

I'M NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

I'm not like the others, I tell the lost little boy wandering in the woods. He hides behind a tree with long, wispy branches and leaves. When he asks, I allow him to touch my stray feathers that will harden soon into green scales.

Are you frightened?

He is small and too scared to answer.

I explain that I am somewhere between good and bad. *Do you know what that means?*

He shakes his head, his hair briefly wild.

I am becoming. Like you, although I will become something else. I'm not finished yet.

He searches for an escape but there is none. He sees that I am stronger and faster. He reluctantly curls into himself at the bottom of the tree, flattening sparse grass beneath him. He is wearing a red shirt in the middle of the forest as if to inflame the animals.

Is your mother nearby? I search with my eyes and pointed ears.

He turns his tiny head back and forth as if to check that it still works.

I touch his hair. My long fingernails fall through the strands. I sniff his skin with its fruits and nuts and his mother's milky odor.

I won't eat you. You are too little and too bony.

The boy sighs, asks, *How do I get out of here?*

I point, crooking my finger here then there.

I'm not like the others, I reiterate. *Come, I'll show you the way.*

We saunter towards the edge of trees before there is a field. The lost boy is slow. I move behind him, lick his neck to encourage him to go faster.

When I taste him I can't help myself, like the others.

BIRD

Red apples lay rotting around a tree under broken ribs of sunlight. Something crawls out from the fallen bird, the size of a wrist. It lays on its side and heaves large breaths. Pink skin, shriveled, with comb-like claws, I lift it, hold it against my chest. It mewls. I care for it clearly and suddenly.

We all come from the same place, I whisper into its forming ears.

It stares at me with enormous dust-colored eyes, in which I see myself dissolving.

We're going home, I murmur, warming it in my sweater.

My home has edges and corners and walls. I explain the iron bed, a chair, the noisy television, a sagging sofa, the refrigerator and how structures contain us, ferment us. It mewls and I try lettuce, berries, cake, and meat. It eats them all. The first night it sleeps in a basket.

The next morning large, iridescent red and blue feathers have sprouted along its sides. I caress its head as the signs of a beak appear. Again it eats hungrily.

You have revived expectation in me so I will call you Bird, I tell it and explain my own problems with poor circulation, ennui, continuous sighing.

Bird spreads its luminous wings, cackles at me. It eats hardily and afterwards waddles to the refrigerator in the kitchen, pecking on the white metal door.

You are a surprise like a new poem, I say as it clatters over the chair and the bed, hurls itself at the window that displays swirling treetops and falling leaves. It sits in front of the babbling television with me.

I love you already and soon you will learn how to talk, I exclaim, handing it some popcorn.

It eats again and one morning when I wake up, Bird resembles me, is me. Bird stands, sighs, and walks out of the house, shutting the front door, escaping. Bird never looks back.

SOMEONE ELSE'S FEELINGS

I'm borrowing a man's face on my orange barnacled body to greet people along my stroll in the park of this antagonistic city. I'm getting used to a place that can change at any moment: skyscrapers rearrange themselves, shrinking then groping toward the expansive sky; people are replaced; traffic moves every which way; animals survive. A radio on a blanket announces a new drama, implying danger around each corner. I close this man's unfamiliar eyelids and see predictions for the future, this city under water, spasmodic bombs, a nearby city burning. These eyes flip open.

I speak to the borrowed man, *Did you need emergencies in your life?*

I used to keep a photograph of the woman I loved in my pocket along with a multi-tool knife just in case. It heightened my shabby life, he explains.

I growl, *Ah yes, conflict.* I lick the man's lips.

Maybe you can find those beloved objects for me. I would feel better having them nearby again, he politely requests.

Maybe, I answer, sitting on a bench. *I need a beer,* I say, which I've never had before.

Passersby nod at me in the man's face. I try a smile, which is stiff and uncomfortable. My heart is congealing below. I miss the strange, menacing creature I was. A child stops for a moment, as if he recognizes me and wants to say something, but he changes his mind. He leaves. I miss the urge to eat him. Instead I want to apologize.

I'm scared, the man explains.

It happens. But what I really mean is, *Untangle me. Please.*

THE NEXT HISTORY OF ACCIDENTS

Foreign words burst from the child before he magically disappears, becoming tiny bubbles that rise and float away, vanishing into the sky. Because his mother wishes him gone every morning we all line up in front of her hoping the same will happen to each one of us.

I truly don't know where he went, his mother claims, but, he's free.

We don't care, we all say, meaning anywhere but here.

On a normal day in the camp, we recoil from each other, refugees dressed in layers the deep gray color of bad weather. We are thin, bony, weak, in our tattered clothes and we shuffle between watery gruel, the medical tent, and the barterers near the barbed wire fence. All of us are of a certain persuasion and were rounded up by the military, individually as well as whole families of children and grandparents. There is only so much to go around beneath the ruthless gray slice of sky, with its unassembled clouds, like some rotten pastry thrown upward by a guard toward a ceiling, sticking above.

I'm here by mistake, each one of us tells anyone who will listen, someone adjusting their shoes full of holes and pebbles or a little girl playing with an old newspaper. We're always trying to share our stories and excuses.

Right now the mother stands in the center of the bare yard, littered with two broken chairs, conjuring, and screaming, *I miss you. I didn't see it coming!* She tears out her dirty, limp, dark hair.

What's it? We ask, assuming she means fate or god or an accident. If only we could discover the answer, we think.

I need to take care of him, to be with him.

Somewhere a baby is crying and something metal hits something wooden. The odor of urine and rotten food surrounds us. This has happened to people by people before and will happen again.

The woman's child hasn't returned.

IF I'M QUIET YOU WON'T NOTICE ME

I'm enormous, with purple spots and red eyes, and I used to perform on street corners by spinning as fast as I could to music. Until the audience called me an abomination. My show songs caused people's noses to run. Children caught them in nearby bushes. The children attached them carefully to disguise their smaller faces but eventually didn't enjoy the way they looked. Dogs stole the discarded noses and they weren't seen again. But me, I know a good performance is worth another eye, a nose, a mouth.

I move closer to the sea to get away from the people.

I see you, a little girl screams from some frothy bushes.

No, you don't, I exclaim, cowering behind a shipwrecked wooden boat on this out-of-the-way beach. I hide myself deeper in a hole near the hull. It smells of rot and salt.

What are you doing there? My family left me here and I don't know where they are, she says sadly.

Gulls trill overhead, water winks in the distance. Sand under my feet tries to swallow me, but I'm too big, so it veils my feet, occasionally falling on my arm too. She is afraid to come closer.

Nothing. I'm being quiet, I explain. I think that I will accept whatever the world wants to offer me. I say, *My silence is safer*.

Why?

Because I'm different, too big, and strange.

Really? The girl creeps around the beached vessel, her fingers clicking against its side.

When I see her black claws and furry green face, she makes me laugh. She lunges on all fours to tickle me. She is so tiny I decide to keep her.