



plump

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By winter, my brother is in danger of eating everything. Bread, soup, leg of lamb. Everything goes into his mouth and doesn't come out. Nothing on our plates but a mess of bones. As a girl, I specialize in restriction, my apron looser every day while his flesh splits round his middle. It's a hunger we throw anything and everything into. Books, table legs, the last of the lamps. Last night he devoured the sink and started in on the sofa. No forks, just his greasy fists. Sometimes, I faint in the forest and wake up covered in moss. The landscape taking me back from this world that wants, so badly, to be eaten.

For every witch in every story, there is a girl, stumbling blind through the forest. A flourish of gingham and eyelet apron strings. Dirty black boots. For every child, a mountain of desiccated locusts, a plague of bloody eggs. No one would have guessed her a changeling if it weren't for her mouth, sewn up at night and opened again every morning filled with bees. When the villagers came for her, she was in the kitchen, making soup from the head of an ox. Sewing a doll made of straw that looked vaguely like her mother. How they dragged her on her knees to the forest, where they tried to fix her. Couldn't quite kill her. Too many holes in her body to fill. Too many hives in her belly. For every witch left bloody by the side of the road, there is a child slowly eating its way from the inside out, gorging on honey, sugared and seething.

...not that
...ing to see her a
... to be my back
... rest week that was my
... not try away from it
... and she was so good in the
... she didn't cry like but she had
... plenty of company for nearly every
... body, but she came back
... to see her. We have had such good
... from ever since we got here
... that we have enjoyed the air
... at late and they enjoy her
... that we see the air taking
... back. She has to sit
... in her room.





No one can survive on a woodsman's wage, the fetch and fever of the ax. The fervor of chopping. A wife wants a coat. A wife wants a forest of furred animals moving soft inside her. Wild and wedded to the roving eye. Eventually everything strangled by rage, vines blocking the light. Yesterday, there was a coyote in the tree outside the bedroom window. She would easily sacrifice a child or two to the old gods. Burn the bone stew. Bury the mandrake root in the backyard. Birth another baby plump and bright, golden as a god. No one can survive on broth alone. All of these children, their mouths opening and opening and eating everything she has. They fill the woods and keep turning up at the door with nothing but *want* and an armful of spoons.

Under the quilt, I can burn entire villages with my breath. Nothing left but fish bones and fairy wings trembling in the breeze. The blighted, blackened oaks. Daylight pulls me back through the keyhole and out into the open. My rope snapped in half by wind. There, the trapper's son says he loves me, but, really, he loves the hunt more. My ankle caught in his snare. His fist around my throat. I don't dare follow the river because the river deceives. The dark pebbles I leave nightly between here and there. Morning, I wake smelling of sweetgrass and livestock. I trade an ounce of fat soaked in salt for his kiss.

Each winter , we play house in the crawl space beneath the cabin, hauling blankets and dishes down through the little trapdoor. The mother and the father, we serve each other mud pies and soup made of stones. We lie down, like the mother and father, in the dark and do not touch. We lie down and cradle the baby made of rags and sing ourselves to sleep. But it's cold in the dirt. Cold in the narrow black. Spiders crawl over us and my dress tears on a nail. Hansel steals matches and holds them one by one until they gutter. I cry and try to spit wash my face, brush the cobwebs from my hair. Like the mother and the father, eventually we give up the game and burn the baby for warmth.







That autumn, hunger comes crashing through the bushes, all thrashing arms and howling. Every cupboard rendered bare. Every jar in the pantry rotten. Stalks in the field wither while the goats catch fever one by one. Mother blames me for my sin, but I am godly as still water, as saintly as a cup. Father prays and leaves sacrifices in the barn. A bowl of tallow. A loaf of molded bread. But still nothing. Hansel wanders into the woods looking for deer and returns with a three headed rabbit. Autumn comes and undoes us one by one.

If you starve yourself enough, you can almost see god, a thin penumbra of white around every figure at a certain distance. As such, I mistake the witch's house for a chapel. Her garden for graves. It's easy to misinterpret the woods, every tree a man, his arms reaching out for you, catching on your cape. I mistake my brother for a bear. A bundle of sticks for bones. When the witch comes for us, I tuck myself into her chest like a cat. She smells like honey and lilacs. It's easy to mistake mere kindness for love. Breadcrumbs for stars.

Soon, my brother and I grow plump on honey and pies. Grow slow and drowsy on sweet cream butter slathered over bread. Well fed and fattening, we loll in bed til afternoon, reading books and listening to the witch tell stories about the devil. At night, she opens the cage and in we go. Morning, she unlocks it with her key Hansel dreams of gingerbread boys, running fast through the forest. I dream of pastries, sticky and decadent between my fingers. A frenzy of *eat* or *be eaten*. So I eat, and my body goes soft and lovely. Everything hard rounding to curves. At night, she opens her mouth and in we go. The bees are soft against my eyelids. At morning, we emerge, slathered in pollen and dazed.







Before long, the animals begin to gather at the edge of the woods. Rabbits, deer, the tiniest field mice. They've been waiting for this fairy tale for years. The witch calls us *Greta* and *Henry*, gathers us at her knee. There is the air of an event about to happen, a disturbance in the air currents. Because we are cautious, she lures us with maple candies and milk. Doses us with lithium and licorice. I've never wanted so badly to be swallowed whole. Can feel all my hollows fill with honey. Nothing so sweet as the girl who wandered away from the path. Nothing so delicious as that sort of fear.

We write letters home and bury them in the forest. *Dear father--we are warm and fine and still alive. Dear father--we grow fat with hives.* It's only a matter of time until we forget our old selves and their hunger, trade scarcity for plenty. Trade skin and bones for rooms of gold unfolding inside. Before we forget our real names left unspoken for years. Grow older and woozy with sugar, lose our molars in the middle of the night. Only a matter of time until the witch wants to eat my brother and I let her, his flesh sweet between our teeth. . The crackle and snap of his fat in the oven. I bury his shin bone in the clearing. *Dear father--the woods are lovely this time of year.*



