



[re]construction
of the
necromancer

Hannah V Warren

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for the girls with moss in their hair

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GUIDE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL BODIES

Eat nothing. Then eat everything you can find. Berries & leaves. Gnaw on the bones of dead limbs. Count in ribcages & opossum teeth. Wrap yourself up somewhere. A bricked house with eight walls. The ballooned lungs of a beached whale. The rotting insides of a forest. Safe but wolves. You'll sense nothing but your first scale snapping. Don't pick at it. This is utopia. Close your eyes & feel the way skin sloughs from your hips. Touch that part inside you. The part that seems papershred & glass. Seal it with hot stones. Nurture your womb with lava. Emerge from your lair writhing & monstrous. Crooked spine. Black eyes. Rusting vocal cords. Use your new incisors like leeches & suck everything dry as pennynails. Grow your hair like scissors. Reach inside a man's chest with alligator fingers & slash him small as molecules. Be gentle with your body. Be gentle.

I will be more than breadcrumbs
more than the smell of Hansel's hair
soft & brown & burning

FORGETTING THE ROUGH OF CALLOUSES

I don't remember the thick way
Hansel scrunched his mouth when I stitched
his lips together
 watching as he swallowed arsenic
 watching as he swallowed his own tongue
he was three years older than me but

 I can still feel
his hands clutching at my young hips
begging me not to tell our birth mother
 who left our bodies to melt in the forest
with coyote & fungus & peppermint
when she was too hungry to hold us

 my new mother is badger
teeth & claws & sinew
she will slice your belly pulpy thin she will plant
 nightshade in your ribcage
 & teach me how to tear you apart

touch my thighs & I will grow long & writhing
 I will unhinge my jaw & swallow you whole
you will wither inside me

DISCARDING HANSEL'S HANDS AS UNFIT FOR EATING

I.

Gretel's calves tremble hard & cold as windchimes. Her knuckles bleed, smudging across Hansel's chin as she cleanses his skin with oil. She wipes away forest dirt & the filth of poverty, even though the unbirth mother tells her all will burn away in the fire. Gretel drips oil in Hansel's open eyes & tells him to stop crying.

II.

The unbirth mother hums as she shows Gretel how to move her hands. This is how you wrap the herbs with string. This is how you mix a poison to freeze his muscles. This is how you thread a needle. This is how you tie a knot. No, not that way. This way. This is how you stack the wood to spread heat through the oven. This is how you slice carrots & onions & celery. This is how you use flint & stone to spark fire.

III.

Hansel feels warm for the first time in a decade.

IV.

The birth mother sells her children's clothes. She buys seeds&seeds&seeds. The hard earth behind her home tears away her fingernails. She considers how lucky her children are to have each other in the forest,

how they'll die together from the bitter cold while
birth mother & silent father shrivel in hunger, their
ribs expanding from their sides like whale skeletons.

V.

The forest sends its weakest roots to grasp at the birth
mother as she scratches the earth. They suckle her
skin & pull her gently toward the dirt. When she
leaves her dead garden, the forest waits for her return.

TEACHING THE UNBIRTH MOTHER TO MAKE FOCACCIA

I read somewhere that focaccia isn't as thick as my unbirth mother makes it.
I try to show her with my hands, pouring on oil&oil&oil, filling thumbprints

with oil. If the bread's too thin, says my unbirth mother, we can't fill it
with liver & onions, but I push her hands away gently & sweep the dough

into the oven. I stand with my hips pressed against the heat & pick at my hair,
braided with rotmint & cotton strips of my brother's shirt. I can feel

my unbirth mother watching me. My chest moves the air at night, crackling
the foundation of our saccharine home, already unstable & over baked.

The forest tells me my unbirth mother fears I will grow too durable & my body
will overcome my mind. The forest reminds me it needs only one of us.

REPLACING THE HEARTH IN THE BIRTH MOTHER'S HOUSE

Our birth mother led us hand in hand into the forest
& I could feel her knuckles crumbling with hunger.

Her eyes cold & void plucked at my unclothed legs.
I wanted to unbutton my chest & pull away skin

from muscle so she could consume me without guilt.
Hansel knew nothing—he was flexible in body starved

but full flush & glancing at me behind our birth mother's
back. Her grip felt nighttime loose as I stumbled

& my eyes quietly closed against papershred forest.
In his sleep Hansel jostled me awake, his back sliding

against mine & I shivered from his gooseprickle heat.
I saw a dense red glow from a gap in the trees &

my ribcage thickened with the smell of gingerbread.
Already my hair was splitting for antlers—already

I felt the barebristle ache of my body reconstructing
into something that felt no remorse for her birth mother.

FORGETTING THE SHIVER OF WINTERSKIN

when I found the parents who left us
 alone & bony in winter
I set fire to their house

it was made of nothing but wood
& moss & broken furniture

the pitcher of water on the table
mirrored a body I'd never seen before
—my shoulders scaled opaque
my mouth curved & beakish
 but my eyes were still
the same color as Hansel's

the firecrackle stormed my ears &
I wound through the flames skinbare
 the heat warming & safe
as I lapped the burn from the air
 igniting my lungs
& scorching away my clothes but
leaving my flesh exposed &
 smooth as hearth ash
 hard as aged cast iron

flamelicked
 I heard my birth mother's voice
fade as smoke curdled the house

listening to shouts from other rooms
I lay on the smallest bed
my legs overstretching the mattress
I used to share with Hansel's
barbed hands

SEMI-PERMANENT GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING GRETTEL

You don't have to be told twice. You've read the story. Brother & sister trade bones or cleverness for survival. They leave the forest with arms wrapped around each other. Eyes full of silver & rubies. By now you've noticed something is wrong here: this Gretel grows sideways. When you hear the name Gretel, who do you see? She must have a face. Squeeze your eyes tight & think. The face. Is it covered in freckles or barnacles? Move your eyes downward. Maybe her arms end in soft nimble fingers. Or in pincers. Maybe Gretel's legs tremor beneath the ropes the forest witch tied around her. Or they've hardened into tree trunks & right beneath her pulpskin are generations of mother spiders who forget to eat their young. Whatever you see—whatever images of Gretel plant most firmly—you must know that Gretel is more than her thin frame, more than Hansel's hands. More than her birth & unbirth mothers. More than the ivy growing wayward from her wrists. Gretel is kindling. Any moment she'll set the trees aflame. Gretel's voice in song is smooth as river stone & oh how the forest stops to listen. Fawns melt their own muscles when she's near & gophers faint against the walls of their burrow homes. The stream begins to flow backward. You must know that Gretel never asked for neglect or a brother. Or antlers or scales or extra sets of teeth. Gretel never wanted anything more than a warm belly & a quiet place to rest.

FORGETTING THE PRICE OF LIVERWURST

when I'm alone, the color of dried moss
reminds me I used to have a brother

he wouldn't have loved me in this body
surrounded by a forest of leaves & bones

I reconstruct who I may have been
before my unbirth mother taught me

to drain femurs for marrow or to ribbon
thyme & rosemary together for roasting

two eyes & calloused fingertips rough
from shelling beans & skinning potatoes

my body is growing & I wonder if I'll have
cartilage thin wings or a throat full of gills

a month ago my unbirth mother would
have known how to pluck my feathers

she would have sweet thickened my hips
with ginger & told me that growing girls

need plumstreusel & sinewy calves
to feed the pressure in their wombs

in this forest home I can tell us apart
by who still wakes in the morning

our skins blend together but I remember
the shape of my knees & the thin curve

that defined my ribs before I grew here
& before I started slipping small poisons

into my unbirth mother's venison stew
her wrists grow small & her mind fleeting

lying in her bed of wintercherry & flaxseed
my unbirth mother cries out for Hansel

forgetting that the grease of his liver
slipped from her fingers years ago

for frying she bucketed the rest & told
me to take it to the forest where the trees
whispered to me that they have suckled
 & fed my unbirth mother for years

SAVING DUSK FOR THE WOLVES

I.

Gretel washes her hands in the barrel by the backdoor, rinsing away blood & salt & fur. The night is nearly soundless. The forest bends to whisper in Gretel's ear. She laughs, shoulders glinting in the early moonlight. Around her neck hangs a stream of moss, growing from her plaited hair.

II.

When she coughs, the unbirth mother sees blood & knows that Gretel has learned to mix potions well. If the unbirth mother hadn't brewed the same poisons, she'd never have known to reach toward the back of the cabinet, tucking into her apron a cure that would keep her alive a few days longer.

III.

Hansel quietly feeds the forest.

IV.

The birth mother scavenges in the forest. She eats bark from the trees like a deer, pulling away strips with her teeth & chewing until her jaw cracks, the sound echoing through the trees.

V.

The forest listens with its roots, whispers to Gretel that she could be more than soft flesh & pleated hair & more than antlers & scales, as well. The forest tells her she could leave these trees empty, could set the world aflame.

FORGETTING THE RESTRICTION OF SKIN

I feel safe when I walk over Hansel's bones
buried beneath spunsugar & honeybee decay

under sediment & fire I imagine
the snap of something ending too early
I imagine that Hansel can feel me dancing

when my unbirth mother died I became hunter
I split a deer carcass ripped skin from muscle

undressing limbs & backstrap
I wrap the fur around my shoulders
the deer & I melt together

I grow hooves
but my teeth remain sharp as arrowheads
& spikes bud from my tail

someone whispers that I am monstrous—
if Hansel can feel me stomping above him
I want him to know I am not a fragile thing

SALVING THE BURN IN MY THROAT

on the day I killed my brother
I ran outside & retched
in a pool of rainwater

the forest shuffled around me
wiping mud & dead leaves
from my knees

my birth mother would have beaten
my chest & shoulders bloody
for wasting food
 on a death so trivial

but my unbirth mother washed
me with her hands gentle &
shaking

 she covered my eyes
with chamomile sachets
& I felt the first feathers
rippling from my spine

FORGETTING HOW TO UNBURY THE UNBIRTH MOTHER

I bury my unbirth mother far from Hansel
far from his cracked pelvis

she seems smaller in the ground
more fragmented
her hands sucked dry as broken twigs

she taught me so many ways to bring her back
to live forever in our candyhouse
but I want to grow long hair again

I want my back to be smooth as lightning
I want to shed this lizard skin & soak in a bath
of lavender & chamomile

until I'm flushed & I don't remember Hansel's
name when my hand is between my thighs

dear unbirth mother
this body does not belong to us

AN EARTHWORM BURROWS DOWN

I watch the children, slow with hunger,
play at the forest edges. Their faces dirty

& desiccated. The forest tells me they've
scavenged their whole lives, living for

their parents' leftovers & more alone
than I've ever been. Their clothes are strings

choking their small bodies. One of the boys
looks like Hansel, but I can't remember that

he was ever so slow-handed. The children
shout with fear as I emerge from the forest,

my back rippling with panther muscle.
They see my sharpened beak—my furred

ankles, my moss hair, my crown of ivy—
& they scatter back toward their homes.

The children will eat tonight, taking the food
I've left for them. Unless their parents find it

& leave their children filled with nothing
but envy. The children see this monstrous

body, feel my breath warm their skin. They
return to the forest's edge hungry & I know

the only things alive here live under the ground.

SURVIVING THE FOREST ALONE

I.

In the middle of the forest, Gretel cooks a rabbit over an open fire & the fat sizzles as it drips onto the flame. Her unbirth mother's crushed cardboard gingerbread house is empty behind her. The caramel chimney stands alone & echoes the moonlight.

II.

The unbirth mother taps within the ground. When spring comes, the earth will thaw, awakening to her thrums.

III.

Hansel's bones are infested with nothing.

IV.

The birth mother spreads throughout the forest. Her hair twines with sapling & bark & pine straw to craft a sparrow's nest. Mushrooms grow from her empty spine. An armadillo saltlicks the ants nurtured by her decay.

V.

The forest wraps around Gretel & keeps her warm even as ice & snow crust the trees & all the animals burrow deeply in the earth. The forest knows Gretel

has never felt needed. The forest knows. The forest knows.

FORGETTING MORE THAN I THOUGHT I WOULD

I left my unbirth mother's home
when I didn't belong there anymore

plucked my way through the forest
scaring away smaller animals

with my scent—pine, decay,
succulent, horehound, ginger

when I came to a stream,
I remembered Hansel, the fog

that twisted from his boiling chin
& the way I told him my unbirth

mother's house would be safe
that she would keep him warm & full

this stream & I decompose together
my fingernails melt away in the water

leaving talons I don't want anymore
this stream whips them gut dry

the water wants to pull me inside
thinking my gills & scales belong

I want to be flesh & warm & unscathed
but skin bruises easier than exoskeleton

GUIDE FOR STATIC BODIES

Eat nothing. Then eat everything you can find. Hard candy & soft foods. With raw gums, suck the marrow from leftover bones. Count in ribcages & your bruises. Wrap yourself up somewhere. Closets of sawdust & ant smell. An empty cornfield with cicada song. Plunged into boiling broth where you feel nothing but acidburn. Safe but wolves. Your birth & unbirth mothers are arthritic & wicked. Don't think about them. This is eutopia. Close your eyes & feel the brass muscles in your thighs. Touch that part inside you. The part that seems papershred & glass. Let it reach out & harden your skin. Fill your mouth with lemon bitters. Emerge from your hell thriving & livid. Dull teeth. Lava eyes. Fingernails chipped & dirt-swollen. Grow your fury like scissors. Reach inside your skin & sharpen your own edges. Be gentle with your body. Be gentle.

REMEMBERING THE HEAT OF BONFIRES

It isn't until I'm deep in the forest that I resolve
to be a necromancer but not the one you expect.

The trees whisper that my body is built on poultice
& flame & cannibalism. Still they feed me with their
fingertips, stretching their limbs & trembling beneath
the weight of berries & dried meats that smell like home.

When I walk through their branches, the trees pull
away disruptive parts of me—molasses & horns.

I crawl into the famine of racoons then lie prone
on a moss bed waiting for someone to consume me.

My skin is warm & undemanding. My hair is braided
with flowers. Vines lift me from the ground, pushing me

onto a stoneless trail. Leaves that have swathed me
for years fleck away the last of my scales & they melt

in the soil like apple skins. The forest edges me forward
& the path turns to breadcrumbs. I feel a sunlit glow

at the end of the trail & smell the warmth of baking. I
wish I could grow mammoth tusks & wrap myself safely

in thick layers of winterfat. Instead, I leave the forest alone, carrying the weight of the dead on my hipbones.

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