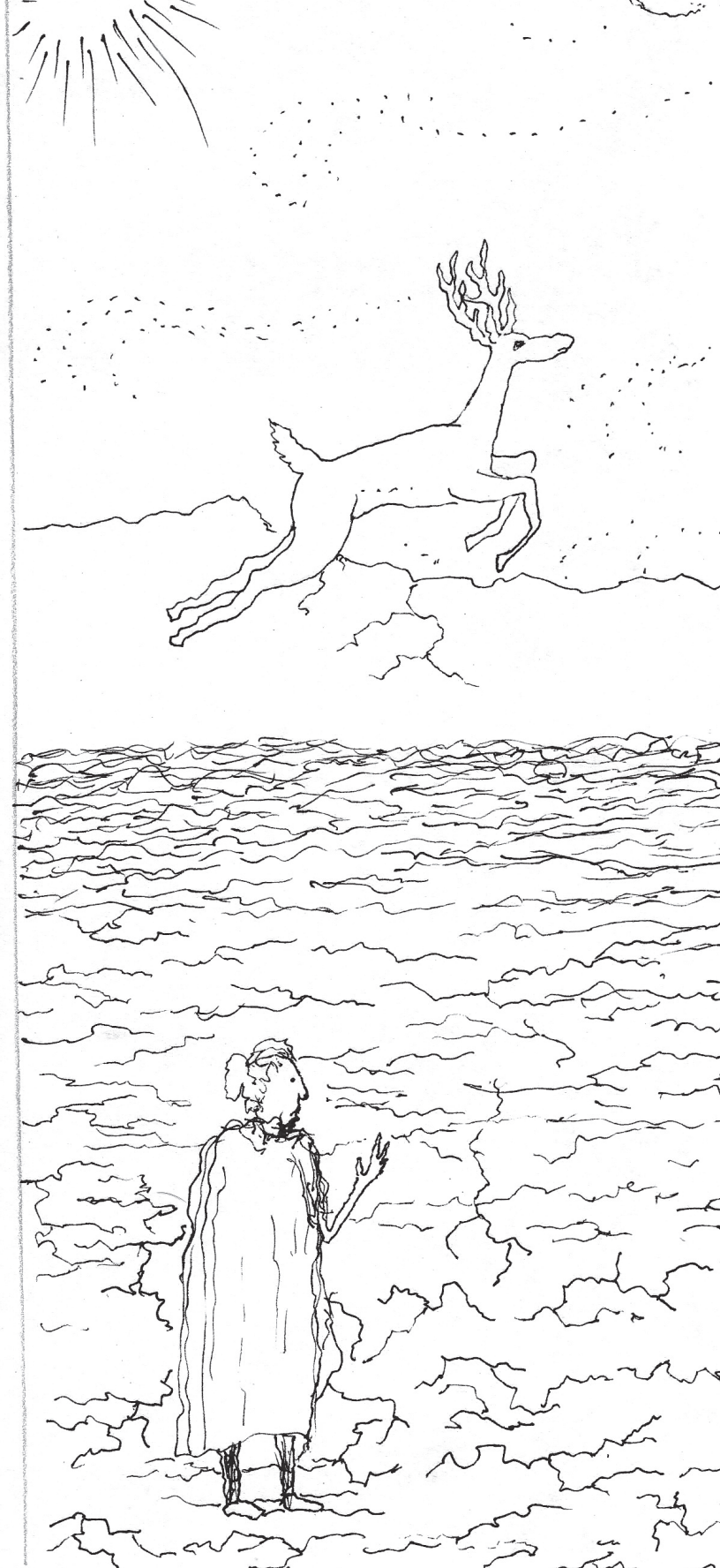
she looked at the wren
and the wren
cocked an eye at her



Book III

The Book of Blue





i.

IN WHICH EMILY LOCATES WATER

Emily touched the wren
and her hand began to burn
and the star and the wren
became indistinguishable

Emily was falling
slowly, then faster
through light and dark
light and dark
until her fall was stopped
by something hard
but that gave a little bit

she felt tiny droplets of water
her ears opened
she heard a distant rushing
her eyes opened
she saw a purest blue
on one side: the sea
on the other: the sea
beneath her:
planks of wood

she was afloat on a small wooden raft
without land in sight
as she moved
she found she was covered
with tiny
feathers

ii.

IN WHICH EMILY ABSORBS MORE THAN THE SUN

as she sat up
Emily felt something stirring inside
something someone else might call
guarded joy
but that she knew by no name

it was the moving up and down on the waves
the spray
the wind
her own lack of concern

(for at this point
you must realize
Emily was not one to worry)

and it was
the feeling in Emily's mouth
of the deerskin quivering
dancing
alive

iii.

IN WHICH EMILY FLOATS FOR A BIT

Emily was happy to float
and watch the sun move
occasionally spotting a large white bird
or the fin of a silent blue shark

in fact Emily was happy to float
feeling neither cold nor hot nor hungry nor thirsty
nor tired nor frightened
until the sun began to set
and the sky played
a bright red color-song

iv.

IN WHICH NIGHT APPEARS AND EMILY BEGINS TO FEEL A
TWINGE

then the night wrapped around her
and the stars broke through
bright as she had ever seen

half the night
was wonderful
and fine

but soon her deerskin stopped dancing
her stomach lightly growled
she felt a slight thirst
and a bit of a chill

as she sat
she wondered when or even
whether
she would reach a place
with real food

v.

IN WHICH WE DISCUSS 2 THINGS ABOUT THE SEA

first. Emily had never, in her waking life
visited the sea
so it is amusing (or confusing)
to note
how clearly the sea
integrated itself
with her

and second. as the old ladies say

*the sea the sea
the marvelous sea*

*you'll see it once
and find your home
you'll see it twice
return alone*

*but see it thrice your very life
will drip with salt
and tar your soul
flay your veins
strip you to bone*

vi.

IN WHICH THE LUMINESCENCE OF THE SEA RISES UP

Emily sat, slightly hungry
slightly thirsty
cold

the water sloshed
with little wakes and wavelets
white in the starshine

on top of the wakes
behind the raft
a flutter of light

oomph alomph wisk

as Emily watched
the flutter of light, bioluminescence
grew into something stable
endured in places
and became something more permanent
than the little flash of dinoflagellates

*here's the riddle of the sea for you
I'll tell you
listen now.....*

Emily forgot her hunger
her thirst
her chill
as the bioluminescence gained shape
lifted itself up out of the water
dripping and flowing
toward the little raft

vii.

IN WHICH THE LUMINESCENCE REACHES THE RAFT
AND TELLS EMILY AN IMPORTANT PIECE OF NEWS

the luminescence reached the raft
and slid upon it
with little tipping
with little water
with a murmur like a thousand little voices chanting
we are here we are HERE
what form
what matter
what shape
what bed what token
what energy
her arms her legs the sky reflects her
how might we be
of service?

at first
Emily saw a blob of light
staining the raft
then it condensed
gathered together
taking a form Emily was unfamiliar with
but that we might recognize
as a type of
mercreature
a quality of the human
a quality of the fish

around the rim of the being's head
a crown of ants crawled
or rather, a single ant
crawling so quickly
its movement created the illusion
of a ring of bright ants

is this the form?
is this the shape?
the energy?
the token?

as the being whispered
Emily felt her deformity looming large
and craved bubblegum
the touch of a cold hand
the soft sheen of Christine's leg

but none of these came
so Emily, instead
touched the roof of her mouth
and felt herself feral and loathsome
dirtier, more wretched
than anything ever imagined

in the middle of this thinking
this ugliness
the beautiful creature laughed aloud
like a tinkling of bells
(of course, isn't it always?)

ah

no

no shape

no form

with the tinkling, Emily's thoughts vanished
and the mercreature changed to an antcreature
and Emily felt better, less deformed
comforted by something other
than pure inhuman beauty

the antcreature said
in a strangely gentle voice
in a chemical voice
in an olfactory voice
once twice here's a third
get ready for the Dr.
the receptionist the nurse
they await your arrival
live to hear your sweet curse

*your mother your father
cannot wait to converse
what you think will be better
cannot possibly be worse
so, darling
clean your teeth
brush your hair
stand upright without err
the faster we travel
the shorter the anguish
the faster we move
the less will you vanish
and if we are quick enough
perhaps
just perhaps
a bit of you
might be saved*

with that the creature disappeared
and the raft caught fire in its place

and Emily turned
and dove into the sea

viii.

IN WHICH WE TELL YOU SOMETHING

Emily could drown
right now and we'd be happy
we'd sure be grateful
for the break

let the rust enter her joints
the sand wash her eyes
the fish nibble her breast

let the deerskin
the luscious deerskin
come undone
and float to the surface of the sea
riding the waves
to us, riding the waves
straight to us

ix.

IN WHICH EMILY MEETS THE SEA

Emily
skin and bones
floating
the sea was warm
not cold to Emily
but Emily is cold to us
cold to touch
so water which would
freeze us to the core
feels, to Emily
toasty
and just right

x.

IN WHICH EMILY FLOATS A MOMENT AND THEN LETS GO

Emily held the edge of the raft
balancing her head
just above the waterline

then
in a moment of decision
hunger, thirst
what have you
Emily released the raft
bobbed with the wavelets
then flipped over
KICKING KICKING KICKING
hard as she could
down toward
the ineffable bottom
of the sea
down toward
the center of the thing
that dragged so heavily
upon her

as she gained in depth
she moved faster
and faster
like a diver with a weight belt
downward
centerward

all about her
tiny flashings
flittings
and the caress of something floating
dead
half eaten

xi.

IN WHICH EMILY TOUCHES DOWN

how long did Emily kick?

*long enough to know
what's really good for you*

forever, or at least
for a lifetime
little Emily's
lifetime

till she collapsed onto something
more solid than water
silty, disturbed
flitting up and around her

dark
a complete lack
of terrestrial light
there in perfect blackness
perfect pitch

xii.

IN WHICH EMILY IS DIRECTED TOWARD THE MERMAID'S
LAIR

yet again

Emily suddenly saw a light

larger than the bursts of unicellular creatures

more permanent than photons from luminous jellyfish

this was a light to call her

and she walked obligingly

to the light

blue in the depths

squish squish squishing

on the silt and occasionally ruffling the skin

of some irritable worm

xiii.IN WHICH WE PRESENT A LITTLE BACKGROUND FOR THE
IGNORANT

once, there were hundreds of
thousands of
merpeople
Homo aquaticus
perfectly equipped
for life at every depth
able, occasionally
to leap like seals onto rocky California coasts
and comb their long
fine
hair

and while mermen were not much interested
in the flesh of female
Homo sapiens

mermaids
had a strong taste
for the flesh of human males

perhaps the ease of capture
of tumescent young men
increased their taste for them
in other words
the more you eat
the better it tastes

(remember Emily's father
whizzing around a corner
singing *I'm not afraid to say*
I love Jesus
picture him in the arms
of some creature
half-human half-fish
see what we mean?)

sometimes these mermaids copulated
with their masculine prey
spewing egg after egg
a few to be inseminated
by the male's small squirt
of semen

one, once, survived this hybridization
becoming Hans the Mermaid's son
strong as 6 men and twice as carnivorous

Hans spent a short time on land
but, finding it dull
returned to the sea
back to his mother
a beauty unrivaled
by any terrestrial woman

it's the meat eater in me that looks so luscious

xiv.

IN WHICH EMILY FINDS THE CAVERN

here
not deep ocean
but rather something deep
and something else

Emily

cold child why are you so cold?

trudged along the seafloor
breathing
did we forget to mention that?
breathing because someone
wanted her there

on either side

FLASH

a group of tiny squid
all colors and light

FLASH

gone again

toward the light she trudged
faced it and saw its form
emerge out of the darkness
a beam traveling out the lips
of an open cavern

the mermaid's den

xv.

IN WHICH EMILY ENTERS THE DEN

Emily entered the den
floating in on the beam of light

a slight skeleton to her left
coral to her right
a reef stretching into the distance
fish jellyfish octopi

in front
towers and palaces
crypts and catacombs
and light

beyond the spotlight
bright as daylight
everything pearl
and mother of pearl
brilliant and soft

the mermaid swam slowly to Emily
not the bioluminescent ant mermaid
but another, true, mermaid
wreath of coral
crown of shell

xvi.

IN WHICH WE DISCUSS THE SPOTLIGHT

the mermaid's light was produced
by a huge searchlight
previously possessed by a man
in San Diego, CA

it had come to the mermaid's possession
after he had tossed it
and himself
into the water
off La Jolla Cove

DEAD MAN'S LEAP

he'd had a particularly bad
run of luck
selling snuff
and straight-up pornographic films

when he discovered that his lost love
and her unlovely death
lived on one of the reels he'd acquired

he took himself down to the cove
clutching his advertising spotlight
and found himself looking deep
into the eyes of the mermaid
that floated below
waiting hungrily

xvii.

IN WHICH THE MERMAID REACHES EMILY

as she swam
the mermaid
stirred up little currents of water
which stretched around Emily
caressing

and when the mermaid
was touching distance
kissing distance
Emily herself was relaxed
sedated
in a way that felt lighter
than other sedations
in a way that felt oddly
appropriate

so when the mermaid reached out a long arm
and grasped Emily by the hand
Emily did not flinch
rather, she grasped back gently, not as though
she were drowning
but as though she were
rising up
in need of steadying



xviii.

IN WHICH EMILY ACCOMPANIES THE MERMAID INTO AN
EATERY OF SORTS

the mermaid pulled Emily toward
the towers and the castles
leading her deeper into the den

all around
brightly colored fish swam
angelfish wrasse pufferfish
clownfish
an eel or two poking a wild-eyed head
out a hole

and crabs and jellyfish
squid and octopi
a shark or two
smiling smiling smiling

all conducting business happily
(or less so when eaten)
paying little
no
attention to Emily
or the mermaid
except an occasional
glance their way

after they passed elaborate homes
and wove between the gates of a castle
Emily and the mermaid ascended pearly stairs
to a doorway

they entered and found
much to Emily's surprise
a fish and chips eatery
just like one you'd find
in Brighton or Dover
the north shore of Boston
the craggy coast of Wales
on any cloudy dreary day

dark paneling
dark benches
and behind the lit counter
an enormous man in white apron and hat
taking and delivering orders
for the multitude of sailor types
in all phases of dress
scattered around the room

the mermaid turned to Emily
and said, in the loveliest of voices
fish chips and stout
what more could you ask for?

xix.

IN WHICH EMILY SITS AT THE END OF A BENCH AND
LOOKS AROUND

the mermaid excused herself to the restroom
and Emily carried her food to the end of a bench

she placed her tray on the old table
a bone of a table
littered with writing-like stains
“Blackbeard was here”
“Ishmael was a liar”
“the Wake of the Medusa rides on”

Emily spaced herself, intentionally
away from the other customers
in this waterlogged fish and chippery
because
simply
she had nothing much
to say to them

at the other end sat three persons
in modern yacht-wear
1 woman, 2 men
(topsiders, khakis, polos, and zippered windbreakers)
apparently ready for an easy sail 'round the bay

next to this group
sat a gentleman in what looked to be
the 19th-century uniform of a Post-Captain
from the British Royal Navy

this captain was deep in conversation
with a woman
an Ophelia
radiant and floral
from some 3-dollar version
of Hamlet

at other tables were more of the same
Viking sailors, kayakers from Port Angeles

Alaskan crabbers
pirates of all nationalities
Australian aborigines, Roman oarsmen
Amistad slaves and their newborn offspring
Elizabethan mariners
Chinese fishermen
hopped-up catamaran sailors from the 20th century
and 'round-the-world sailors from all times
and all places
people dead in heavy weather, in calm seas
in rotten vessels, in fiberglass schooners
dead in warships and peaceships
new ships
and old
people dying in salt water
and fresh water
in pools ponds
and bathtubs
the waterlogged dead
all enjoying their food
gulping their beer
toasting their loves
the bloated deceased
all tied to one another
by a deep dark
marriage to the waves

xx.

IN WHICH SOMETHING IS EXPLAINED

so

Emily is eating food
underwater
and the food is neither
floating
nor soggy
*(oh those lovely
lovely crispy salty
chips)*
Emily can hear
and speak
and breathe
no bubbles
no difficulty

and persons without
homes
or bones
wander proudly
full of shape
and pride

think about it

xxi.

IN WHICH EMILY EATS FISH AND CHIPS DRINKS A STOUT
AND IS APPROACHED BY A SHORT MAN

Emily chewed and sipped (with great satisfaction)
and as she thought to herself
how nice the vinegar tastes
on these salty chips
one of the entities approached her
walked to the opposite side
of the table
and sat down

a very small man
a very thin man
a very tan man
a very wrinkled man
a man with hands sliced by knives
a man with two rolling blue eyes
a man with a dagger and a cotton shirt
embroidered with flowers
with birds with bees
loose knit pants no shoes
feet covered with dirt
long blond hair
a voice of snow

xxii.

IN WHICH WE SING A LITTLE SONG

yo ho ho
and a bottle of rum
rum tin tinny
here's to some fun

the tunny's in the water
the crabs are on the wall
the girl is netted carefully
for the joy and use of all

xxiii.

IN WHICH EMILY FINALLY SPEAKS FOR HERSELF

Emily, licked her fingers
 and felt a surge
 of irritation
 of frustration
 and a slight bit
 of indigestion
 she stared at this, yet another
 uninvited acquaintance
 after a long line of uninvited
 acquaintances

and said
enough!
are you here for some surgery
or to scrape up my arm
are you planning quite carefully
as you mean me no harm?
will you pierce me with prickers
or ask stupid questions?
burn me
fry me
grind my heart down to nubbins?

where should I go
what should I be?
where will you send
this aching
this me

is what you have lovely
a greening wide sky
or anesthesia
solace?
a bottle of sigh?

Emily would have kept asking
 question after question
 had the little man not interrupted
 in his snow-white voice
 and said

*No boneless child
I'll take you to neither
doctor nor nurse
(though Rex Morgan is close)*

*no, my dear
it's time for your mother*

xxiv.

IN WHICH EMILY DECIDES WHO TO TRUST

at this, the mermaid returned
and though a bit of blood dribbled
from the corner of her mouth
Emily was comforted
and knew that if the mermaid
trusted this little man
she would also trust this man

whose name she found
was Arnold Arnivan
sailor extraordinaire
and
incidentally
Old Lady Bogul's
delightful little nephew

XXV.

IN WHICH EMILY TAKES THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD THE
END OF THIS PARTICULAR JOURNEY

the mermaid held out to Emily
a 5-pointed star
mother of pearl
carved with images
of a wren, a deer
and in the center
an ant

Emily
as usual
pocketed the luminescent star

and Arnold Arnivan
reached out a hand
that was deeply tanned and scarred
and wore, on the back
a tattoo of a star with 5 points

Emily, after a glance at the mermaid
accepted his hand
accompanying him to the back of the eatery
through the kitchen teeming with vats of oil
and littered with blood and bones

to the back door
black door
obsidian perhaps?
or ebony
ice-cold and heavy
but pushed open easily
by the little man

xxvi.IN WHICH EMILY AND ARNOLD ARE IN A HALLWAY OF
SORTS

Emily and Arnold
emerged into a hallway of sorts
a glass tube
thrust through the center of the sea
ocean above
ocean below
ocean to the right
and the left

towers and turrets
crypts and halls
all visible through the glass

the oceanic bioluminescence lit up the tunnel
making it wondrous
lovely
an unstricken place
Emily was gladdened
and her deerskin danced
she followed Arnold happily
for several steps
one two three
four five six

but
perhaps after they'd passed through
a third of the hallway
the tube darkened a bit
and something began
to push its way up
Arnold's back
something lumpy that moved
under his shirt, emerged at the waist
and crept slowly
to perch on his right shoulder

this crude shape gave a squeal
a little bit of laughter
gave several small yelps
all which reminded Emily
of the sound of a saw
amputating a leg

xxvii.

IN WHICH AMPUTATION IS DISCUSSED

yes, Emily had once attended
an amputation
her father was so thrilled by the sport
he felt bringing Emily
to the site
might be a source of filial bonding

(before the curve in the road?
or, perhaps
after?)

when Emily turned away, for a moment
from the child losing her leg
to the slow work of the saw
her father gave her a little punch to the ribs
as if to say
don't let me down now, love

and Emily turned back quickly
staring pointedly at the tourniquet
instead of the saw
and thought
how happy he'd be
her father
if he could cut me open
with that bloody saw
and take out whatever it is
he finds so embarrassing

xxviii.

IN WHICH A HEAD EMERGES

suddenly
a head poked up from the lump
a small wrinkled fetal head
bottle head jar head
toothed with vampyrish long canines
and wearing pointed ears filled with tufts of brown hair
the same hair that flowed
from the top of its head

the lump moved its golden eyes
and rested them on Emily

as the creature stared
Emily grasped her star so tightly
her fingers ached
then the thing leapt
off Arnold's shoulder

and flew to her face

whispering
*I'm your momma
I'm your daddy
I'm the woman
down the alley
hey babe!
you're my lucky star
and I'm the luckiest by far
welcome to the jungle
we got treats and games
you are little Emily
yes we know your name
once you killed
twice you tried
weakened yes
but still alive
ah, hello
let's have a look
at that deerskin*

the being latched to Emily's face
smelling of rot and ancient enmities
and swiftly it crawled into Emily's mouth
fusing with the deerskin

all this with a shout of laughter
a bit of bleeding
some tears from Emily
and some shaking

then
Arnold turned around
saying
well
come on now

and Emily, her hand cramped around the star
dreamy Emily dazed Emily
moved forward
forgetting the creature was now in her mouth
and that this, perhaps
was the most confusing challenge
of all

xxix.

IN WHICH WE RAISE THE ISSUE OF THE DOUBLE

we suggest the being is a
 doppelgänger
 which, yes, is Emily
 but is also something else indeed

*little wonder little changeling
 crawl into your crib*

when her mother fed her, gently, so gently
 did Emily respond in kind
 or did she bite and chew and tear
 in this way find
 a house
 a dumpster
 a habitation
 of her own sort

*little changeling how lovely
 you've become*

who replaced the perfect baby
 with this misfit this Emily
 this hole-in-one
 this eroded deformity?

our doppelgänger is far more perfect
 and complete

the god you love that loves for anger
 looks down on his deformed ones and says:

YOU, LITTLE ONE, HAVE EVIL IN YOUR HEART
 AND FOR THIS I WILL FORM
 A HOLE IN YOUR MOUTH
 AND LEAVE YOUR BODY FOREVER FALLOW

XXX.

IN WHICH EMILY FOLLOWS ARNOLD TO THE END OF THE
GLASS TUBE

Arnold continued to walk ahead
(he knew or didn't know about the creature
either way he responded
not at all
and in this the question of innocence
may be raised)
until he reached a door at the other end of the hall

Emily and Arnold stood
at this door
a door of deep blue, chalky blue
Titian blue
a blue to fall into
a blue that moved through itself
presented itself as an amalgamation
of all the dyes of this life
little molecules so radiantly active
they nearly pulled apart
and exploded
a blue holding chaos back
so effectively
chaos was the only marker
by which it could be measured

in this blue
Emily was ageless
counting back from day 4746
to her day of expulsion

when she reached day 0
Arnold turned his beatific eye to her
radiant with the reflection
of the door's deep blue
and said
*now Miss Emily
no knives (yet) I promise
just a little visit now
with people you know
and people you love?*

Emily accepted Arnold's hand
and in a wash of odors
Arnold became the Old Lady Bogul
and the old woman became Arnold
and each became free-floating hands
free-wheeling gloves

the mermaid hovered near
and a scent of death was close upon them
the wailing of the dying
the howl of one's own end in a mirror
reached Emily so intensely
she stepped back with a shudder

Arnold vanished
and in his place she saw an ant
which paused
and then quickly crawled
under the door

xxxi.

IN WHICH THE BLUE DOOR REVEALS SOUNDS

Emily stood in front of the blue door
quietly, waiting
while scents
and sounds
edded round her like flotsam

she reached into her pocket
the shell-star was warm
pulling it out
she saw it glowed
with mother-of-pearl rainbows
as she held it up to the door
the door shuddered
unraveled like a ball of yarn
sank down as blue powder
blue snow
fall leaves
and vanished

Emily was in front of a dark cave
from which emanated sounds like groans, like moos
the hum of machinery and soothing voices
cries again
and the smell of all that is hospital
all that is sterile
all that is beneath

as Emily entered the room
the little doppelgänger
shifted in its deerskin pouch

xxxii.

IN WHICH EMILY IS REUNITED WITH HER MOTHER
AND FATHER, AT LEAST FOR A MOMENT

to put it plainly
Emily was in a delivery room
(in a cave in the bottom of the ocean
tickled by a doppelgänger and accompanied
by a solitary ant)

on the table lay her mother
feet in stirrups
swimming in sweat
on the side of the table
stood her father
holding her mother's hand

the room was flooded
with various machines
humming beeping blinking
and
a nurse
an anesthesiologist, Dr. Smiley
and a doctor
yes
our old friend
Dr. Rex Morgan
M.D.

Emily continued to approach the table
and smashed into something hard
clear and glass
the one-way side
of a one-way mirror

so
this is Emily's reunion
with her parents
this, the celebration
of her own birth

here she comes
whoop
and slip
and a bucket of fluid

*let's get that mopped up
tee hee hee*

xxxiii.

IN WHICH BABIES AND CHANGELINGS
AND OTHER THINGS BECOME APPARENT

a tiny redness
(really quite small for all the fuss)
leapt into the hands
of the good Doctor

her father looked down
saw her redness
her open mouth
her compressed body

her mother looked down
and saw beauty
beauty alone

the Doctor looked down
saw nothing
and casually cut the cord

he handed the little thing to the nurse
who idly slapped
at the newborn's bottom
a few times

as the placenta climbed its weary way out
something tiny moved quietly in the room
something that had tufts of hair
and pointed ears
something that floated to the baby
and touched her

at the touch, the baby stopped breathing
after a moment the nurse noticed
and signaled to the doctor
who realized that the child
had swallowed her own tongue
that the child, in fact
had a hole in the roof
of her mouth

and, as he pulled her tiny tongue forward
he shook his head tsk tsk tsk
and murmured
*well this is just the start
your child has a cleft palate
no doubt accompanied
by a host of other deformities
and serious problems
mental retardation, regression of the limbs, blindness
deafness, juvenile senility, psychopathic behavior
murderous behavior, serial killing sorts of behavior
well too bad these things happen
must say it's not my best result
I'll leave you to ponder your various fates
and we'll take this little one to the nursery
while I move on
to a more
hopeful
delivery*

xxxiv.IN WHICH EMILY READS UNWILLINGNESS
AND SOMETHING BURSTS

Emily's father mouthed
changeling
and her mother nodded
forgetting the beauty
thinking only about the hole
and what the hole meant
for the rest of one's life

especially now that Emily's father
was on his way out the door
out of the hospital
out to his car
with nary
a look
back

when it's time to go
it's time to go

in this moment Emily's mother
alone in the room
conceived of an airplane
brilliant and beautiful

she stopped her crying
and started to dream about airplanes
their bulleted beauty
she lay on the gurney
with fluid still seeping
and imagined great metal beasts
while she
stared stared stared
at the ceiling

until Emily
behind the glass
could stand it no longer
and willed her father to return

willed her mother to come back
to drag herself up
to call for her only daughter
as though the little baby
cleft-palate and all
still mattered
was still beautiful
and with a cry of vexation
Emily yelled
wept
her eyes huge
and swollen with frustration

the glass barrier shattered
her mother disappeared
the delivery room disappeared
and the smell of disinfectant disappeared

Emily was in a cave
up to her knees in seawater

XXXV.

IN WHICH THE ISSUE OF EMILY'S DOPPELGÄNGER
IS DISCUSSED

Emily's doppelgänger
or what you might call
changeling-maker
was still in the deerskin

but Emily's emotional outburst
made the environment so unpleasant
the creature began to move
to try to pull away from the deerskin

however
this was less simple than one might suppose
for rather than coming disassociated
the movement merely increased Emily's discomfort
jarred her sinuses
poked her brain
until she remembered
the thing and the changeling

and Emily pulled her star from her pocket
shoved it into her mouth
and RIP RIPPED RIPPED
at the deerskin
tearing flesh from the creature
and as blood burst out of her mouth
she found herself in a joyful rhythm
plunging plunging plunging
the star
deep into her palate

as the star continued its mutilation, the creature
with a wail
finally came disentangled
and Emily chose something
akin to ashes

*ashes my dear
ashes on the sea for your love*

Dr. Morgan rushed into the cave
while the fat nurse
scuttled in behind

he rushed up to Emily
grabbed her arms
and yanked them away from her palate
while the nurse
reached deep into Emily's mouth
grasped the creature
and pulled it out

it was wet with blood
limp and lifeless
hysterically, the nurse
began to rock the creature
crying vividly
and the doppelgänger melted away
into a piece
of rock candy

clear, uneven
crisp, and sweet

xxxvi.

IN WHICH WE MENTION THE BEAUTY OF ROCK CANDY

in the big rock candy mountain

Emily and Christine

share that final song

Christine is leaving

and Emily well...

Emily

sugar cracks beneath her nails

xxxvii.

IN WHICH THE DEERSKIN IS HANDLED BY THE DOCTOR
AND THE ANT DOES SOMETHING INTERESTING

with one swift movement
Doctor Morgan loosed Emily's hands
prying open her mouth
in a rage of irritation

she could see in his eyes the reflection
of the bones of the drowned
she hoped the knives were away
because somewhere
she knew
she was sitting in a dumpster
alone now
quiet, alone
and she let him press the deerskin
back into place
let him withdraw his hand

she let him
and the nurse
turn and leave the room
without stabbing them with the star
a little funeral procession
exiting the cave

then, looking down, she saw the ant
crawling up her leg
moving toward her right ear
where it
after nipping her gently
situated itself carefully
and began to whisper in a voice
so full and calm
Emily found herself relenting

the star
the star
pull out
the star

dear Emily
we love you so
we do
love you so

with this Emily looked
at the blood-encrusted star
felt a sudden strong revulsion
and tossed it
far away
down the passage

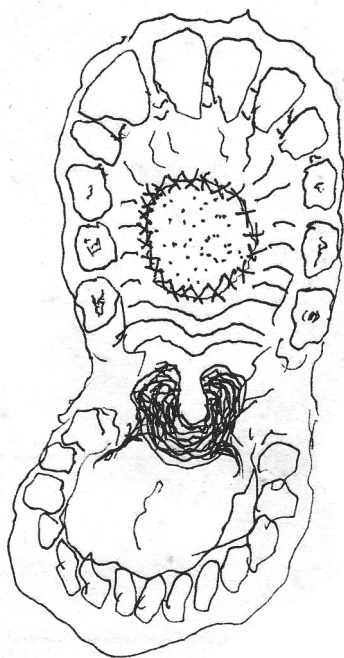
CRASH

and

BOOM

an explosion
a rocking of the cave
and Emily and the ant
were tossed upward
beyond the water
beyond the land
into dark sky
surrounded by stars

And Then...



i.

Emily
after floating with the ant for a bit
felt a second nibble in her ear

this was the ant
saying farewell

and, as Emily fell
the ant
the wren
the deer
were cast into the sky
as constellations

ii.

upon touching ground
Emily recognized the banks
of the milk-fed river
and knew she was quite close
to the burned cottage
the smoke had ended
all was quiet
no more animals
rushed past her

Emily sat up, very thirsty
and dipped her hands into the river
drinking again
slow and long

iii.

this time
rather than feeling a change in location
Emily found that the blood
crusted around her mouth
was gone
and that the milk
had inculcated itself
into her cells

and she was healed

you might say

the deerskin was fused
with her palate
cell to cell the deerskin and her skin
became one
(yes, cells with two nuclei
but cytoplasm fused, nonetheless)

this was not an easy process
rather it was a painful process
a holding of a hand quite close to, just in
an open flame
like they say to do
if you wish to know of hell

luckily, Emily's burning sensation
didn't last as long as hell lasts
(the removal of a grain of sand every hundred years
by a single sparrow
from a long cold beach
a million times over)

rather this lasted 2.3 minutes

long enough for Emily to become dizzy
to feel as though she would either vomit or pass out
to feel very hot, then cold

to open her eyes
head on the ground
the burning ended
the cells fused

iv.

Emily stood up
brushed herself off
and turned back toward the cottage
where the shadow of the flames leapt up again
and licked the sky like dark petals
gathering themselves into
a single
glowing
flower

Emily reached toward the flames
and plucked the flower
from the sky

as she did so
the three constellations
The Deer, The Wren
and The Ant
winked on and off and on again
and Emily
watching them quietly
for once, in this moment

smiled

v.

and then...







Postscript

I see through a mirror, in the dark / I predict a place that
no one else has known.

—Alejandra Pizarnik, trans. Yvette Siegert

i.

A Story of Witchery is a township in my Kingdom of the Self, an alternative reality forged out of early trauma, shaped by historic and generational violence, and populated as I aged by the banished. As such, I am Emily, but I am also Dr. Rex. I am the parents and the nurses; I am the mermaid and the men she consumes. Perhaps the only beings that are not reflections of me are the wren, the ant, the deer, and the tree. For those are the more-than-human beings who have brought and who bring solace into the otherwise very human township.

Like any kingdom and its townships, the Kingdom of the Self is not static. So the township of *A Story of Witchery* was related to my experience of this kingdom at the time I wrote it. I was just beginning to encounter the inner space that my mind, subject to early medical trauma and predisposed as it was to develop post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD or, as I now understand, complex PTSD), possibly as the result of intergenerational and historic force, perhaps by accident of fate.

I would not write the same story now. This postscript is to give you, the reader, a glimpse of the book from my current vantage. And I have asked Thor Harris to provide new drawings.

I met Thor when he was touring with *Shearwater*. His illustrated chapbook, *An Ocean of Despair*, effectively captured for me the weird world of major depression, a world akin to, though not the same as, the trauma-

driven Kingdom of the Self. When he first read *A Story of Witchery*, he told me he wanted to illustrate it. I am so grateful that he still wanted to all these years later. His hand drawings give me chills. There is my mermaid, there is the doctor. A shark swims by, and the questionnaire oppresses our Emily. His illustrations make this edition a new and different edition.

ii.

Originally, when I learned that punctum books was reissuing *A Story of Witchery*, I thought I would revise the language to address misanthropic, ableist, fat-phobic, and other violent terms and narrative moves. But I quickly realized that to do so would be to write a different story in a different way.

All of the inhabitants of *A Story of Witchery* are selves that occupy my Kingdom of the Self. And all of the language, violent or otherwise, is the language I use for those selves and myself. It adopts the cruelty of Grimm as I experienced it through my own voice describing my own selves. To revise that language out of the text, or to try to create a text that would be the book I wrote now, would collapse the narrative. *A Story of Witchery* is not autobiography or memoir but was an effort to draw a path through a particular township that existed in my Kingdom of the Self in 2001–2005, before and after 9-11, during my pregnancies and early years of mothering, when I was first coming to grips with the fact that I'd had some form of PTSD most of my life.

A Story of Witchery is flat and brutal in the way the Brothers Grimm's stories are flat and brutal, because this particular township in my Kingdom of the Self, the township I'd come to know when I wrote this book, was reflected best by those stories in their original published forms. The stories that resonate with me were not softened versions adapted by Disney or others. The stories that resonate with me are the ones that end with Cinderella's stepsisters' feet bleeding through the slippers and Snow White's stepmother dancing in burning shoes until her death.

I know that some of my relationship to these tales is the result of my being a descendent, in part, of Germans,

including my great-grandfather who migrated to the us in 1911. Because my prewar German heritage influences my family culture in undefinable ways, these tales hold resonance for me.

But that's not the only reason. I also believe that these tales, in their flattening of character, amplification of violence, and explicit, often brutal, use of descriptions of the body to reveal character, are uniquely useful as an aesthetic approach to exploring the experience of medical trauma, particularly for those of us who experienced it as children.¹

An infant entangled in the medical system of the us in the early 1970s experienced something not dissimilar to being an inhabitant of the uncanniness and brutality of a German fairy tale. My early surgery took place when the theory that infants did not feel pain was still pervasive. There was an emphasis on sterility in the recovery room, and this took precedence over allowing a parent or other caregiver to be with the child. And for

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- 1 I would be remiss not to mention Bruno Bettelheim's *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 2010). For those of you wondering about its influence on me, I read it when I was in college, and still appreciate that it provided a popular focal point for the role and impact of these tales on childhood. I also appreciate that it led me to subsequent critiques of the book, such as Jack Zipes's 2002 discussion in *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales*, rev. ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002). I find that I am more interested and convinced of the aesthetic utility of the mode of storytelling undertaken by the Grimms as a means to describe medical experiences, rather than their importance for childhood psychological development. Bettelheim still looms large over any discussion of childhood experience and Grimm's fairy tales. So I think it is important to also note that Bettelheim's legacy is complicated. He dedicated much of his work to a psychoanalysis that could caretake and heal children. Yet he also caused profound harm. He was an academic who abused students in a system that often enables such abuse. His tendency to victimize others can neither be untangled from the impact of his time in Dachau and Buchenwald, nor can it be untangled from the contributions that experience led him to make on the understanding of the experience of the camps. It is impossible to separate this legacy from his work on the utility of fairy tales.

those of us with cleft palates, restraints were a standard tool for post-op recovery. Decades later, I still vividly remember waking in a fog of waning anesthesia with my arms tied tightly to a gurney. They've since been largely abandoned because of the toll they take on the patient's mental health.

So while I imagine there is a relationship between these stories and my ethnic identity as a descendent of German immigrants, I also believe they can be particularly effective at providing an emotional template of a child's experience of medical trauma at the hands of us healthcare system, particularly at that time. For me, Grimms' fairy tales described what I knew to be a certain truth from some of my earliest moments, that something about me drew scalpels and needles, white coats, restraints, and isolation.

iii.

Rather than leaving you, the reader, stuck in that Kingdom's horrors, *A Story of Witchery* aims to open a doorway out. It is not by accident that the exit is not love in a simple form, per se, but is through attention to nonhuman animals and a certain sort of lonely resilience.

For those of you who have your own Kingdom of the Self, built out of your own experience of the scalpel and the needle, I hope *A Story of Witchery* provides you solace and strength. The inhabitants of your Kingdom deserve attention and care. You are not broken, or you are broken but so are we all. For those of you who've trained yourself to hide pieces of yourself in your own Kingdom to protect yourself from annihilation, you are not alone. You and your Kingdom are beautiful. You shine.

— Seattle, January 17, 2024

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As before and now, thank you to Amy Gerstler for the enduring preface.

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To creatures who were there, then, and the creatures who are here, now, thank you for keeping me safe even when I travel through my dangerous kingdoms.

Finally, thank you to Devlin and Sage. You make possible this book, and everything. “

