Fairy Tales

By Sara Luttrell
This book is dedicated to my best friend, Benjamin Westbrook. With his constant love and constant editing, this book has been born and my sanity remains intact.

Thanks Blinky.

Thanks to Brown Kennedy, Julie Dorn and my mother, Maryann Luttrell for their edits and feedback.

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Preface

Welcome to my book of stories!
Here is a collection of seven tales full of bizarre, disturbing and even humorous revelations. This book represents three semesters of working with fairy tales and illustration.

Besides the tales you will find illustrations that bring another dimension to my stories. I chose to veer away from realistic representations and from classic fairy tale illustration for the same reason that I chose to write non-traditional fairy tales: I want to bring the sneaking creeping dark things to the light.

My illustrations are all combined process Intaglio, using aquatint, drypoint and etching to create multi-layered images that unsettle and intrigue the viewer. Some have been hand-colored with watercolors to enhance the image. Choosing to use abstract imagery, I wanted my tales to be without distinct representation to allow the reader freedom to imagine what I have written as they choose.

For logistical reasons the prints have been digitally scanned and reproduced here. Many maintain their original size but others have been scaled to fit the size of the book.

I hope my stories make you think of things you had not before. These are just the beginning.

Sara Luttrell
Introduction

The “classic” fairy tales, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, come to mind for most in Western society when they think of the genre today. What people recognize as a fairy tale are grossly altered suggestions of a fairy tale that include little of their original language, content, intent and importance. Often dismissed as children’s literature, or worse, mere fluff and fantastical conjecture, fairy tales are more than they seem. Deceptive in their simplicity, this genre holds deep truths about human nature and the ways of the world.

What is a fairytale? The term is so loose and freely used by different scholars that it is hard to pin down an exact meaning. While some use the fairy tale as a subset of the folktale, others make no move to differentiate the two. For me, the fairy tale exists as an elusive multitude; I do not think of it in any one specific manner. In my mind it takes the form of allegory, entertainment, psychological tool and cultural history all at once. I can find no benefit in nailing down a genre that so clearly needs to flit and float through our consciousnesses. However, it can be useful to give some history on how fairy tales have changed and moved through human culture. They are, above all else, a human creation.

Beginning as spoken word, the fairy tale has much in common with the folktale as part of the oral tradition of tales. Stories told by the fire to enchant, to amuse, to shock, to teach; these fairy tales are uninhibited, at times bawdy, even
crude. Existing only in memory and spoken form, oral tales are a work of the ‘common people’.

As text and literature came to the forefront of civilization, the oral tales were transcribed to start what is known as the literary fairy tale tradition. The conteuses, who dominated the fairy tale literary genre in late seventeenth century France, wrote their own tales, lengthy ones, filled with intrigue, romance and vast amounts of precious jewels. At the same time, Charles Perrault, their competitor and the prominent male author of fairy tales transcribed oral tales to suit the genteel upper class. Perrault did some of the most lasting damage to the fairy tale as it is now seen today. The Red Riding Hood who was tricked by the wolf into consuming her grandmother’s dead flesh (but saved herself in the end) was turned into a simpering child who didn’t stand a chance. Cinderella’s sisters, who once mutilated themselves for a chance at winning the Prince, became shallow petty nags with no bite or truth. As the oral fairy tale transformed into a literary phenomenon, much was lost in the translation. Once a fairy tale was written down it became imbued with the essence of its ‘author’. The characters in a literary fairy tale exhibit the biases of their author, collector or editor. Fluid characters that once could change in accordance with an audience or situation were cemented in text, and as the world became more text oriented, the oral fairy tale began to vanish.

Back in the days of the conteuses and Perrault, fairy tales were written for adults, but the Brother’s Grimm were among the most influential early ‘authors’ who claimed the fairy tale as literature for children. J. R. R. Tolkien argues that
fairy tales only became children’s tales when they went out of fashion for adults; altered hand-me-downs, if you will.¹ The fairy tales I have written are quite clearly not intended for children. Fairy tales are a wonderful thing for children to read and have in their early life, but that is common knowledge. That fairy tales are just as wonderful and important for adults is far less accepted.

My adult fairy tales are centered around the fairy tale heroine as she is persecuted and entrapped, as she travels and understands, as she find her way. My heroines are strong, whether they know it or not and through their strengths I begin to examine what makes a heroine heroic.

Many heroines in fairy tales are perceived as weak, the wrongs done against them are not even noticed by the teller or transcriber. The tale known to Americans as Sleeping Beauty has older variants from Italy, namely Giambattista Basile’s Sun, Moon and Talia. The prince finds a castle by chance and enters. Inside he finds Talia sleeping. He unsuccessfully tries to wake her but she does not move. He proceeds to copulate with her anyway. In some versions he even believes her dead before he lusts after her. He finishes the act and returns to his city on pressing business. The tale continues and describes Talia’s subsequent unconscious pregnancy. She doesn’t wake until one of her twin children, who she has birthed while asleep, sucks the enchanted splinter from her finger. In the tale as it is transcribed in Basile’s The Pentamerone the prince’s violent act is not addressed or even made remarkable. None

¹ J.R.R Tolkien, Tree and Leaf, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1964), 34
of it is portrayed with a sense of right or wrong and Talia’s rape is never portrayed as such. It is here that Alan Dundes’ argument on the supremacy of the foktale, which claims that written tales can never come close to the “true oral fairy tales”, gains ground. An oral tale would have the verbal inflections to give the audience keys for proper reaction. A reader cannot be prompted in such ways. That is to say, a reader cannot be prompted to feel by the transcribed oral tales, by tales that are written down word for word as they were spoken, without any cues for proper assimilation.

When feminist writers began to approach the fairy tale in 1970s, they attacked the genre in a number of ways. Initially to identify the shortcomings and vilify them, showing how they imprison women by setting up false precepts of ‘being rescued’ or waiting for life to begin with the entrance of their prince. They attacked classic heroines like Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Cinderella as being insipid, denouncing their tales as rife with gender-stereotypes and full of socially harmful delusions. Other feminists responded and wrote tales with smart and clever heroines who save the day of their own accord.

Donald Haase discusses the debate between feminist scholars Alison Lurie and Marcia Lieberman in the first chapter of his anthology *Fairy Tales and Feminism*. Their arguments focused on the fairy tale heroine and what she can and cannot do for women. Lurie argues that within fairytale, classic and obscure alike, are a wealth of strong female characters that “advance the cause of women’s liberation.”
She claims that the males who collected and edited fairy tales obscured those tales with forthright females through the filter of patriarchal society. Lieberman countered this by focusing on “female acculturation” claiming that only the best known tales, polluted by Disney and others, have affected the children in our society. Those that are more obscure, Kate Crackernuts, Unana and the Elephant, are superfluous because they have influenced no one. Their argument heralded the beginning of modern fairy tale studies.²

Masterful feminist writers like Angela Carter and Anne Sexton took on the fairy tale, turning it upside down and inside out, rearranging the stories to draw attention to their previous failings. Carter has been widely critically acclaimed for her work in the fairy tale. In 1992-93, The British Academy received more than forty applicants for a doctorate on Angela Carter.³ Her work, mainly novels and short stories, takes note of the cultural implication of the ‘classic’ tales and uses them as a base for imaginative renditions. She has been known to re-envision the same classic tale a number of times, showing her prowess by making each substantiate a different aspect of the traditional tale with new meaning for the roles of fairy tale women.

Carter, Sexton and others such as Jane Yolen and Margaret Atwood have been my role models in writing fairy tales.

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² Donald Hasse, ed., *Fairy Tales and Feminism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 1-2

tale fictions. Their work has been inspirational and affirming for me. They deal with the darkness that lies inside the fairy tale, the darkness that has been edited out by modern society. But not only do they deal with darkness, they craft and mold it to their whims, using the social roots of the classic fairy tale to agitate the accepted modes of gender and woman’s role in society.

I believe that the areas where fairytales gloss over women, their feelings, their choices, their selves, is also where fairy tales gloss over everything. Fairy tales, as we know them today, were transcribed and written down in a time where female liberation was an unknown concept. They were not written with the intent to suppress women any more than anything else created during those times. The fact that much of modern women’s complexes regarding love and sexuality can be linked to the plot line of the fairy tale is not proof that fairy tales are sexist. They can be viewed as such, as they are in their “traditional” literary form. But it is the point of revision to change outdated aspects.

I want to bring the women in fairytales to the forefront and break the rules of traditional fairy tales by telling the stories of the fairy tale heroine. This calls for substantial revision of tales that feature a heroine but neither extol her successes nor promote her finding an identity. I am using the genre of the fairy tale to draw attention to these neglected fairy tale heroines. They have been marginalized by the patriarchal society who had charge of their advent into text. That does not have to remain the case. Fairy Tales have been changing since their conception. There was no sole
birth, no first fairytale. They are human in nature and in content; they discuss human problems.

Revising the fairy tale takes something that has deep cultural significance and prevalence and changes it into something modern audiences can assimilate. As social ideals and concepts change, the parts of the fairy tale that are important change; revising an old tale in a way that accents information pertinent to the time makes a dated text into a useful narrative. As Jack Zipes argues, “As a result of transformed values, the revised classical fairy tale seeks to alter the reader's views of traditional patterns, images and codes.”

“As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its normative functions, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its subversive wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation.” Christina Bacchilega makes a strong point, however, exploring the subversive qualities of the normative is a large part of what interests me. How can the normal aspects of life lead to our hidden subversive natures? The older incarnations of what are today well-known fairytales have more psychological complexity than their modern shadows can hope to express. Much of the original intent of fairy tales was to explore the more sinister aspects of

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humanity in hopes of shedding light on how to process our darker natures. We all have darkness inside. Fairytales were designed to free and dispel this darkness.

The following collection of fairy tales includes modern revisions and more traditional retellings. My stories seek out aspects of traditional tales previously left undeveloped. By drawing attention to these neglected features I attempt to radicalize the fairy tale genre as my predecessors have done. Within the old tales are decided flaws, negative portrayals of women with power and relationships between women, distorted views of love, sex and consent, not to mention blatant patriarchal ideals. However, there is much about these negative aspects that can be used in revision to draw attention to why these issues are problematic.

I have created a collection of literary fairy tales across a range of modalities. *The Stairs With No Steps* is the most traditional, using a classic format with one-dimensional characters and repetition of dialog. This tale is the closest to an oral tradition in its format. *RedHood* also follows a traditional format; it is modern in its subject matter, although the ideas are directly influenced by Carter’s versions of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The first three stories are all connected by an old Scandinavian tale called *King Lindworm*. The traditional tale is, by definition, “not concerned with individual destinies.” They are one-dimensional and simple, "the characters of the
fairy tale are not personally delineated." These three stories are an experiment in taking a traditional tale and going against the traditional methods of one dimensionality and linear format. They move beyond the traditional bounds, to encompass a more modern sensibility that includes complex characters in convoluted environments. By stretching one tale over three I emphasize the matri-lineal transmission of fertility and the relationship of women who all experience the same bizarre phenomenon in different stages of their lives. The triad invokes the traditional aspects of maiden, mother and crone around central motifs of pregnancy, silence and transgression.

_Figs_ is a didactic revision of Hans Christian Andersen’s _Thumbelina_. It is progressive in its interpretation and yet it harkens to the oral tales in its crudeness and revelation. All my fairy tales make reference to a traditional tale in that their most basic plot lines. Sometimes they are based only on fairytale motifs and not specific tales. _Ms Eassley_, for example, is based on the fairy tale crone who waits on the roadside, the keeper of many secrets. _The Swan Maiden_, like _Figs_, emphasizes the persecution of the heroine, bringing previously overlooked violence to the forefront. This revision of a tale which has a variant in almost every culture, discusses the heroine’s resistance of her captivity and comments on the need to domesticate that which is wild within women.

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All my tales contain elements of distinct feminism and a prevailing darkness. Fairy tales allow us to move beyond conventional boundaries, whether we want them to or not. Through their blending of fantasy and reality they move through our realm into another, less defined and more uncertain, taking us a willing passengers, or dragging us along behind. Their power is palpable as can be seen by their survival. Though they have been edited and mangled and altered at the whim of their authors, by some strange miracle they have remained in our consciousnesses as powerful narratives of the human condition.
Ms. Eassley

Elizabethe Eassley woke from dreams of her youth. She had been sitting in a yellow dress on a bench by the train station with her sisters when consciousness crept up on her. Waiting with eyes shut for the sun to rise in her window, she could see the red light through her eyelids. With slow breath and a practiced stretching of the toes and fingers, she surfaced into morning. Gently, stiffly, her body rose upright and she tossed the covers aside. She paused for a moment, looking down at her knees and fingered the faded sheet. The worn flannel had hundreds of tiny nubs from years of sleeping; she could feel the memory in the fabric of bodies past. Standing, Ms. Eassley stretched and yawned, the dried saliva at the corners of her mouth cracked. Her thoughts began to circulate and her dreams melted in the friction.

After eighty-seven years of living, every morning followed the same pattern, more or less. First a shower to wash the dead skin that flaked from her drying body during the night, then she moisturized herself thoroughly. If the mood struck her, she might masturbate briefly, vigorously bringing some sensation to her quiet life. Her second husband died when she was fifty-five and the grief counselor her neighbor had recommended opened the door to the concept of “self love”. It had been an interesting time for her, she wore silk robes, ate chocolate and explored her body. She had even taken a lover or two, if only for experimentation.
No one could replace her late husband as a companion, he had been a friend, not just a husband. Toweling dry, she moisturized her limbs and torso.

Remaining in the nude, she shuffled into the kitchen for a brisk breakfast of sour grapefruit juice, dry toast and a three-minute egg. Making breakfast had been her duty when she was young. Her many sisters had often complained at her late hour of rising, but she made the best pancakes. These days pancakes held no appeal for her as there was no one to share them with. Reaching for the salt her hand slipped and she dropped the egg cup. It shattered on the tile floor and the egg split open, leaking golden yolk. Ms. Eassley gazed at the wreckage impassively; it had been a gift from her mother in law at her first wedding. A set of two egg-cups with delicately painted dancing ladies holding hands around the edges. She got a paper-towel and moistened it in the sink. With cracking knees she bent down to wipe it all up, putting her hand down to steady herself. It took three paper-towels to clean everything and as she threw the last one away she noticed red.

Her hand was bleeding; she could see the translucent sliver of porcelain in her palm. Her eyesight had remained intact throughout the years and she saw almost as well as she had in her youth. Bringing her hand to her mouth she tried to suck the shard from the wound. It came loose with velocity and embedded in her tongue. Alarmed, Ms. Eassley rushed to the bathroom and stuck out her tongue. She could see the splinter of egg cup and got out her tweezers. Her hand shook as she reached for it, the reversal of the mirror causing her to miss the first time. With a deftness that surprised her
grasped the shard with the tweezers and pulled it out. Salty blood filled her mouth and she absurdly thought of her breakfast egg and how, were it in her mouth, she’d need no salt. Spitting in the sink, she rinsed her mouth out and tried to examine the residing hole in her tongue. It filled with blood too quickly for her to see anything and she spit again. A faint movement on her wrist reminded her of her bleeding hand. The offending shard had clearly slid quite deep into her palm and she was surprised at the amount of blood. It flowed along the canals of her hand, following the lifeline down to her wrist. She watched the drip of blood travel across her veins. Wiping it away, she folded a piece of gauze into a small square and affixed it to her hand with a band-aid. She couldn’t think of how to bandage her tongue and she swallowed the blood when it filled her mouth.

Ms Eassley was not usually upset by blood or accidents, but today she was shaken. There was more blood than there should be and she didn’t know what to make of it. She felt light headed and knew she should make another egg for her breakfast. But now her appetite was gone, she felt no genuine hunger. Feeling cold, she tried to resume her customary routine. In a daze she fumbled for clothing in the closet. She chose her brown skirt and a white cotton blouse. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest and she worried about herself. Filling a glass with water, she attempted to calm her nerves, but all she could taste was blood.

She decided to go out. Today was Tuesday, and on Tuesdays she usually went to the butcher. The kitchen
seemed full of bad omens and she decided to clean up her breakfast when she returned.

It was April, and the buds were exploding into flower. Ms. Eassley distractedly walked the three blocks to the butcher pulling her mini shopping cart behind her. She did not notice the flowers, though she usually took such delight in them. The cart rattled and clattered on the street and sidewalk as she went through town. She walked two blocks too far without noticing and had to retrace her steps. Frowning at herself for uncharacteristic inattention she walked back towards the butcher shop. It was only seven fifteen, and the shop would not open until eight. She waited on the bench in front of Frank’s Choice Meats with hands folded in her lap.

Swallowing the blood that still seeped from her tongue, Ms. Eassley watched the town awaken around her. Shops began to open, mothers and fathers walked their children to school, the sun rose higher and the sky got brighter. She saw a little girl of perhaps six or so, walking with her brother hand in hand. They had no parent or guardian in sight. Being so unhindered they idled in front of the candy shop, pointing longingly at the gingerbread house on display. Ms. Eassley thought of her sisters. When they were young their father had brought them lemon candies with crystal sugar on top. Kellen, the eldest, had always been given the bag to keep and distribute at her whim. The twins had not been happy with that situation. They had quite the tantrum, causing a long punishment in the broom closet for both of them. Elizabethe had never cared for lemon candies and
always gave her share to Lucy and Lorraine in secret. The children walked away down the street. She swallowed again, the bleeding had slowed.

When Frank approached his shop and unlocked the front door, she opened her mouth to greet him. Her tongue faltered and she choked on her “Good Morning.” Frank did not seem to notice as he fumbled with his keys.

“Hello, Ms. Eassley.” He smiled at her, “I’ll be ready in just a few minutes.” Ms. Eassley nodded and smiled, not wanting to expose her bizarre condition. As he closed the door her smile faded as she let her worry float back to the surface. She tried speaking and was only capable of unintelligible sounds. She tried again and could only cough raucous noises that made passersby glance her way with disdainful concern. After ten minutes of activity, Frank flipped the sign to say ‘Open’ and motioned Ms. Eassley inside.

“What’ll it be today?” Frank waited behind the counter for Ms. Eassley as she perused the mostly fresh selection. She smiled at him, hoping to compensate for her lack of words. His strong hands rested against the stained countertop. She glanced at the livers and hearts, so separate from their homes, waiting until they were digested into new bodies. She looked at the sausages and steaks, at the bacon and the ham and up again at Frank.

He looked inquisitively at her and repeated his question. “What can I get for you?” He gestured towards the left end of the display. “We have some nice steak today, fresh in this morning.”
Ms. Eassley looked at his hands, red from washing with cold water. She nodded and pointed towards the steak. “You’d like the steak then?” Frank seemed confused by her speechlessness, as well he must be since usually she was gregarious and talkative. Ms. Eassley could only nod and would not meet his eyes.

Frank wrapped a steak in thick white paper. “That’ll be $5.49 then.”

Ms. Eassley took her pocketbook from her cart. She paid with change to relieve her wallet of the weight. Placing her steak in the cart she waved to Frank and tried to smile as she walked out. She spat on the sidewalk outside, it was mostly spit with only thin ribbons of blood mixed in. The wound was closing and yet she still could not speak.

The sky was a peachy blue that Ms. Eassley thought might appear gray to an unimaginative eye. Her white hair had a glowing presence in the daylight, a sort of hazy halo. She cropped it short under the ears like a schoolgirl, wearing a thin headband to keep it back out of her face. Trundling along to the corner store as her routine dictated, she bought a newspaper, some milk and dry groceries and put them in her cart. The morning sun was still low on the horizon, and her back was half covered in shadows. She reached the bench facing the oak trees and set her cart to rest. Elizabethe sat down, using her cart to steady her descent. Taking her paper from amongst her belongings she began to read. But the articles held nothing of interest for her; she couldn’t focus. She kept floating back into her dream from the morning, her memory of that day. All of the Eassley sisters were gathered
at the station to wish their sister a fair journey. Their father had arranged a marriage for Lucy with a young man in the city. She was excited and smiling but Elizabethe had done her hair that morning and noticed the nervous red splotches on her sister’s neck. It had been a time of excitement and all the sisters had put aside their arguments. Nothing had been the same between them after the resulting chaos. Shaking her head, not wanting to remember, Ms. Eassley continued reading.

She was about halfway through an article on the death of Mother Theresa, when a young woman sat down on the bench at the front of the park, at a diagonal from Ms. Eassley. She was dressed casually in black and seemed preoccupied. Ms. Eassley recognized the orange plastic bag she held on her lap from the produce shop on Main St. The woman took out a large red onion and began peeling the crispy skin. Slowly her nails scratched the surface, trying to peel the tight thin layer of skin that only flaked off in pieces. She got most of the dry layer off and seemed satisfied with that. Cautiously she opened her mouth, as if scared to take a bite. With an apprehensive vigor, her teeth took a great juicy chunk of onion with her first bite. She squinted in pain as she chewed, the vapors clearly irritating her nose and eyes.

Ms. Eassley watched her with curiosity. Eating a raw onion was strange behavior. Surely she was simply an eccentric woman with an odd craving. The young woman finished her onion, wiped her eyes with a napkin and took a breath. Her mascara was smudged beneath her eyes making her look fiercely comical. She reached into her bag again and
pulled out another large red onion. She peeled it as she had done the first and began to eat with her eyes squeezed tight. She ate it quickly, nibbling around the rooted end delicately before casting away the remaining nub. Ms. Eassley watched with a frown furrowing her brow, this woman was not just satisfying an urge; she had an intention. Ms. Eassley remembered the beast and the blood; she remembered the death. She tried to shout, “Stop! Stop!” but no sounds came. She could only cough and spit. She rose and advanced towards the woman on the bench.

The strange woman looked up mid-bite. She quickly grabbed her remaining onion and her produce bag, looking over her shoulder with disgust at the shabby old woman who hobbled towards her.

Ms. Eassley watched her direction and formed a plan. She walked again to Frank’s. Her wire pushcart rattled on the concrete as she crossed the road causing the squirrels in the park to glance her way. The bell jangled as she opened the door, but it summoned no-one, the shop was empty. Seeing that Frank was elsewhere, she took the large meat cleaver from the counter and walked straight out again. Ms. Eassley crossed the road a third time, walking in the direction the young woman had gone.

Her thoughts whirled. That woman. Where did she hear about the onions? What other reason besides infertility and stupidity would a woman have to eat three raw onions? An onion was nothing but peels, taking off the first layers would not stop the inhuman growth in her womb. She would
conceive a monster and not a child. Had the idiot who told her what to eat told her that?

She could still smell the onions in the air. She walked down the street until she came to a cluster of apartment buildings. Knowing this was where her prey had vanished she stopped and considered the doorways. Not knowing which to pick she began to take items from her shopping cart and place them on the sidewalk. Out came the newly stolen meat cleaver from Frank’s and the wrapped steak. She took out a pint of milk. Kneeling on the hard concrete, Ms. Eassley unwrapped the steak so that it lay on the butcher paper in a shallow pool of pink meat juice. Reaching up to her head she pulled three white hairs from her head. Arranging them on the surface of the steak, she made a triangle in the center. She sucked her tongue until the blood flowed again. Her mouth filled with blood and she spat on the meat, directly in the triangle of hair. The red spittle was frothy and viscous, yet it stood out in contrast with the meat.

With the meat cleaver she started to chop the steak. She forgot her stiffness and the awkward angle of her activity was of no concern. How clearly she remembered that afternoon so many years ago. She had not been able to save her sister either, youth and all. Her arm wavered at the apex of her swing but she severed clean with each stroke.

Elizabethe continued chopping long after the meat was minced and with difficulty set the cleaver down. Her hand had begun to cramp with the tension of her grip and her stiff shoulders ached with the activity. There was a pile of chopped raw meat oozing on the concrete. What had she
expected? Grabbing a handful of the pulpy meat she squeezed. The softness of raw flesh in her hand was pleasant, almost soothing. She noted the distinction between the shiny mess of steak and the hard lumps of her hands as she squeezed. Tangible material giving with such complacency made her hands feel powerful again. But it was an empty power. There was no monster here, only a steak that would never turn into anything, not even her dinner.

She contemplated the edge of the cleaver. It was sharp enough to cut through bone.

Ms. Eassley sighed and sat down on the sidewalk, fatigued. That strange woman had no doubt finished her onions. It would be growing inside her already, shifting molecules conglomerating through a dark magic. Elizabethe Eassley, crone and spinster stood up. With slow determination she grabbed the handle of her shopping cart, left the meat on the ground and shuffled home.
The Lindworm

The morning fog had just begun to lift when Elizabethe arrived at her destination. She had taken the morning train from her small town and traveled all through the night. Although she did manage to sleep on the train, she felt exhausted and disheveled. Her walk through the city had been long; her skirts were filthy from trudging through the wet streets. None of that truly mattered, for as soon as she saw her sister, Elizabethe knew everything would be all right. It had been weeks since she had heard anything from Lucy. She was beginning to mistrust the vague assurances from her father.

Elizabethe waited, standing by the fence in front of a big house. Her sister Lucy had left most of her belongings behind her, as their father instructed. He insisted that her new husband was a fine gentleman and that they would buy her clothes suitable for her new status. He insisted on a lot of things these days. However, when he informed Elizabethe that she would be joining her sister in London, his demand was well received. Helping Lucy adjust to her new life would give time to search for a governess position. Then she might leave home for good. The excitement of her freedom almost made her forget her worry. Surely Lucy was fine, a new wife did not have time to write letters. But even in her validation, she felt doubt.

Elizabethe looked up at her sister’s new home. She had to walk through the markets and past the museums and
through a neighborhood of imposing houses to get there. It was a large house with many windows and grand turrets like a castle. Surrounding the house was a tall wrought iron fence ornamented with decorative scrolls and vicious spikes. Her gloved hand grasped the black iron, wet with morning. She had eaten the meager meal she had taken from home and now her stomach cramped with hunger. In the hustle and bustle of the city she could certainly find something to eat, but she had brought only enough money for her train ticket home. Elizabethe sighed nervously and straightened her spine. She opened the gate and walked up the wide steps to the front door. Pausing before the door she wondered if it were too early to call, but someone would be awake, surely.

The large brass knocker on the door was cold through her glove and it made a thunderous noise even though she rapped as lightly as she could. Without too much delay, the door opened to a young maid in uniform.

“Good Morning.” Said Elizabethe. “I am Elizabethe Eassley, I believe Mrs. Linden is expecting me.” The maid appraised her curiously.

“Good Morning, Miss. I will have to inquire with the lady of the house. Come in and sit in the drawing room.” She held open the door. Elizabethe smiled at her, they looked to be the same age, but the maid would not meet her eyes.

“Right this way please. I will go speak with Mrs. Linden.” Elizabethe was led to a large drawing room just to the right of the entrance hall. There were thick carpets on the floor and heavy curtains on the windows. It was quite dark before the maid turned on the light as she left. The
illumination showed an array of dark wood furniture, richly upholstered in silk brocade. Elizabethe removed her gloves and hat as she walked around the room. She touched the curtains and the sofa gingerly, wondering at how her sister had gotten such a life. She sat down to wait.

Upstairs in her bedroom, Mrs. Linden faced her mirror. She looked for her youth and found nothing. Age had crept in, seeped in, infused itself with her skin. Everywhere showed signs of wear. Wrinkles, sagging, faded beauty all. She selected a dark plum lipstick and applied it with determination. Comical! She looked like a clown, some sad aged debutant, tawdry and washed out. She glared at her reflection and slowly, never breaking her own gaze, she removed the lipstick with a handkerchief. Plain again. Plain Jane. Old Plain Jane. She combed her long hair, golden mixed with gray. Deftly, she looped and twisted a beautiful cascade that paid homage to her former glory.

Increasingly obsessed with her appearance since her last miscarriage five years ago, she worried that her infertility would lead her husband to abandon her. If she could not give him an heir, then at least she could try to remain attractive; to remain appealing for him. He was her first husband and she his second wife. They had married in the fall, in a church with their families present. After the first year Jane knew she could not get pregnant. She imagined her womb as a dried apricot, wrinkled and juiceless.
There was a short knock at the door as she put the last hair pins in place. She watched herself as she called, “Come in.”

“Excuse me, Ma’am. There is a Miss Elizabethe Eassley here to see you.” The sturdy young maid stood at the door, awaiting instruction.

Mrs. Linden was surprised at the hour of her call. This must be the sister that Lucy had spoken of. “She must be hungry. Bring her to the kitchen with you and feed her. Tell her I shall meet with her shortly.” The maid bobbed her head and left.

Elizabethe sat in the living room with growing apprehension. When the young maid reappeared she sat up straighter. “Mrs. Linden has invited you to breakfast in the kitchen. She will meet with you shortly. Follow me.” The maid turned and walked out leaving Elizabethe to follow. As she walked behind the solemn girl Elizabethe asked, “Have you met my sister?” The maid paused,

“I saw her when she first came here. But I believe she has fallen ill; she has not come to dine in a few weeks.” Elizabethe stopped walking, they were in a dark hallway; she could see the kitchen beyond her guide who still walked in front of her. Lucy was not the sort to catch a cold, something must be very wrong for her to be in bed for weeks. “My sister is ill?” her voice betrayed her fear.

The maid turned in the doorway to the kitchen and saw Elizabethe, whose face was white with worry. Her solemn demeanor softened and she threw a glance towards
the kitchen. Holding a finger to her lips she motioned Elizabethe closer. “Your sister has not been seen by any in
the house since she got here. But young Mr. Linden is a
solitary man. None of the staff have seen him. His mother
who lives with him in the east wing of the house attends to
his every need, whatever they may be. Your sister must be
locked away with him.”

Elizabethe stared aghast at the maid, “You cannot be
serious. Why would my father send Lucy into a family like
this?”

The girl shrugged, “My father sent my sister to the
whorehouse. Come into the kitchen. I haven’t eaten yet and
you must be hungry.” Her mind whirling with questions,
Elizabethe followed the girl into the kitchen,

“What’s your name?” Elizabethe sat down on a stool.
The kitchen was empty except for them.

“Louise,” said Louise as she got bread and cheese
down from the pantry. Cutting them both thick slices of each,
she also set a pot of tea to boil.

“Please tell me what you know of my sister.”
Elizabethe asked as soon as Louise was seated.

“Your sister came here about a fortnight ago
and Mrs. Linden went to greet her at the station. They had
supper together and…”

The bell rang by the door; Mrs. Linden was
summoning them. Louise stood quickly and hurried
Elizabethe back to the parlor. “I’m sorry. I will be here if you
need me.” Louise smiled encouragingly and left.
Elizabethe barely had time to check her appearance in the mirror over the fireplace before Mrs. Linden swept into the room. “Good Morning Miss Eassley. I do hope your journey was not too tiring. May I offer you some tea?”

Louise came in with a tea tray, set it down and left without making eye contact with Elizabethe.

“Mrs. Linden, Good Morning. Thank you for having me here. I am eager to see my sister.” Mrs. Linden poured the tea, smiling gently. She held out a fine china cup and saucer. “Do you take sugar?”

Elizabethe shook her head and accepted the tea. The two women sipped their tea quietly, the clock ticking loudly in the background. Mrs. Linden looked at Elizabethe expectantly. “I was hoping you might stay for supper. I would love for you to meet my son, he is not able to go out much and does not often get such pretty visitors.”

Elizabethe looked at Mrs. Linden and dropped her polite tone, “Where is my sister?”

“Ah. I see you are forthright in your manner, not quite as a proper young lady should behave but perhaps it will be your salvation.” Mrs. Linden set her teacup down.

“Miss Eassley, let me tell you a story. There once was a woman, newly married. She wanted to give her husband a child, but as fate would have it, she could not conceive. Not being faint of heart, the woman sought alternate means of conception. She visited doctors and wise women, she drank potions and sat out in the rain under the full moon. Nothing she tried would work. Then one day, as she walked down the street, an old hag huddled under soiled blankets called out to
her. ‘Lady. I know what you seek.’ The woman, being
desperately unhappy, knelt beside the old woman and this is
what she heard. ‘The child you seek is within your grasp. Find
three red onions, peel two and eat them raw. Leave the third
unpeeled and discard it. Within a month you will feel life
within you.’ The woman gave the hag some money and
walked away, certain she had her solution.”

Here Mrs. Linden paused and took a sip of tea. Elizabethe watched, uncertain what any of this had to do with
her sister.

“The woman found the onions and decided to eat all
three, for surely that would mean a greater chance of
conception. Her folly was great, for when she gave birth, the
child was stillborn, it’s cord had been severed in the womb.
None could decipher the cause until out of her womb
crawled a beast. It swallowed the dead baby boy and
frightened the doctors and nurses away. The woman was left
alone with the fruit of her womb and she wept. The creature
slithered close and began to nurse from her breast. A feeling
of motherly love came over the woman and she knew she
could not kill this creature. Whatever it was, it was still her
child. When the doctors returned with her husband to kill the
beast she had hidden it away, claiming it had escaped. She
retreated into the east wing of her house and raised him there,
feeding him milk from her breast and meat from her table.
He began to grow. His appetites increased and she had to
find whole animals to feed him. One day he began to speak.

He asked for a bride and I found him one.” Mrs.
Linden freshened their cups.
“Your father was the first to answer the advertisement I put in the London Times. When your sister arrived I told her what I am about to tell you now. After the birth I went to try and find the old woman who had given me the advice about the onions. After many weeks of searching the streets, she found me, just as she had done before. She laughed when she saw me, knowing without a word from me that I had disobeyed her instruction. ‘Got a beast of a problem now, haven’t you?’ She told me that only a maiden could save him, she told me to give him what he asked for, a bride. If I found a girl clever enough, she could save my son. She said there is a human inside him, somewhere.”

Elizabethe stared at Mrs. Linden with horror. She had listened quietly to all of this and now understood what had happened to her sister. “You killed my sister!”

“She can be saved. She wasn’t clever enough to save herself. That was her shortcoming not mine. I told her everything I am telling you. Do not place the blame on me, I am only doing what any mother would to save her child. She is trapped by my son, but if you can outwit him, you may still save your sister.” Mrs. Linden stood up.

“My attendants will come to escort you to my son. His name is Reginald. Perhaps you can still save your sister. Perhaps you can save my son. Perhaps you can save yourself.” She walked towards to door, “My attendants will come to prepare you.” She left the room without a backward glance.

Elizabethe felt overwhelmed. Her sister might be dead! How had things progressed this way? She must gather
her wits. She had no desire to help Mrs. Linden save her
demonic creature of a son. But if her sister still could be
saved she must steel herself and face the monster herself. She
had little time to think before three imposing women entered
the drawing room. They were dressed in somber robes and
had nun-like head coverings. They said nothing and did not
answer any of Elizabethe’s bewildered questions. Grabbing
her arms with a firm hand, two women walked alongside her,
taking her up the stairs and down a long hallway. The third
woman walked behind. Bringing her to what looked to be a
guest room they took her to the bath.

The women did not look at her face as they rolled up
their sleeves. The women got soap and shampoo and
washcloths, Elizabethe calmed to a degree. Whatever was
going on, this part wasn’t going to hurt. Without ceremony
two woman stripped off her dress and shift, giving her no
opportunity to do it herself. The third filled the bathtub with
steaming water. She was directed to the tub. Her body was
roughly jostled as the women washed her vigorously. Her
head was dunked under water to rinse and for a moment
panic surfaced and she thrashed, fearful of being drowned.
The women took no notice. They scrubbed her shoulders and
neck, washing every inch of skin repeatedly. The hoisted her
to her feet and one woman scrubbed her breasts and belly,
using excessive amounts of soap, while another pushed her
legs apart and scoured her genitals. They even washed the
bottoms of her feet and in between her toes. Elizabethe
wondered at this ritual; had her sister also been bathed and
scrubbed by these silent women? Where was she now?
Dressing her in a light shift, a brocaded bodice and a long velvet dress, they also combed her hair. Elizabethe had stopped trying to communicate with them and let Mrs. Linden’s attendants move her body as they would. She tried to think of a way to save her sister.

Reginald’s bedroom was at the far end of the east wing. Elizabethe took a hesitant step in, wishing she knew what to expect. The somber women closed the door behind her and her eyes took time to adjust in the dim light. With curtains drawn and no lamps it was hard to see anything, but even with their heavy fabric the windows let in a sliver of light. There was a large bed in the center and by it an open door leading to a separate chamber. The room had no other furniture but impressions in the carpet betrayed the previous arrangement of chairs and dressers. A pile of thin branches and brush lay in one corner looking oddly like a nest. There were dark stains on the carpet that made her uncomfortable.

Elizabethe began walking towards the window when she heard splashing coming from the adjoining room. She froze at the sight through the doorway. A strange creature stood on two feet, bending low to lap milk from a large basin. His long serpentine body was covered in shiny black scales, as were his two flat-footed stumpy legs. His eyes were red as the devil and somehow he didn’t seem real. This creature was easily twenty feet long from head to tail. Elizabethe did not move. She knew this must be Reginald.

Elizabethe stood still, watching the red-eyed beast as he watched her. Seeing him, his thick body undulating with
muscle, she knew her sister to be dead. A cry escaped her lips but she had no time to grieve. He approached her, sliding across the carpeted floors smoothly, gracefully. His body was long, uncoiling from one room to the next. His scales were black with shiny iridescence that caught the low light as she moved. Stopping just short of her, she could smell his breath of old milk and blood. He spoke,

“Undress.” The beast hissed. Elizabethe didn’t move.

“Run,” he commanded. She realized he could not chase her if she did not run and she planted herself firmly and shook her head. The lindworm backed away and appraised her from a distance.

Elizabethe remained motionless. This beast had intelligence, which made him more dangerous. Elizabethe wondered what to do. She wondered what her sister had done. Whether she was still inside the monster, waiting with him for release.

She could see that he was growing restless. What was it the old woman had told Mrs. Linden? Unpeeled onions and skins, she hated riddles. Snakes have skins too, she thought as she watched his tail coil and his body undulate. The old woman had said there was a man inside, beneath the layers.

She took off her dress, revealing her bodice and shift underneath. It was so cold in this house.

“Undress” the beast repeated, shifting from foot to foot in anticipation.

“No.” said Elizabethe. “A skin for a skin,” she gestured to where her shift lay on the ground and pointed to
where the scales on his nose were beginning to slough. She held her breath as he looked at her. She said again,

“A skin for a skin.” Reginald looked at her and stuck his tongue out to smell her. He began rubbing on the bedpost. The lindworm’s skin began to come loose from his entire head. Soon, his shiny scales looked dull and the loosening skin became dry and brittle. He sloughed his skin in one piece, turned around to face Elizabethe.

“Undress.” He hissed. Elizabethe took off her bodice and repeated,

“A skin for a skin.”

He had to rub for longer to get the skin to loosen. It was not ready to be shed. The black scaly skin remained fresh and moist as it fell to the ground in a single piece.

Elizabethe had only her shift to shield her from doom. The lindworm bled freely from in between his scales. His skin was gray, no longer black and he appeared weak. Elizabethe knew she had him. She removed her shift, feeling stronger. She shivered and repeated the words that held such power over the beast,

“A skin for a skin.”

Reginald bowed his head and began rubbing his head on her torso. Elizabethe felt his cold reptilian head against her skin. His scales were smooth and sharp. He rubbed so hard she had to use all her might to remain standing. She knew she would fall, but at that moment his final skin split, blood rushed out and he collapsed on the floor. A writhing bloody mess, his skin split down the length of his body and
for a moment he lay still. There was no man inside, neither was her sister there. Elizabethe looked in horror at the blood that covered her body and the floor. The lindworm started to move again. He was not yet dead. Elizabethe raced to the corner of the room and grabbed a branch from his nest. She beat the bloody worm savagely, screaming with rage. He had eaten her sister. There was no saving her. Thrashing his skinless body over and over, blood spraying her face, drenching her hands she tried to drive the life from him. She had no wish to save a man who had eaten her sister. She raised the bloody branch and stabbed at his eyes and head. Furiously she continued to take her anger out on this monster long after he stopped moving.

Panting, she dropped the stick and surveyed the bloody pulp that remained of the lindworm. She stood staring until the blood started to dry and she felt uncomfortably sticky. Stumbling she entered the adjoining room and used the basin of milk to wash the blood from her face. After she had done what she could, she dumped the basin out on the floor and it washed out over the corpse of the lindworm.

Elizabethe knew she needed to get out of the house but she felt a powerful exhaustion hit her. The bed was so near and she collapsed, falling asleep in seconds.

She woke to the sound of her name. Louise was shaking her roughly. “Elizabethe, wake up.” She opened one eye saw Louise’s worried face. “Elizabethe! What happened?” Elizabethe propped herself up on one elbow.

“I’m cold.”
“You’re naked. Bloody hell, what did he do to you?” She hurriedly walked over to the discarded shift and froze as she rounded the corner of the bed. Having come in straight through the door and finding Elizabethe in the bed, she had not yet seen the rest of the bedroom. She had not seen the corpse of the lindworm. Seeing it now she gave a startled yelp. Elizabethe rose quickly, remembering. “Is it still moving?”

She joined Louise and together they saw the remains of the beast. But it had changed. Where before there had been a bloody milky expanse of lumpy flesh now, there lay a naked man. His skin was white as milk, his hair was blacker than his former scales and his penis was red as blood.

As they stared he began to stir. His eyes opened, red and bloodshot and she thought it was the beast in another form. She looked for her stick.

Finding her weapon she grasped it firmly, she knew what to do. A hand wrapped around hers and she looked into clear eyes, brown and true. This was a man, no monster.

“You ate my sister.” Elizabethe said with resignation and despair.

“I am sorry.” The man Reginald looked at her face intently. “I wish I had not, it pains me to have caused you sorrow before I even met you.” He did not resemble his former self at all. His face was kind and his manner gentle. He looked tired, but Elizabethe thought that was fair considering the beating she had given him. Louise gave Reginald a blanket, draping it over him after it was clear he did not have much strength.
Elizabethe felt confused, where had her anger gone? She did not feel hatred towards this being. She was about to say more when the door opened and in came Mrs. Linden.

“Reginald! Is that you?” She dropped her husband’s gun and her hands flew to her mouth. Elizabethe stood to confront this woman who had been responsible for Lucy’s death, but instead was embraced.

“Dear girl, you have saved my son! You have saved us all!” Mrs. Linden’s elation was not contagious. Reginald sank to the floor again and Elizabethe reached for Louise’s hand, crying for her sister.
Red Onions

The walls of the examination room were white. The beige floor showed long black skid marks where equipment had been dragged. The whole room was drab and sterile. Susannah sat on the examination table, naked except for her socks and a thin gown. She wished for vibrant color, something bright to distract her from where she was. She stared with nervous disinterest, her gaze roaming over the magazine rack and posters of anatomical diagrams. She tore the translucent paper that shielded the examination bed into feathery strips and watched them float to the floor. Their haphazard descent did little to distract her and she fidgeted nervously. The door opened and the doctor came in. He had a festering cold sore on his lip, Susannah watched it as he spoke.

“Well, I’m afraid it’s beyond medical help, Ms. Kingsley. Your body just isn’t equipped. I’m sorry. Your uterus is unfathomable. It simply won’t hold a child.” The doctor did not look sorry at all as he flipped through the pages of her file with clear ambivalence. Susannah supposed she should be thankful he even pretended sympathy. Her mortification at what her mother deemed a “feminine failing” had faded with the years of trying to conceive. Her partner Elaine had left her after the fertility cocktails and injections had failed. The new age meditation and multi-colored crystals she had tried on her own were not any more helpful. She had even tried the good old-fashioned way with a man and his
ejaculate. Nothing would grow in her; she was salted earth. The initial outrage and shame had slowly been replaced with a pervasive melancholy. This had been the last hope, a miracle cure from some young doctor proven to work on two out of sixty women. The finality of this failure sunk in and she closed her heart.

The doctor left her to change, the door latch clicked and her mind wandered. When the nurse came in to check on her, Susannah was still in her white and green patterned hospital gown but too numb with sorrow to feel embarrassed. She hung her head, eyes open wide as she stared at her toes. The nurse finally had to help her dress. Susannah held out her arms to be clothed, like a child or a queen.

She walked slowly to the car, swaying with deep-seated fatigue. She stooped and rested her head on the door, feeling too weak to drive. An elderly woman who had been in the waiting room with her drove past.

“Are you alright?” she asked as she rolled down her window. When Susannah made no sound, the old woman parked her car in the next available space. She walked over and placed a concerned hand on Susannah’s shoulder. “Do you need to go back to the doctor? Are you feeling sick?”

“I can’t have a baby.” A simple admittance and her throat choked with despair, tears burned in her eyes. She had thought there were no more tears left in her.

“Oh my dear, I am so sorry.” The woman stroked Susannah’s back as she cried and waited patiently for her grief to ebb. “There now, it’s all right.” Susannah breathed deep. “I have a proposition for you. I know you have no reason to
trust me, but you remind me of my niece and I would like to help you.”

Susannah dried her face on her sleeve and turned to the woman, looking at her for the first time. She looked kind, with warm brown eyes and happy wrinkles.

“There is an old remedy, older than my mother’s mother, that has been passed down my family through the generations. You will conceive and feel the fruit heavy within you, if you follow this advice.” Susannah unsuccessfully tried to quell the hope that reached out a tentative tendril. She listened with growing excitement,

“Eat nothing for three days.” The woman spoke in hushed tones as if she were relaying a valuable secret. “On the third day before noon, while the sun is still trying to reach its peak, find three red onions. Peel two, eat them raw and bury the third at the far corner of your garden.” Susannah looked dubious. Onions?

The old woman saw her expression and laughed, “It sounds like nonsense but my grandmother never told a lie in her life. It might be worth a try if you feel such despair.” She stuck out her hand then and said, “By the way, I’m Francine Linden, I work at the library near the train station in town. I have to run now, but if you have questions or just want to chat, please visit. The library is always accepting new members. Try out the old remedy, then you can let me know if it works. I mean, there’s no harm in trying right?” Susannah gave a bewildered smile and thanked her, promising to stop by the library soon. The woman drove off, waving at
Susannah who still stood, keys in hand, at the side of her red Volvo.

Susannah followed the advice of the Linden woman and ate nothing for three days. She felt weak and distant from her body by the third day, as if she were floating.

On Tuesday she went to the grocery store and purchased three red onions. She carefully picked the best looking ones, the largest ones that filled her whole palm. Exiting the shop she walked to the park and found a bench beneath a flowering tree. Susannah was so focused on her task that the beauty of the day went unnoticed. Taking an onion from the plastic grocery bag, she contemplated the best way to eat it. She had not thought to bring a knife with which to cut it.

“First things first,” she thought and began to peel the onion. The first dry husky layer came off like the label on an old tin can. It flaked under her fingernails in places, resistant to being shed. The first skin was a darker purple than the one underneath, which was only partially dried, a substantial portion still moist cellulose flesh. She decided to tear off a third layer to be certain and quickly bit into the onion, as she would an apple. The red onion was strong and she thought of healthy baby boys. Texturally the onion was not unpleasant, she had never had this much onion in her mouth before. But the taste was overwhelmingly fiery and her tongue burned. The vapors from the onion hung like a cloud in front of her eyes and nose. She swallowed, and without pausing took another bite. Chewing ferociously with her mouth open helped to dispel some of the fumes. Susannah imagined the
masticated onion traveling into her womb and gestating there. She crunched into it again and her nose rubbed against the wet onion with the bite. Tears formed to protect her eyes and she could feel how red they must be. Imagining her baby, Susannah ate two of the onions with determination. She reached in the produce bag for the third red onion and stopped, remembering the woman’s instructions. Realizing that she should have written it down, her mind began to alter the facts. Was she supposed to eat the third onion? Wasn’t there something else she had to do with the peels? Something about burying them in the garden. Susannah peeled the third onion. Placing it in her lap she carefully gathered the onion peels and put every piece back into the shopping bag. She would bury them the moment she got home. It seemed straightforward enough.

Susannah began to eat the third red onion. Her teeth slid on the smooth skin, denting and bruising the surface without puncturing. She tried a different angle and bit hard with eyes squeezed shut. At the edge of her vision she noticed the creepy old woman who had been sitting on the opposite side of the park approaching her rapidly. Susannah grabbed her purse and quickly walked away, she did not want to deal with a crazy old lady. As she walked back home she finished her onion with satisfaction. It was easier to eat it while walking, the distraction of movement made the burn and unpleasant odor less apparent. When she finished, she felt elated; her mouth burned, her eyes were swollen, her heart was light. Holding her fingers underneath her nose she inhaled the scent and smiled.
Once she got home, she carefully buried the onion peels in her garden, and then her wait began. Nervously, she tried a pregnancy test after a few days. Her urine had smelled like onions for days but the little stick showed nothing but a blue minus sign. So she waited, wondering how long it would take the onions to sprout in her womb. In three weeks she missed her period and was filled with hope. The pregnancy test read positive and she shook with tremulous excitement. She told no one, afraid to break the spell.

Her pride grew as her belly swelled. Her body was receptive to the life growing within and she knew with certainty that there would be no miscarriages this time. How round and full she looked in the mirrored glass of the mall! She had to wear maternity dresses and loose tents of fabric to house this growth of child. There were days when she felt ravenous and huge, a vessel carrying something unknown into the world. Susannah ate more than she ever had, eating three servings from the all-you-can-eat buffet at the Chinese restaurant. Smiling all the while, she ate and ate, happy to spend her money on her child, feeling filled with new maternal purpose. Soon there would be someone who relied solely on her, a new being who would love her unconditionally.

However, even in her intense joy, there were days when she wished she had never heard of pregnancy, that it had remained an unknown. Her back ached, she felt cantankerous and mean. Her morning sickness came late and the constant vomit made her feel uneasy. She knew it was normal, and yet she felt there was something wrong with her.
Paranoia would seep in and she would think of her child as a parasite, leeching strength from her, taking what it needed and making her expel the rest. When it was born, she imagined herself a dried husk with a greedy, fat baby.

But not once in all that time did she visit her benefactress. She worried that the kindly librarian might extract a bargain from her; decide she wanted something in return for giving Susannah exactly what she wanted. She was afraid of the magic that gave her this baby, but also protective of it. She went to see no doctors, had no ultrasounds. She read books on healthy pregnancies and contacted a midwife for a home birth. Her co-worker connected her with Jacqueline, a retired RN who had worked in the labor and delivery sector at the hospital. She specialized in home births and was happy to help Susannah for a modest fee.

The midwife came over for a pre-birth examination. She was a capable-looking woman in her mid-fifties with strong wiry hands and a thick head of silver hair.

“You can call me Jacque.” She said as she entered Susannah’s apartment.

“Lovely to meet you.” Susannah was nervous. She still felt as if she might lose her baby, even though her belly was so big she could no longer drive her car.

“You’re huge!” said Jacque appreciatively, setting down her kit and gently placing her hands on Susannah’s belly. “Are you sure this is your first pregnancy?”

Susannah shyly confirmed, “I thought I was infertile. It was a miracle that I got pregnant at all.”

Jacque glanced around the apartment, “Is it just you?”
Susannah nodded, “My girlfriend left me a year ago when it was clear I couldn’t conceive. She really wanted a child.”

“So did you, apparently.” Jacque grinned and Susannah blushed. “Well, let’s get started, shall we?”

Susannah went to the bedroom to undress and called Jacque in when she was ready. The examination went well, Jacque said everything looked great. Susannah was surprised to discover that she was carrying twins. It had not occurred to her that there might be two babies, but Jacque said her belly was too big for one. She gave Susannah her number and left the expectant mother to wonder at what it would be like to raise two babies alone.

She was in the kitchen when her water broke and with the first intense contraction she felt the onion burn in her nose and eyes. Frantically she called Jacque, who gave her instructions to lie on her bed, prop her feet on pillows and count the space between contractions. As she lay, breathing and counting, her face shone with excitement. This was the moment she had been waiting for. Lying on her bed all she could see was her enormous belly, it encompassed her vision. She pulled up her night-shirt to expose her roundness.

Jacque arrived within the hour and they began. She gently massaged the belly to get the baby to turn around and come out head first. She was kind and gentle with Susannah, offering comfort and support when the birth process became more difficult. As the contractions increased their frequency the midwife instructed Susannah to start pushing. It was a
difficult birth. There were two babies in the womb and both were determined to come out first. The midwife reached inside Susannah’s womb to help the closest baby on his way. The head crowned and Susannah’s perineum split. There was a great deal of blood which made it hard to see the small black snake with two short legs that slithered out. It lay in a pool of blood as its brother was born, blue and floppy. The midwife snipped his cord and attempted to resuscitate him as Susannah began screaming. Her next baby came too quickly and tore her way into the world.

Amidst the confusion and noise, the little black lindworm slithered up to the breast of its mother and began to suckle. The midwife noticed with horror and stood still with Susannah’s dead son in her arms. Placing the dead boy on a table for a moment she moved the live girl, still attached to her cord to her mother’s belly. Jacque began to wash the corpse to prepare him for burial. Susannah held her daughter on her belly and watched the snake drink her milk. She felt no horror, only joy. Now she was a mother, she could feed her children with her own body. She felt the milk being sucked from her breast and it gave her pleasure. The dead baby in the midwife’s hands seemed unreal, she had not expected two children, she only needed one. Her daughter was perfect and her son, well she wouldn’t know how to raise a son anyway. Even so she felt sorrow for her dead baby and something akin to disgust that she had carried something dead inside of her.

Susannah paused and looked at the snake that was still nursing. “Did this come out of me?” The midwife
nodded as she cut the cord.

“You’re losing a lot of blood, so I’ll give something to help expel the placenta. It must have been a couple of weeks that the boy has been dead.” She made no mention of the lindworm who had finished his snack, nestled in Susannah’s neck and gone to sleep. The midwife washed the baby girl and handed her back to Susannah before readying the syringes. She applied some anesthetic and stitched Susannah up as best she could.

Susannah looked at her baby with wonder. She felt exhausted and overwhelmed but the tiny fingers on her daughter’s hand were so perfect and small. Her eyes were tightly shut and her small pink mouth was wet and moving. Susannah brought the child to her breast and felt the small lips searching, like little butterflies on a flower. Her daughter was hungry and Susannah was still holding her as she felt the placenta detach. Using strength she did not have, she pushed the placentas from her womb with a grunt. The little lindworm raised its head, tongue flicking the air with curiosity. It slithered down to the pool of blood and began to eat the placenta. Susannah was distracted with her baby, but the midwife looked on in disgust as the unearthly creature detached its jaw to swallow the afterbirth. She said nothing.

Susannah heard the strange sound of the lindworm baby swallowing and looked down at her ophidian child. “I don’t know how to care for a snake.”

“I don’t think it’s a snake,” observed Jacque. “Looks like it’s growing.”

The lindworm not only had a large lump in the
middle of its body now, but also had expanded in girth and length. It raised its head and looked towards Susannah, tongue out.

“Is it a girl or a boy?” Susannah looked up at the midwife as if she would know.

“Not a clue. It seems harmless enough.” She changed the subject. “You’ve stopped bleeding, so I think you’re gonna be fine. Welcome to motherhood” Jacque smiled encouragingly.

“What do I do?” Susannah looked at the midwife, “I’m a single mother. I have no one to help me.” The midwife shrugged,

“There’s plenty of open-minded babysitters in the area. I’m sure you’ll do fine. I have another baby to pull, but you have my number if you start bleeding again, give me a call.” Susannah protested and offered more money for her to stay but the midwife refused. Insisting that her other client was in more need with her baby still inside, Jacque gave a confused wave and left Susannah alone. Her two live children lay sleeping on her body, still sticky with blood. Her son lay cold, wrapped in a towel, waiting for burial.

The front door closed and Susannah felt a surge of panic. There was no one to help her, she still lay in bed too exhausted to move. She soiled herself as she lay prostrate and started to cry.

Feeling guilty and promising herself she would come back to check on Susannah, Jacque hurriedly got into her car. Unable to process what had just occurred, she started the engine and drove quickly away from this house of horror. She
almost hit an old woman walking up the driveway, white hair gleaming in the moonlight, pulling a wire pushcart behind her.
The Stairs With No Steps

Once there dwelt a little girl, who, more than anything else, wanted to befriend the stars. She would cry and cry in her room, alone, for she could see no way to reach them.

One morning she woke and decided to set out in whichever direction she wished, in hopes that luck might guide her.

She took a corn cake from the kitchen table and wrapped it in her kerchief for the journey.

When the sun was just starting on its path in the day, she came to a mill pond. “Mill Pond, oh Mill Pond, do you know how I can get to the stars?”

The Mill Pond laughed contently, “You may think them far away. Come swim in my waters, see how the morning star twinkles here? He is bathing too and can tell you the way to his brethren.”

The little girl placed her corn cake on the bank and took off her dress. Chilly in her thin petticoat she took a deep breath and jumped into the mill pond. Surfacing, she splashed and paddled around, trying to find the morning star. She could see it sparkling just out of reach. When she called out to him she received no answer.

Irked and wet she clambered onto the bank, put her dress back on, picked up her kerchief and cake and said, “You were wrong Mill Pond, there is only a reflection in your
waters. The morning star is far away. You have not helped me. Good day.” Nodding her head curtly, she walked off.

When the sun was high in the sky the girl came to an old oak tree. Some creature had made a home in the trunk long ago and left a deep dark hollow. The little girl approached the tree, “Good afternoon Lady Tree. Tell me, do you know how I can get to the stars?”

“Dear child, they twinkle around me in the night and, come morning, they all fly into my hollow to sleep. Quietly peek your head inside and see them sleeping.”

The little girl did as she was bid. The inside of the hollow was musty and dark and her eyes took time to adjust. When she could see clearly she saw thousands of sleeping bugs lying in the basin of the hollow.

“Those are not stars at all!” she said in dismay. “Those are fireflies. Stars are much brighter. They are bigger than these creeping things. I’m afraid you were mistaken. Good day.” And off she went.

She sat at the edge of the road and ate her corncake as dusk fell. As she chewed she thought she heard laughing and voices. Swallowing, she rose and listened. The laughter was coming from the top of the hill, she could see twinkling lights. Thinking for certain the stars were dancing she ran up the hill only to find the Fairie Folk.

“Good Evening Graceful Fairies,” she said to the dancing crowds. A few fairies momentarily ceased their revelry. “Would you like to dance with us?”

“Oh no, thank you. I am looking for the stars.”
“Then you’ve come to the right place,” they exclaimed with joyous secrecy. “They dance here, with us. See how their dancing sparkles in the dew. Come dance with us, dance with the twinkling stars.”

The little girl could see how the dew sparkled and how the fairies danced with many partners, but she could not go to them. Those who danced with the fairies were foolish indeed. She looked up into the sky and saw the stars high above in the sky. Resignedly, she tied her kerchief around her head and prepared to bid them goodnight.

One fairy whispered to another at the sight of the bright red cloth.

“We will tell you the way to the stars in exchange for the kerchief on your head.”

The girl nodded and they both held onto the kerchief as the fairy told her the way, “You must walk until you find Four Feet. Take Four Feet to No Feet and he will take you to the Stairs Without Steps. If you can climb them you will find the stars.”

The little girl gave them her red kerchief, thanking them excitedly. They gave her no further attention and continued dancing on the hill as the moon rose.

The girl kept walking in the direction the Fairies had pointed out until she came to the edge of a great cliff. There was no way down, not this late in the evening with no sun to illuminate her path. She began to moan with despair, when she heard the rough bleating of a goat. In the shadowing gloom she saw a white goat amble from the dark.
“Good Evening to you Goat. Can you tell me how to get to the Stairs with no steps? I need to climb them to find the stars. The Fairies told me to search for Four Feet to take me to No Feet, but I cannot solve the riddle. Can you help me?”

“Little girl, I am Four Feet and I can take you to No Feet. But what can you give me for my trouble?”

“I have two strong shoes on my feet. I know you do not need them for your feet with such strong hooves but perhaps your ears might enjoy the protection.”

“Very well, I can see they are fine shoes. I accept your offer.”

She tied the laces of her shoes together and hung them like a necklace on the goat. He bent a knee to help her onto his back and then they started the trek down the cliff.

All through the night they traveled and the girl could not sleep for fear of falling; but the nimble goat clambered down the steep cliffs walls with dexterity.

The moon was bright when they reached the bottom. The goat bid her farewell and trotted back up the cliff with his new red shoes on his ears.

In front of the little girl was a broad expanse of misty beach. She walked straight ahead towards the sound of lapping waters. When she reached the edge of the water she saw a large fish swimming in the shallows. The top half of his body was exposed to the air and his eye was divided by the moving water line.
“Fish, oh handsome Fish, do you know how I can reach the stars? I'm looking for No Feet and the stairs with no steps.”

“Well met by moonlight child, I am No Feet and can take you to the stairs without steps. But what will you give me in return?”

“I have nothing left to give, dear fish. My corncake is eaten, my kerchief belongs to the Fairies and now the goat Four Feet has my red shoes.”

“My daughter often takes human form. Give me your dress so that she might have one of her own and I will take you to the Stairs without steps. Whether you may get to the stars is up to you.”

The girl took off her dress and gave it to the fish, who put it in his mouth. Climbing onto his slippery back was challenging and once up there perching on his scales proved to be most tiresome. But she held on, feeling very weary.

Across the water they swam, little waves following in their wake. At last the little girl saw a tall shining beacon that stretched high into the sky. As they drew closer she could see a small platform at the base. There the fish left her and dove swiftly into the sea.

The girl looked up at the tall tower of stairs where every color swirled and glowed. There was no discernable way to climb them but climb she did. She clomb and she clomb but she did not advance. She clomb and she clomb and still she got no further. Looking down she could see the platform far away, but looking in front of her she saw the water not ten feet away. On she clomb until it became so cold that she
began to shiver in her thin petticoat. Her shivering became shaking and she lost her footing and fell, down, down down.

When she awoke it was day and she lay where she began, on the floor of her bedroom at home, all alone.
The Swan Maiden

At the foot of the mountains, on the outskirts of a forest sat the small town of Larkspur. In this town a young man once lived and loved; his name was Peter.

Peter grew up with his mother in a small cottage by a wooded grove. His father had died when he was quite young and it had always been just the two of them. Together they had a fine life. They had a large plot of land behind their house, which spread down a sloping hill with a babbling stream at the bottom. The edge of their property bordered the forest that began at the foot of the mountain.

There were local girls in the village that had cast an admiring eye in Peter’s direction but he found their country charm to be bland and ordinary. Peter wanted a wife. He dreamed of a woman of extraordinary beauty to fill his days with love and laughter.

As a result of his dissatisfaction with the local girls, Peter was a solitary fellow. He was a woodsman and hunter, like his father and grandfather before him. He took to wandering the forests and mountains, treading paths and forging new ones. He spent days in the solitude of nature.

One evening, after a long day in the forests with no game caught, he strolled by the mountain lake in the darkening gloom. In the dusk light he could see white figures on the water. Swans. Thinking to shoot one for supper he swung his gun from his shoulder and took aim. The swans swam to the shore and waddled across the sandy beach. Peter
watched in amazement as the swans cast their feather coats to one side and turned into beautiful maidens. They frolicked for an hour as the moon rose above the lake. Donning their white feathers, they became swans again and flew away.

Peter felt as though his heart had flown away with them and vowed to marry one of those beautiful maidens. He raced home to his mother. Anxiously he told her of what he had seen, unsure if she would believe him. She did. She told him a tale of a man who had found love with a beautiful maiden but was unaware that she was a swan. His mother then told him the secret he had longed to hear. “He who captures the skin of a Swan Maiden will have her for his bride.” They talked into the night, discussing how to snare a maiden for Peter. He must be strong and not falter. “To capture a wild thing alive and bend her to your will, you must be firm with her. Allow no way for her to escape.” His mother embraced him and gave him her blessing.

The next week Peter spent every day hidden in the brush beside the lake, waiting for his true love to fly to him. He waited for weeks until, on the night of the full moon, the swans came again. They flew down from high in the night sky, white wings spread wide, moonlight showing the bones of the pinfeathers. He watched as the swans swam to shore and waddled awkwardly across the thin stretch of pebbled sand to the grass. They began to shudder and grow, their snake-like necks thickening. Peter watched in fascination as the swans mutated into large lumpy beasts. Their bellies distended and stretched, their wings shortened and grew denser. Their feathered bodies spilt open and human maidens
stepped forth from the skins. Cast aside into a pile, the white feathers looked ordinary and shapeless; but the maidens stretched their new limbs slowly and with an accustomed grace. Their pale white bodies were slender and strong. Joining hands they began to dance, together and apart, stepping nimbly and leaping lightly to a music of their own. They laughed and sang with boundless joy, taking delight in the moonlight.

Hiding in the bushes, Peter watched them, nearly weeping with joy. They were so beautiful, so graceful and light. He focused on his purpose. With great caution and unerring deftness, he used the tip of a branch to snag the corner of the skin and drag it towards him. It smelled strongly of lake water and weeds. Clutching it to his bosom, he retreated quietly although he was loathe to leave the dancing girls.

As soon as he was out of earshot, he raced down the mountain and into town. It was late and everyone was asleep. He had thought about the perfect place to hide the swan skin for days. The church seemed most appropriate, as it was only inhabited on sundays. He clambered up the church steps and climbed into the bell tower. Wrapping the skin in discarded burlap he concealed in the swanskin in a far corner. Glancing around to make sure it was sufficiently out of sight, he laughed excitedly with the success of his plan. Running swiftly back through town and up the mountain he crept back to his hiding spot and arrived to see the girls swimming in the water. Through the water he could see their luminous bodies as they splashed. Soon, the maidens were calling to one
another that the time to go had come. Assembling on the shore they gathered around the pile of skins and began distributing them to one another. Six sisters had their skins and yet one sister remained. “Ilona,” they called to her, “Where is your skin?” The youngest sister had been the last to disrobe and her skin had been on top of the pile, but now it was nowhere to be found. Panic rose as they searched high and low for the skin. Peter retreated further into the shadows as they searched. Finally, when dawn was nearly upon them, they had to give up. The distraught maiden begged and pleaded her sisters not to leave but they had no choice. “Your skin has been taken, Ilona. Pray it was an animal and not a human. We will return on the next full moon, sweet sister. Hide and rest easy until then.” They donned their skins and flew off tearfully, leaving Ilona sobbing on the shore.

After he was certain her sisters had left, Peter approached Ilona. She fled from him with fear and he pursued saying, “Please dear lady, I mean you no harm.” Ilona ran but her fear caused her to trip, and she fell hard to the ground. Peter, who was close behind, scooped her up from where she lay and wrapped her in his cloak. She was still crying and he tried to soothe her by stroking her hair, but she struggled in his arms and leapt from him, throwing off his cloak and running towards the lake. She dove in and swam out to the middle where she thought she might be safe. Who was this hunter in the dark? How dare he touch her? And then she realized, a human had taken her skin. He knew the old law and was here to catch her for his own. She wailed in despair, calling her sisters, but they were gone. She was alone.
Peter came back to the lake and sat on the shore. He called to her gently saying again that he meant her no harm. He brought out his reed flute and began to play. Ilona liked the music, but did not come ashore. She swam to a cluster of reeds and tried to curl up in them as best she could. Peter waited. It made his heart sore to see how frightened his love was. So beautiful and graceful she had been as she ran from him. When he had picked her up she weighed nothing, as if her bones were still hollow.

Morning broke and the sun shone down on the pair, Peter on the shore and Ilona in the wet reeds. She was shivering and hungry. She tried to eat the lake weeds but her human body would not process them and she threw up. Peter called to her again and again, using sweet words to coax her ashore. “Ilona,” he called. “Ilona my love, let me keep you warm. I have some bread here and warm soup at home. Come back to my mother’s house with me. I will keep you safe.”

Ilona was stubborn and she waited in the lake and reeds for another day, sleeping, swimming and starving. Peter waited on the shore until finally, as he lay sleeping she waded ashore and wrapped herself in his cloak. She stood watching him as he slept, wondering why this human called her “love”. He knew nothing about her. She prodded him with her foot to wake him. He rolled over and gazed up at her, “Ilona,” he started and she interrupted.

“Where is my swanskin? I know you have taken it. Give it back to me.” Peter rose to his feet and tried to
embrace her. She stepped back, and repeated her question. Peter said only, “I love you.”

She questioned him again, moving her body sharply out of reach when he extended a hand. Finally Peter admitted that he had taken her skin and she raged, hissing at him like a swan. Her fury was received with gentility, as Peter remained peaceful, arms stretched out towards her.

With a heavy resignation she knew that her best chance of getting her skin back was to follow the man who took it. And so she walked down the mountain, wrapped in a blanket, her head held high.

At home, Peter’s mother hurried about, praising Ilona’s beauty and grace, offering her some soup and bread, giving her some old dresses to wear, saying how she’ll sew new ones for her, and isn’t she glad to have met Peter, such a handsome lad.

Ilona ate the soup awkwardly; accepted the clothes but did not know how to put them on. Peter and his mother dressed her, Peter’s hands were warm and clammy; he touched her breast as he helped her dress and blushed. Ilona said nothing throughout and stared out the window, watching the birds fly past. A rising panic built deep in her chest. She had to escape; she must find her skin.

Ilona waited until everyone was asleep. And then searched the house for her skin. She found nothing. The next day was much the same. Ilona did not speak, but only sat and stared out the window. At night Ilona grew more frantic and tore the house apart, knocking things asunder as she searched
for her skin. A light came on and Peter walked into the room and surveyed the mess. “Your skin is not here. I have hidden it to give you time to love me. Once you have proven your trustworthiness I shall give it back to you.”

Ilona lunged at him intent on attack, but Peter was stronger. He grabbed her hands and pulled her to him instead. She struggled but he had a solid grasp on her and would not let go. Finally she bit his shoulder and he let her go with a wounded look. “Ilona, I love you. I would never hurt you. Please, let’s not fight. Soon we will be wed and then you shall love me.”

Ilona stared at him and retreated to her small bed by the window.

The next morning she spoke to Peter and his mother at the breakfast table, “I am a prisoner here. I do not love this human body. I do not love human people. I do not belong here! Give me back my swanskin. Set me free.”

They sat still and looked at one another. “You are a guest in this house,” Peter’s mother said, “We do not wish to hurt you. You will adjust to your new body and to your life here. As soon as you’re married you’ll see. Peter is a good boy; his heart is full of love for you. Don’t be stubborn, he is a good man.”

That night Ilona left the house, panicked and sorrowful. She found her way back to the lake where she had danced with her sisters and she cried out for her sisters to come to her. They did not come. She called out for her swan lover to come, and wept with relief as she saw his broad white form flying down.
At home, Peter woke and went into the living room to gaze on his sleeping wife to be. When she was gone he panicked and raced to the church where he hid her skin. Finding it still hidden and undisturbed, he wondered where she might have gone. He ran to the mountain lake and saw Ilona waist deep in the water. Clasped in her arms was a great swan that preened her hair with his beak. Such tenderness was on her face, tenderness Peter had never seen or experienced for himself. He grew angry and threw a rock at the swan. Beating his wings, the swan flew low at Peter and began to attack. Peter drew his gun and Ilona screamed for her lover to fly away. Quickly, she came ashore and threw herself at Peter to save her swan. With angry cries full of helpless sorrow the swan flew off. Ilona wept as Peter dragged her down the mountain back to his mother’s house.

On the day of the wedding, the whole town gathered to see the foreign woman who had captured Peter’s heart. Ilona was silent the whole day; she remained motionless, allowing herself to be moved and situated; a breathing doll with sad dark eyes. Peter’s mother made a few stitches on her old wedding gown as she had never been as slim as Ilona. The women of the town dressed her, chattering excitedly as she stood mute and resigned. The starched satin and crusty lace looked awkward on her slender white figure.

The guests, when they started to arrive, whispered to themselves as they looked at Ilona. How strange her dark hair, so feathery and elusive; it flowed freely down her back without a pin or ribbon to tame it. Her eyes were darker than
any seen, with no discernable pupil. The men agreed that she was fair of face, full of grace but the women were uncertain. They were dissatisfied with her unearthly presence. How distasteful, why would anyone want something so other?

Peter’s mother brushed all their doubts away, saying she was shy and her silence was part of her custom. Brides did not show emotion in her country. But her assurances brought only more questions.

The ceremony was quick and the bride’s lack of emotion still caused tongues to wag. But the lure of food and lively music caused the guests to revel and cease their worries; a wedding celebration did not come every day. The bride retreated into the house silently and the guests forgot about her.

Peter, unnerved by his bride’s continued reluctance, drank heavily into the night. By the time the guests left he was stumbling and belligerent, eager to consummate his marriage. Ilona lay still; she cried out once as he thrust, like a bird. Peter thought it was a beautiful sound. He grunted and panted, sweating profusely. Drops fell on Ilona’s skin, beading and slowly running down her sides. Red-faced, Peter looked on with glazed eyes and a closed heart. He shouted as he finished, rolled off of her and fell asleep, dreaming of pale dancing bodies.

Ilona rose stiffly and went outside into the back yard. She walked down the slope, still naked, to the small stream that crossed the property. She knelt in the water, ignoring the hard stones and gingerly washed the semen from her thighs. There was blood, stark and red against the downy whiteness
of her skin. This human body was fragile and full of pain. She wished to get clean of his sweat and erase his terrible grunting from her ears. There was no solace for her. With a heavy heart she returned to her prison feeling hopeless and alone.

In the morning Peter apologized for his roughness, saying his love for her was so strong he couldn’t control himself. His mother chimed in and said that in time she would come to enjoy it. Ilona said nothing but looked Peter in the eye and he felt shame.

In the months that passed he was gentle and caring and did not try to force himself upon her again. Yearning for something to pass the time, Ilona became more active in the house, washing and mending things. She still went once a month to swim with her sisters in the lake at night. They were sorry for her imprisonment but were unable to help her. This was something she must solve herself.

Soon her body began to change, her belly ballooning out with new life. Their wedlock union had been fertile. Peter and his mother rejoiced and even Ilona smiled. She wondered if her child would be born with feathers or wings or even a beak. This child must be some unsightly monster with feathered arms and flat webbed feet. Giving birth to a demon would make them see that she did not belong to them. Ilona felt certain they would kill the child and give her the skin, expelling her from their lives. She waited, knowing that her freedom was growing inside her.

Life fell into a pattern. Peter went out to hunt and forest daily and left the women to their work. Ilona learned to garden and found some joy in making things grow.
As her belly grew, Ilona became more distant. In the backyard she built a nest with twigs and mud and spit. She marveled at how different a task this was with hands. Peter noticed her activity in the yard but assumed Ilona was gardening.

One day, Ilona felt a change in her belly and knew it was time. She went into the back garden and squatted over her nest. She was surprised to feel not a human baby but an egg escape her loins. She caught it in her hands and set it in the nest. She gave birth to seven eggs and washed them in the stream.

Peter’s mother saw her washing and grew curious. She crept up behind Ilona and exclaimed in horror at the bloody eggs. Ilona whirled around, hissing and dark-eyed. She lashed out, with a rock from the stream bed in her hand. Peter’s mother crumpled and fell to the ground moaning. Ilona advanced over her and continued to beat her with the rock until her head bled fatally. Ilona felt the dying breath upon her ankle. She dropped the rock, surprised at what she had done, but not sorry.

When Peter came home he found no one to greet him. Thinking there must have been problems with the birth, he rushed to the neighbors. He could not find his wife or mother. Returning home, he noticed movement in the back yard. In the dim light of twilight he saw a fallen figure and another standing close. He thought Ilona must have collapsed. Nearing them he saw the blood and his mother, he cried out in pain. Ilona stood between him and her nest,
which was hidden in the bushes. Peter saw the blood on Ilona’s hands and lunged at her, she deftly evaded him and he fell. Rising he lunged at her again, tripped on his mother’s body and fell to the ground sobbing.

“Mama.” He cried, stroking her hair from her face. Ilona walked calmly into the house.

Peter looked up and raced after her. He pushed her into the house with a yell and started beating her wildly. “You killed her!” He screamed curses and insults, hitting her face, punching her stomach until she fell. On the floor she fought back with vigor, kicking him where she could. Dropping to his knees he straddled her, grabbed her by the shoulders and beat her head on the floor until she was still. Her head lolled limply as her continued to shake her. With deliberate malice he tore her dress open, exposing her limp body. Her belly was still big from carrying the eggs, her breasts round and full of milk. He grabbed her breasts and squeezed, twisting her nipples hard, sucking the milk that dribbled from them. Spitting in her face he slapped her, watching the red hand print appear on her cheek with satisfaction.

“This is what you get,” he said. Standing, he undid his pants and spit on his hand. Peter looked at his wife as she lay splayed out before him and rubbed himself hard. Her vagina was stretched and torn from the earlier labor; blood leaked out onto the floor. Roughly he shoved himself in her, wishing she were conscious so he could hear her cry out in pain. She lay still and he thrust violently into her, tearing more of her flesh. He was bloody when he withdrew and released himself
all over her face. Wiping himself on her dress, he left her where she lay.

Returning to the yard, Peter carried the body of his mother indoors and washed her. He stripped her and dressed her in new clothes and laid her on the kitchen table and said a few prayers. He rolled Ilona outside and shut the door.

Ilona regained consciousness when the moon was high in the sky. She could barely open her eyes. She had lost a lot of blood and felt weak and sore. Slowly she rose and stumbled to the stream. Washing herself gingerly, she curled naked around her nest and crooned to her babies, willing them to save her from this nightmare.

In the morning Peter carried his mother up the mountain into the forest and buried her. He was gone for three days. Ilona watched him, her hate burning her eyes. She would not remain here any longer. While he was gone she tore the house apart searching for her skin, but knew that he had hidden it somewhere else. She dug in the garden and around the house, searching in vain. As she tended her eggs she felt the babies moving inside and knew what she would do.

When Peter returned, somber and withdrawn, he found Ilona waiting in the kitchen for him. He had ruined her last dress and she had not bothered to dress herself in any of his mother’s clothes. She stood naked, her bruises stark against her pale skin. She looked him straight in the eye as he walked in. He looked away; he had expected her to fear him.
In front of her was the nest with the eggs. She pointed at them,

“These are your children.”

Peter stared at the eggs. They were unnaturally big, larger than any egg he had seen.

Ilona watched him appraising the eggs. “Set me free. You can want nothing more with me. Keep these and let me go.”

“You are my wife.” He would not look at her.

She raised her voice in anger, “I am your prisoner! I do not love you, nor will I ever. Set me free!”

“No.” He said it quietly, with stubborn petulance.

Ilona picked up the first egg and cradled it to her bosom. Kissing the shell she smashed it on the floor. Peter cried out in alarm. Amidst the shell and albumen was a partially developed human child. It was still alive and Peter rushed to pick it up. It barely filled his hands. “What have you done?” Peter rose with shock and fear in his face. “They are human!”

Ilona looked with disgust at the infant, she saw no trace of herself in it. She had anticipated feathers at the very least. This made her task easier. She smashed another on the ground.

Peter yelled, “Stop! Stop! Are you mad? Those are our children!”

“They are your children.” Ilona picked up another egg. Peter lunged for her, hands out. She threw it directly at his feet and it smashed all over his shoes. He knelt to save his child, scooping it up gently, but it was limp, slimy and fell to
the floor with a wet splat. Peter began to cry. “Please stop. Don’t kill them, please.” His tears streamed down his face as he blubbered helplessly.

In quick succession Ilona smashed all but one as Peter wailed, crying out for her to stop, unable to do anything to save them.

Ilona held the last egg high in the air,
“Give me my skin and you shall keep your last child.”
Peter sobbed hysterically like a child, unable to even look at her.

Ilona shouted at him, “Where is my skin?”
He turned his face from her anger, cowering behind his hands and surrendered, “It’s in the church bell tower.”

She laughed triumphantly and smashed the last egg at his feet. Leaping over the wreckage she raced to the church tower leaving Peter alone and defeated in his mother’s house.

Ilona ran swiftly through the town, ignoring the calls of the locals. They had never seen her in the town and were alarmed to see a naked woman running past. She stopped once to ask a woman who was washing her clothes by the fountain where she could find the church. Receiving a bewildered stare and a finger pointed up the hill, she ran. A few of the local boys ran after her, whistling and laughing. Not knowing what to look for she raced into the big building at the top of the hill. There was a bell in the tower and she knew it must be the church. She frantically climbed the bell tower, leaving the door open behind her. Searching in the dusty corners she saw no hint of white, no feathers. She
cursed Peter for lying to her and then she saw a wrapped bundle in the corner. Sighing with relief, she found her skin wrapped in the burlap and tears of joy fell from her eyes. Holding the feathers up to her face she breathed in the scent. Hearing the sound of people climbing the stairs she quickly shook the dust from her coat of feathers.

Donning her skin she stretched into her swan form joyfully. Her neck elongated, her arms thinned into wings and she flew. Free and unfettered she flew from the tower, away from the town, away from Peter and into the mountains without a backward glance.
Red Hood

There once was a girl with a woolen cloak of purest white.

She lived with her mother at the edge of a great forest. During the day she would go into the woods to gather herbs and wild plants for their evening meal, taking time to frolic in the sunshine. Often she saw animals that one might expect her to be frightened of, such as wolves and bears, but she offered them no threat and they left her alone.

She would take off her cloak and place it on a high rock, away from dirt and sap. She would take off her dress and shift, stocking and shoes and bathe in the clear mountain pools.

One day while undressing for a swim she noticed her breasts. They had not been there last time she looked, but there they were, small and sweet like rising bread. She examined the rest of her body and noticed hair growing between her legs and under her arms. She had seen her mother bathing and knew that her body was changing into a woman’s body.

Excitedly she shrieked and jumped into the pool. She swam and swam, full of energy and life. Exhausted she clambered onto a large warm rock and lay out to dry in the sun.

She felt sore and tired and her body ached. She must have overdone the swim. Her belly was cramped with hunger
and yet she could not stir herself to dine on her snack of bread and cheese. She felt a heat between her legs.

Peering down there she noticed blood. Nothing hurt overly much but there was blood. She felt a hint of concern but did not panic. She squatted on the rock and made a red vulva print. Again and again she printed the rock with her own stamp.

She washed again in the pool and went to gather her clothes. Searching high and low she could not find her white cloak. All around the swimming hole and in between the rocks she searched and found not a scrap of white.

Under a tree at the far side of the pond she noticed a small cave. On a last hope she stuck her hand deep under the roots of the tree. With her fingertips she could feel the wool of her cloak and she stretched to pull it out.

The cloak was no longer white, it was a deep blood red.

Suddenly, she heard a noise and looked up. There was a large grey wolf watching her at the edge of the clearing. He licked his chops and the girl felt afraid.

She stood quickly and the blood rushed down her thighs.

The wolf lifted his snout, sniffing his prey.

The girl tried to wipe her blood away with her hands, knowing that it was the blood he smelt. Her hands were red and now she panicked, running swiftly into the trees.
The wolf loped after her. Easily he overtook her and nipping at her heels he caused her to fall to the ground. She was naked and bleeding, the most vulnerable prey.

The wolf licked her face and she quivered with fear. The wolf licked her sex and she quivered again. He looked into her eyes.

She looked back and she spread her legs wider. The wolf buried his snout at her opening and lapped at the blood. The girl felt a warm honey coursing through her and sighed with joy.

The wolf spoke, “How nice to eat you my dear.” He lay down beside her, his thick coat soft against her skin.

The girl smiled sleepily and together they dozed in the sun.
Figs

When Kenneth’s mother died she left him the house. Or rather she left the house to all her children and everyone else relinquished their claim. Everyone else in the Nelson family was successful, with jobs, money, families and houses that they owned. Kenneth felt that they had given him the house out of pity, but a gift is a gift and he did not complain, except to himself. His life had never been that remarkable. He currently worked the night shift at the city zoo, guarding the animals as they slept or prowled. The nocturnal schedule he shared with the hyena made his social life awkward. He had no success as a family man. Neither his ex-wife or his daughter spoke to him any more, but he did not blame them. He was not as good to them as he might have been.

Leaving his shitty one room apartment was easy, it was only good for sleeping in. He only had to ride the bus twice to get his stuff moved from one side of town to the other, well, four times if he counted there and back as two. A suitcase full of shoes and essentials, a duffel full of clothes and a second trip for his lamp and favorite coffee mugs. He just added his belongings to his mother’s, not bothering to throw her old stuff out as he moved in. He had always found it more comfortable to have a house full of things and was glad for that new luxury.
Exploring the house room by room, Kenneth examined the remnants of his mother’s life. Deep down he did love his momma, but he had not been the best son. He was saddened by the building realization that he hardly knew her at all. The only visits he gave her were twice a year at Easter and Christmas, when he would sit on the living room couch for an hour and watch T.V., leaving before he even needed to use the bathroom. Opening the back door he saw she had a greenhouse built to fill her backyard. He never even realized she loved plants. An increasing gloom built in him as he saw how lonely his mother must have been. His siblings paid for everything she needed but he could not fathom what someone would do with all that time. For the first time in years Kenneth sat down and thought about how someone else might feel. The activity brought him no joy, only a deepening sense of shame. It sat in his belly like a sour toad croaking guilt laced gas. A loud burp and he felt better.

Kenneth wandered out to the greenhouse only to find that the door was locked. “That’s strange,” thought Kenneth. And he tried to imagine what could be locked away, hidden inside. Being rather less than imaginative he could only think of a few flowers and maybe a hose. He did not really know much about greenhouses. The front side with the door was covered with vines, obscuring the view. But greenhouse walls are made of glass and he soon realized he could see everything inside by walking around the perimeter. Long tables stretched from the front to the back along the sides of the greenhouse, covered in an array of flowers, cacti, bonsais,
fruit trees and ferns. Everything looked to be in need of a healthy drink.

Walking to the far corner of the garden he noticed a contraption labeled *AquaDispenseX4* with a hose on the side connected to the faucet. Glancing at the greenhouse he noticed a hole in the side. He screwed the hose into the hole on a whim and turned on the water. Kenneth was not particularly clever, but his father raised him to know basic skills of construction and repair. “Tinkering with machines is Man’s purpose on earth, son.” he used to say. Kenneth had skills and adaptability. He was Man and he would bend nature to his will. Even so, when some sucking and rumbling sounds came from the machine for a few minutes, he worried that he had broken it somehow. But soon he was rewarded with a cascade of mist on the inside of the greenhouse. Kenneth smiled with satisfaction and watched the water replenish his mother’s legacy.

He waited for fifteen minutes by the spigot, arms crossed over his chest until he thought the plants were thoroughly soaked. He considered the orchids and iris. They reminded him of fancy ladies.

“If the flowers were really women then this would be like watching them in the shower.” Kenneth chuckled at his mild arousal and shook his head to dispel the silly fantasies. Turning off the water and walking back to the house he noticed something. The locked door of the greenhouse now stood open. Had someone come and opened it as he stood watching the flowers?
“Maybe the water opened the lock.” thought Kenneth with confusion.

He hooked a cautious foot around the bottom corner of the door and pulled it towards him, widening the opening. The drip-dripping of the wet plants was the only sound. There was no one in the greenhouse, unless they were concealed amongst the orchids at the far back. Kenneth crept through the trickling green damp and approached the back.

No one was hiding in the orchids. Kenneth smiled ruefully at how spooked he got and sheepishly rubbed the back of his balding head. He was certainly having a funny day. He wondered if maybe it was the grief from his mother’s death.

Now that he was in the greenhouse, he took a more careful look around. Everything was so carefully tended. He had never seen brighter flowers or greener leaves. In the center were the fruit plants. A small lemon tree, some strawberry plants, and a fig tree. The figs were a happy purple, looking quite ripe. He had never eaten a fig before. Finding a basket under the table, Kenneth gathered some figs and took them in the house to ripen. He made sure to close the door to the greenhouse.

He woke from his afternoon nap to the scent of sweet nectar. The small basket of figs lay on the windowsill next to a dish of toothpicks and a glass of water. Fruit ripens quickest on a bright window ledge. He remembered reading that in a magazine at the dentist a few months ago. The sun had moved to blanket them, making the figs leak with joy.
Golden honey juice seeped from the anus-like hole at the bottom of the round ended fig. “What a tasty looking fruit,” Kenneth thought drowsily. Rising, he noticed a book on the table at the end of the couch where he had napped. It was a book on fruit bearing plants. He flipped to the section on figs. It might be nice to know what to expect before eating some fruit he had never tried.

The Common Fig, *Ficus Carica* was not a fruit. Kenneth raised his eyebrows in surprise. A fig was something called a synconium. The slightly chewy flesh was only stem material. Kenneth knew that fruits grow from flowers. This ‘fruit’ had its flowers within. Self-sustaining amazons, these flowers needed no pollination to flourish. The text got a little too scientific after that and so he closed it. He liked to read things like this, neat facts that he could mention at work or to the attractive woman at the grocery store.

“Did you know that figs aren’t fruits?” he’d say and then she’d laugh and say “Let’s go to dinner and you can tell me all about it.” Giving the cover a second glance he saw that the author of the book was his late mother.

He returned his attention to the figs. The thick skin had deepened to a dark purple in the heat of his short afternoon nap and the figs were clearly ready to be eaten. Kenneth picked one up by the stem, still a milky drop of sap oozing from the severed stalk. He looked at it up close for a minute, and tongued the rough outside skin on a strange impulse. It felt sort of sexy and he licked the fruit again. His tongue skimmed some of the leaking nectar and the sweetness was divine. Probing lasciviously he found the small
hole at the bottom filled with nectar and he could no longer wait. He chomped the whole fig, leaving the green stem behind with ragged edges. The sensations were such that although he enjoyed it immensely he immediately wished he had seen what it looked like inside first. There were slimy bits and crunchy parts and Kenneth was filled with a desire to investigate. The sweetness had a thick gummy consistency as if the fruit innards were already jam. Swallowing with relish, he greedily reached for the next, the big one with rich purple, almost black skin. The nectar dripped out of the fig and his tongue darted out to catch it. Again he probed with his tongue in the nectar opening at the bottom, this time pushing deeper into the moist cavity. His insistence broke the skin of the fig and by gently pulling the split apart, he revealed the inside of the false fruit.

The dark purple skin had a thick layer of pithy white that changed into pink as it neared the center. The pink had short fleshy tentacles, closely packed in a sea of shiny jelly lumps that ended in golden flowers and seeds. Nestled in the flowers that grew in the deep center lay a tiny naked girl. Her eyes were closed and she lay as though asleep. Kenneth held the two ripped halves of fig in his hand and ate the half that did not have the girl in it.

“Definitely more delicious now that I’ve seen the inside,” he thought.

The girl lay still, her body covered with the sticky nectar. It brought a delicate golden sheen to her pink skin, she looked soft and dewy. Kenneth raised a thick finger and gently nudged her body. She was soft, but she did not move.
Her legs were together and she rested on her hip. Her top half splayed out limply, jostled from the splitting of the fig. She was not more than two inches long. He got a toothpick from the dish on the table and gently poked her. She did not move, but he could see her chest rise and fall ever so slightly. She was alive, that was certain. She had small budding breasts tipped with dark puffy nipples. Kenneth poked her breast and watched with delight as her tiny nipple hardened. He used the toothpick to move her body around so that she lay flat on her back. He pushed her legs apart and saw her pink hairless vagina. She was a child still. Looking at something so tiny with such intensity made his eyes hurt. They felt crossed and bulging.

He continued his examination. She had tender limbs and long golden hair, slick and shiny. He got the glass of water and gently poured it over his hand and the girl who still lay in her fig half. She looked even more fresh and appealing after the water had bathed her and he felt his blood stir mightily. Her tiny mouth had sweet pink lips that were parted with her unconscious breath. Her legs were still open and he used the toothpick to spread them farther. Only his fingers were engaged in the action but his blood ran faster. He gazed with unabashed desire at her nubile body. His dick was getting hard and he had to stop and put the toothpick in his mouth to unbutton his jeans with one hand and let the beast out. The tip in his mouth was sweet, but it was barely enough flavor to cover his tongue. With a sudden gesture, like a bird finding a worm, he jabbed the pick in her leg and watched nectar well up like blood. Opening his mouth he stuck out his
tongue and licked her body, getting another taste of the ambrosia that coated her. He licked her again and stuck the toothpick in hard, skewering her on its length. Raising the girl morsel to his lips, he ate her right off the stick. She had flesh of the sweetest fruit and bones like candy. He grabbed his dick stroked it hard and fast until he spurted semen.

The afterglow of pleasure radiated through him. Kenneth felt strong and brave, like a warrior from ancient times. Pure of heart and valiant, he would gallop across the plains with his sword in hand ready to rescue the damsels in distress. Pliant maidens trapped by evil men, naked and shivering he would clasp them to his armored breast and carry them to safety, where, in gratitude, they would give him the only gift they had to give. Soft bodies enveloped his imagination and he reached for another fig. He pulled it apart to reveal the little whore inside and was surprised to discover there was only pink fig jelly and golden seeds. Where was his princess?

He opened another and another yet found nothing. He left the torn figs on the table and searched in the basket for the biggest one he could find. None rivaled the second he had eaten for size, but he found one so purple it was almost black and thought he had won. Excitedly, he pulled it apart and found a small green girl, unripe and curled into a ball in the center of the fig. No nectar dripped from her. Kenneth was disappointed. He put his shoes on and went outside to the greenhouse, determined to pick more figs and find another sweet child, unconscious, with legs spread.
Acknowledgements

Each of my tales has some link to a traditional tale. There are a multitude of sources for them but for your reading pleasure I will include ways to find some of the variants I used in my writing.

*The Lindworm Trilogy* was thought up while reading from this book:

I did not use any one variant but read from several, a few of which can be found here:
Grundtvig, Swen. *King Lindworm*.
http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/snake.html#lindorm

*The Stairs With No Steps* is derived from my memory of a tale in this book:

*The Swan Maiden* came from a book:

with additional sources at:
http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/swan.html
Red Hood was heavily influenced by:

Figs came from my memories of Hans Christian Andersen’s *Thumbelina*. The psychology behind it was influenced by:


Selected Bibliography


