Between Two Worlds

Stephanie Tillman

Western Kentucky University, Stephanie.Tillman033@topper.wku.edu

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
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In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Stephanie Tillman

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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Tom Hunley, Director of Thesis

David LeNoir

Ted Hovet

Dean, Graduate School  Date
5-12-15
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While I largely embarked on my thesis journey alone, there are people who gave me the encouragement I needed to keep working. This is one of the biggest projects I’ve ever tackled, and I couldn’t have done it without the patient reminders of those who are closest to me. By getting the courage to start on this as early as possible, I was able to work diligently and not worry about how much time I had left. Dr. Tom and my classmates—especially Kathy, Melissa, and Dori—in our writing workshop were amazing with their critiques. I genuinely felt like I had a fun project to work on because of them.

Completing such a large project can be difficult at times. At those times, I was able to talk to Cody Spraggins and my mother, Debra Tillman, about my struggles. They’re my biggest supporters; they believe in me far more than I’ve ever believed in myself. My mom has encouraged me since I was very young to pursue writing, and Cody has been nothing less than an angel when it comes to my writing.

Dr. Tom has also been there every step of the way, taking a professional eye to my work to push me to do even better. I have often been able to use the first draft for many projects and papers in the past. This thesis went through approximately 10 extremely thorough drafts, having gone through an intensive comb each time. In the time I’ve spent working on this, my horizons have been so much more expanded than I could have imagined. I’ve really begun to learn to find gems inside pieces that I didn’t think would work at all. Having outside perspectives allowed me to find what shone among haphazard words.

There have been times when I felt like I wasn’t getting anywhere, but both sides
of my family have been so proud and encouraging of me through all of this. I don’t think I’ll ever forget how interested in my academic career they have been. Each and every one of them has made me feel like I’m being worth being listened to, which is one of the most valuable things that you can give a person.

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“Original Sin”—evocative and powerful words, but what if they were applied to one of the world’s most popular fairy tales? This thesis explores Snow White in the context of the Seven Deadly Sins and the grand fall of Adam and Eve. The forbidden fruit manifests itself in different ways, pulling the prim and proper princess into places she never could have imagined. But what of the Wicked Queen, here known as Lilith? She too feels the bite of the world’s sick sense of humor, exacting revenge on those who have wronged her.

Are these poems about them? Or are they about the author? Perhaps they are both: the innocent children learn quickly of life’s cruelty, handling it with equal parts grace and selfishness. Dive into the minds of Lilith and Snow White as they explore what it means to be themselves in a world that doesn’t care if they end up happy.
Genesis of Darkness

wrath, touches troubled
whose fury hurled whirlwinds of tempestuous fire.

a cocoon is formed: ambitious, breathing, sucking

disastrous twilight
and devils of dread
ran purple to the sea here, blood staining, etching an ethereal temper rifling the bowels of a mind not changed by place or time.

An eternity passes all at once, each moment hurtling as an egg, so fragile, yet the ember remains.

A forest in chains and flicking flames swallowed the falling star, and burned with liquid fire, hurling hideous defiance combusting at Heaven with brittle, vain, earnest.

The calamity surges, deliberate, by the choking moon and howls at
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
whether upheld by chance or fate,
an organ of remorse and lasting pain:

a baby named Lilith bloomed and broke free.

A fair portion of this poem belongs to John Milton's first canto of Paradise Lost. However, significant liberties have been taken with it; may Milton not roll around in his grave.

Blackout poems involve taking a piece of text and removing words in order to create new phrases and meanings, thus giving a different sort of life to something that may be difficult or uninteresting to read at first glance.
**Tainted Phoenix**

Lilith began life as a rag doll: 
button eyes gleaming in darkness,  
permanent smile sewn on,  
would go anywhere as long as she wasn’t alone.

Her pudgy fingers were always stretched—  
for a hand to hold  
or demanding gifts?

Pristine frilly frock—  
lovely as a doily,  
as fragile as vintage lace—  
hand-sewn by a servant,  
the barren one.

Dragged around,  
neglected,  
and beaten,  
she grew dirty—  
unclean by advisors’ leers  
and wandering hands.

“It’s a compliment, dear.”

Yarn hair in knots,  
Mary-Janes scuffed,  
she stands on her balcony,  
arms spread out  
and fingers splayed.

She longs to fly,  
to re-forgé her violated flesh  
into fiery plumage.
Sweet Dreams

Lights out.
Who cares?

Leather-bound spellbooks—
Lilith’s only friends.

People couldn’t be trusted.
That was something she’d learned long ago.

Revenge would be much, much sweeter
than any mollifying, honey-bleeding cheesecake.

No longer would she let them force her to sleep.

No longer would she let them force their hands onto her budding breasts.

No longer would she let them force some sticky hard candy down her throat
just so she would be quiet and choke, not scream.

Her bed stinks of sweat and tears
and something she couldn’t name—
it left too harsh a sheen
of bitter-twisted memories
on her shriveling taste buds.

The best book’s scent of musky oil
with a hint of spearmint
soothes her mind’s basilisk
that only wishes to unearth
the repressed thoughts of
what happened after every breakfast
and while the ladies powdered their noses every evening.

The worn table of contents
glimmers with potential:
• death,
• destruction,
• agony,
• a rain of blood

She smiles as she drifts off,
dreaming of her reign of darkness and pain.

Her time will one day come.
The Losses and Vanity of an Angel Falling Rapidly

Once upon a time, the beautiful queen Lilith didn’t love her husband’s daughter.

It was always something with that pointless child—a toothache, a hangnail, a nightmare, falling off her horse and breaking her ankle.

The queen couldn’t quite figure out why she was supposed to care. (She had better things to do and worry about.)

But she had her looks, and she had her love.

Lilith combed her hair exactly 100 times each morning and each night.

Each day, her husband would tell her just how beautiful she was.

And the queen would feign modesty and blush every time.

The king would give her flowers for every birthday, one rose for each year.

His daughter, however, would try to mimic her stepmother’s routine, tripping underfoot as she pretended to check her teeth.

What a nuisance! Lilith would snap at the girl and tell her not to interfere with grown-up things.

The child would sniffle,
produce a few tears, and shuffle away,
her porcelain head drooping
like the little glutton china doll she clearly was.

The king wished they would be civil,
but that was silly,
in the queen’s ever-so-humble opinion.

She was an adult.
She could handle this.

The girl needed to learn how the world really worked.
It was an important lesson,
especially for one so obviously dimwitted and self-absorbed.

Lilith had tried to show the child how to paint her fingernails,
but the polish had ended up all over the woven rugs and carpets.

“You foolish girl!
Can’t you pay attention?”
she snapped.

“It was an accident,”
the girl mumbled.

Lilith’s warning dripped with venom:
“Don’t let it happen again.”

As if in spite of Lilith’s happiness,
the child would always get in the way,
a clueless interloper
like a dog in the kitchen
while dinner is cooking.

The child’s whining
became much worse
when the king died—
worse than the queen could have imagined.

Lilith never even got to see
the mangled remains.

The queen requested privacy.
She wanted to mourn in peace.
But the brat would sit outside
her door, crying dumb tears.
There was no way the child
could ever understand
her step-mother,
  the way bits of fruit
  would get caught
  in her throat,
  the way she felt her chest constricting
  when she had news and no one to share it with,
  the way she felt glass shards in her palms
  when she wanted her husband’s hand to hold.

But she at least had her beauty left.

The mirror would confirm
it for her any time she wanted,
as it had always done.

One day,
the cruel pane changed its mind.

The queen’s face turned
blister-red in rage.

No way would this brat,
this spoiled pre-teen,
take the one thing
the queen had left,
for she had certainly
lost her patience.
The Coming Purge

The crumbling whisper of failure as a woman strangles Lilith’s lungs and shakes her bones.

“I can’t be seen like this.”
Mumbles in the dark.

Who would even look?

She clenches her hand around the velvet curtains, draws them to hide her shame.

A honeycomb of paths lay before her, the possibilities gleaming in the hidden stars.

The only one she can see is food, the only control she has left.

Chocolate ganache, strawberry shortcake, and black forest trifle dance before her mind’s eye, singing a little ditty she can’t quite translate.

She can feel the bile bubbling, her throat itching to grow raw and burn, burn, burn just like her mind, just like the tendrils of anger that blind her, just like how she craves to see that foul goody-two-shoes burst into flames so the blame game can end, so she can stop feeling like it’s her fault, and the tears spill early, long before the decadent, dreamy food can grace her lips.

The taste of icing lingers in the cracks of her mouth, whispering that there is more, that there will always be more, more, more.

All she has to do is ask.

Her mascara bleeds down her face like tar as she grasps at her chest.
Someone else must feel the same coarse strings of agony.  
Someone else must spiral with her into the quiet-at-last abyss.  
Someone else must suffer for her loss that came an eternity too soon.  

If she must shrivel and shrink into choking nothing,  
then she most certainly will not do it alone.
Lilith’s Plan A(ple)

A sneer curled the queen’s lips upward.
A fragile flower like her step-daughter
couldn’t fight back against her favorite huntsman.

Bloodlust bubbled up in his eyes, pooling into a grim smile,
the kind that we all have on the inside
when we know someone will get what they don’t realize they deserve.

He pulled his stringy hair back into a stubby ponytail
and grunted before he turned to leave.

“It should be simple.
It should.
It should.
It should,”
the queen murmured with dead eyes,
knocking three times.

When was the last time the threes hadn’t curled around her ears like expectant smoke?

Lilith reclined in her gilded throne,
   sliding into the red silk cushions,
   stretching her legs out,
   and crossing her ankles
   as a sly smirk crawled like a millipede
   across her plump, ruby lips.

Brainless Snow White—
the sugar-laden name was nauseating
even in the queen’s mind—

would lose her way in the twisting woods;

   or get ripped apart by wild branches,
   with twigs piercing that
   supple, delicate skin
   like sultry vampire bites;

   or even be gored by a mother bear,
   the lethal claws sinking into the girl’s
   starkly pristine, alabaster flesh,
   separating her limbs into
   oozing, unrecognizable hunks
of sinew and crushed ashen bone.

No mercy for her husband; no mercy for his daughter.

It wouldn’t take long for her huntsman to procure the girl’s dripping heart and shake the blood away, crimson droplets spattering and staining the vile clusters of poison ivy.

A hoarse laugh rose in Lilith’s chest—oh, how her hands would shake as she undid the heart-shaped latch so she could see that foul leech finally suffer as she had.

The organ would lie still inside its velvet-lined box, the cold enameling of the brass case glistening as the woman acquired her prize, her new treasured trophy to embalm and display.

Even still, her mouth watered, wondering what it would taste like, wondering if the girl’s beauty would become her own if she were to pierce the leathery bulb with her canines, ravenous for the sweet taste of Snow White’s untimely death.

She drummed her fingers on the hollow, rosewood armrest.

It was perfect. It was perfect. It was perfect.

“Once again, I’ll be the fairest in the land,” Lilith crowed.

She let loose a heartfelt cackle, a rich gayness ringing up to the vaulted ceiling,
but forgot her repetitions.

Her voice echoed with hollow pride.

“Snow White will be dead by nightfall!”
Love at First Bite

“One bite, and all your dreams will come true."

Why couldn’t Snow White have found that magic apple years ago?

No more would she thanklessly clean cobblestone on her hands and knees day after day after day.

No more would she wistfully wish her step-mother would see that she isn’t a hopeless pile of scum.

No more would she receive hateful stares and judgmental comments over the pettiest of perceived mistakes.

Freedom was finally ripe for the taking.

Snow White rubbed her thumbs along the smooth skin of the apple:

a scrumptious, refreshing snack after being chased through the woods just yesterday.

The old woman’s eyes held a hint of something that Snow White couldn’t recognize.

“Now, make a wish and take a bite.”

The young girl closed her eyes, the way she always had when she lingered over the well with birds singing their hope for their princess to be happy at last.

Her teeth sank into the saccharine fruit, the juices lavishly filling her eager mouth
just like they had when she was small.

Her world faded
as she swooned with
visions of her prince
crooning to her
in the courtyard,
the forest,
the mine,
the village,
the kingdom.

The smears of her lipstick
perfectly framed
the crisp whiteness
of the fruit’s succulent flesh
as the apple rocked
back and forth
after being dropped
by hands as pale
as moonlight.
Forbidden Fruit

One for love,
one for knowledge.

Both were held precious;
both, a dear wish.

Cast away from the arms of luxury,
a woman is blamed for her choice.

Stupid,
dimwit,
gullible,
naive,
foolish,
selfish,
worthless—
“Look at your life;
look at your choices:”

accusations spat like endless strings of barbed wire,
negativity tumbling out of everyone’s mouths
like a pyramid of gumballs.

“It was still my decision,”
she murmurs into the bark of the tree she slumps into.

“My body, my choice.”

The rains crash down upon them,
a torrent of a million choices gone sour.
PERSONAL HELL
Sunday Drive

With strings of fuzzy car lights
crawling down the highway
like brilliant caterpillars
and trees flying by
on wings of leaves,
the breeze is cool,
artificial.
Mellow music whispers
in distant memories,
the smell of a crackling bonfire
almost lingering in the cabin.
Red-gray sky looms above,
clouds obscuring all.
Can you hear the spruces swaying
to the beat of the earth
as they wail in agony
for their dead?
Can you feel the road beneath you
as it longs to tell you
its great deep yearning
to peel into the great beyond?
Can you see the flat street signs
crying for their constant warnings
to be heard?
STOP
Can you, please?
The screaming must end sometime,
even if we only silence
the voices in my head.
Apartment D306

There is nothing poetic about a leather chair with stiff arms that dig into your knees.

There is nothing poetic about a ceramic cup full of Kool-Aid, cherry limeade.

There is nothing poetic about stagnant roommates and Super Smash Brothers.

There is nothing poetic about hard, scratchy carpeting and noisy neighbors’ techno.

There is nothing poetic about daily pool parties right out the living-room window.

There is nothing poetic about ice cubes rattling in a restaurant cup full of whiskey.

There is nothing poetic about a flat-screen television and not enough catfish.

There is nothing poetic about a Skyrim map poster and Warhammer 40K point values.

There is nothing poetic about Pathfinder NPC minis and a piranha’s water filter.

There is a strange beauty in a lack of poetry, but even stranger still is the smell of death when all are breathing.
How do I explain myself?

How is it that a scribble on a page expresses the idea just as well as [cliché]?

How can my deepest, most personal feelings that rip me open on a daily basis sound just like a(n) [adjective] [noun] on [website]?

And when I try to make them poetic, it seems that I’m just [-ing verb] [plural noun].

If [noun] [present-tense verb] the [body part] [present-tense verb] [-er adjective], then why do I feel so alone?

If a(n) [adjective] mind is the devil’s [noun], but all [noun] and no [noun] makes Jack a(n) [adjective] [noun], which one is worse?
Love Blisters

There is no gas mask for heartache,
no DayQuil for this pain.

Poison pouring through my lungs,
I cough,
   I rattle,
I wheeze.

Each moment longer brings more toxic elixir,
pumping through my bloodstream
   with bubbles of venom
   popping in succession
   with clouds of ash
   and industrial smoke
   of polyester remnants
   from diseased child labor.

Joints creaking,
I age more every second.

The morning cocktail of pills is bitter,
but Nexium can’t treat this heartburn.

My clavicle is downright clinical,
an egg forming in the nook between
collarbone and shoulderbone.

My hip feels a marble rolling around
deep in its cranny,
a knot you can’t massage.

My arms are limp and loose,
muscles dangling
like paper cranes on the hospital ceiling.

   Let me rasp and choke on dust
   rather than live this way—
   chronic pain only grows like an abscess
   and peels at my nerves
   like the first flaking tissue of sunburn.

Painless living is a pipe dream—

crammed into creamy sludge of garbage
compacting and traversing
the rusting Damascus ducts,

    playing musical chairs
    with molding newspapers of yesteryear,

    oatmealing and coating the discarded Nokias
    with highlights of yellowing marshmallow.

    Squeeze my heart dry of tears
    and drink of my cherry Kool-Aid,
    sweet with the remains of positivity
    that crumble and tumble out my pores
    in salted sand grains of total failure.

Loss is a sword that keeps getting re-forged;
    each time you think grieving is done,
    it shatters its own brittle bones.

You heat and pour,
    but you’re weaker every time,
    no matter the strength of the mold.

“Cast off your bindings,” they say.

But how can I when they’re fused to my skin?

What was life like before this vomit-inducing,
    pickled cotton-candy,
    non-profit circus
    crept in and boiled my blood into steel,
    tinged with the bile of despair?

    The searing-hot fire,
    the clang on the anvil,
    the rush of steam—
    it’s all I know as the cycle renews.
The Claws of Life

Love is scrambled in my veins.

The only words I have are the ones I’d regret the most.

Heartbreak claws at my nerves, rendering me numb to all but pain, while death’s sweet siren call drags me ever closer.

My nails scrabble at the dirt in futility, chipping away the pebbles of what keeps me in this world.

The boulder of eternity looms like an impatient parent past curfew.

The dogs that war in my spirit chomp at my ankles.

They all know I am coming—but it never feels like soon enough.
left breathless by perpetual sorrow

to the one who is deaf to my pleas:

i’m aggravated
    agitated
    weary
    & worn
    and all of these words
    feel too tame
    too sentimental

i need words that will shred like barbs
words that pierce your lungs and leave you breathless

i need words that will crush your ribcage
    words that crack open your spine like a clam
    like a crab on the dinner table

i need words that will flay you and decay your flesh
    words that will fill your mouth like a baseball tumor

i need words that will peel away your toenails
    words that pluck my hair out as each one counts
    for a way that i am in pain

i need words that will crochet me a skullcap to cover my now-bare head

i need words that will whisper in my ear at night
    words that will tell me that i will be okay
    words that are so quiet i barely hear them

words that hold me close
    and somehow drown out the deafening roar
    that beckons me closer still to death
Dusk’s Embrace

Primal darkness haunts my every step, clinging fast to all my lovelorn pores.

Fractured branches rake against invisible windows with grim fingers of petrified, anguished wood that smell of retirement homes:

    curdled milk and ancient lace.

Pandering, pondering, wandering, wallowing in the putrid swamp of wretched feelings, wickedness writhes in fetid emerald ooze.

My trail is unmarked; my leopard spots do nothing to disguise me against the slinking, vile boas of the MetaPhorest.

Leather vines slither and wrap around my ankles, pulling me into quicksand. It envelops me warmly, welcoming me.

The night glides closer and tugs at my arms like a small child in need of a nap but is stuck at the grocery store.

Warring nations craving impatience and feeding on suffering, they grasp with tendrils of fear.

A tea kettle steams and screams, begging for wholeness from a knothole deep in the fathomless expanse of woods.

Anxiety constricts my lungs, ribs compressing in the rusted clamp of dread. Vision fades with the boa of doubt wringing me like a soaking towel.

Thorns of grief pinch as I am dragged under into the mud of
Productive gophers burrow past, ready to report to the Goddess of Invisible Illnesses.

Pages peel back in her book as she murmurs, “Does she even know that she needs help?”

The canopy raises higher, pushing like a crow in an egg, shoving the glass ceiling a little bit higher.

Trials and trails of conquerors past bite at my calves, while thieving curs snatch away my voice with raking claws of demolition designed to shred tongues and every hope.

Midnight licks at my thighs, calling itself my mistress.

The boa’s veins are bulging, brimming with anguish toxins.

Ink spills onto a page in the distance, calling forth the muses to channel away the misery.

Panicked breaths are manifesting into boas squeezing my ribs with a subtle hiss.

The forest will have no leftovers.
Starvation
will gobble you up,
yanking you deeper
and deeper
into the bottomless pit of
NO FOOD

It screams and screeches and claws
as it bites and chews and gnaws
at your innards,
ripping your nerves
up like weeds
rooted deep under the grass and mushrooms,
holding tight to all they have left.

Fat boils away,
brain cells sparking into oblivion
with a faint hiss as steam.

The crackling whip of the fire in your belly
pulls at your feet like a puppet-master.

Disrobe yourself into b-o-n-e-s
and clatter toward your freedom.
Deprivation

Torturous memories tug at me like children on mothers’ sleeves.

Every awful angle reveals itself, a shower of bobby pins drowning me.

“Red Rover, Red Rover, send anxiety on over.”

My mind is yawning, gaping with vulnerability

as demons gallop in with delighted grins.

My mouth is rusted shut as my hand is taken.

My arm is limp with shame.

I’m zipper ed up and pulled into a cocoon of blankets.

I don’t even remember what it means to love myself.
Thoughts

Slippery like soap dropped in the bath, 
dangling
like a dust speck just out of reach,
squeaking like the mouse you just can’t find,
flailing like a fish just outside the net.

I try to scan my fingerprint 
to enter the House of Ideas,
but my arm is
loose and 
unhinged.

My retina is no better—
what am I looking at?

Dis
jointed and drowsy,
I try to rouse myself from my fugue,
but
chessboard stairs keep going into the sunset.

Crystal chandeliers beckon me closer.

(Parentheses squeeze me tight.)

I have become an after-thought.
Morphine
is submarine giggles
and poodle farts.

Lemonade courses through my veins,
an alkaline cloud tinting it all the way.

Brownie-batter lollipops
and arsenic-laced chainsaws
wallpaper Sir Chipmunk’s master bedroom.

The ballroom is full of our shark friends
and weed-whacker chandeliers.

Trophies of feathers and acorns
adorn the teddy-bear picnic
past the velvet ropes.

War and love unite
at the end of the rainbow—
or is that just a toilet?

Pointless cameras dangle off chairs’ arms
while the cats lick their dainty paws
as they wait to become useful.

“See Historic Rock Castle!”
But all anyone wants is watered-down coffee.
Reading Hicok

“I moved the nest to the top of a plastic box / ... / scooped the wasp onto a long, rusted hinge / that has sat for months on the porch railing, / placed the wasp on the nest, and came back to tell you / this is the poem I’ve been trying to write / about the man I stood beside during the national anthem / at a ballgame, who placed his prosthetic hand / over his heart, looking more like a boy from the outside, / where I was, and sang, in his uniform, harder / than I ever have, without a sense / of irony.”

I get it.

But “it” is not some word or phrase that we can form with our rolling tongues as if they are bubblegum balls, sweet but chalky and hard but soft.

You’re lying if you say they actually have a flavor.

It’s a taste I don’t know, a color that I can’t quite describe.

It’s fifth-dimension, ultraviolet light, an honorable mention, whatever music looks like to synesthetes.

It’s a clothespin holding shut a bag of chips—it’s simple, but it just works.

It’s a wordless connection, from author to paper to reader.

These pages are anthrax in an envelope; sometimes it catches you by surprise, and sometimes, it ends up in somebody else’s mailbox.
MARINES DON’T REINTEGRATE
ASH IN MY MOUTH
WHEN THE VET WILL LASH OUT
CAMEL SPIDERS
AND SEARCH-AND-RESCUE
DRESS BLUES
AND BROKEN LEGS
CRUNCHING ANKLES
AND LASIK SURGERY
ENDLESS DOCTOR’S VISITS
TELL ME ABOUT THE WILDLIFE
CALLS END
IN PROLONGED HARSH WHISPERS
WISH YOU WERE HERE
BITING MY LIP AS HEARTBURN BUBBLES
RATTLE COIL AROUND MY LUNGS
MY RIBS ARE
CR
AC
KI
NG
LET ME BUILD MY OWN backbone
The Anniversary: 9/11

Two years,
and I’m still no better.

This date means more to New Yorkers.
I’m insignificant against real death.

False death plagues me,
trailing after my feet,
a starving bony pup.

One attempt later,
and still I live.

Excruciating leeches suck my soul
while students are a beacon.

You may take away my pointed things.
You may watch me like a hawk.

But I can still do it while you sleep.

Vodka burns my throat like acid reflux as I try to forget.

Drown it in wine that looks like chocolate milk.

Bury it in poems of wickedness
and lost love.

I am but a ghost now,
yet still I live.
Memory

The whip of thorns
rips my flesh bare once again.

My throat is raw
as my nose floods.

“I’m just going to Arby’s and back.
I need to eat.”

Sure you are.

That’s all it was before—
hunger.

What would make today any different?

The kaleidoscope of anguish
twists into my heart
with a hidden dagger.

My cheek clenches
as it feels again the lonely sting of rug-burn.

Bioshock tingles my brain.

Never forget.
Never surrender.
Blank Slate

Easier said than done.

Why is it so simple to forgive but so difficult to forget?

You can’t erase permanent marker.

Your words still echo, ringing in my ears as a mosquito starving for another chance.

Suck my blood all you like, but take your drop of poison with you.

Tease out the remains with a comb

and let me begin to heal.
DESCENT
A Graceful Silence

There was an echoing,
a deep banging in Snow White’s head as she fell to
the wooden floorboards of the dwarves’ cottage that
peeled away into the chasm,
the sweet crispness of the apple
still lingering on her moistened lips.

“Let the bodies hit the floor,”
something cold whispered,
and panic’s icy fingers took hold.

Her hands were claws,
aching and reaching,
her fingers stretching
at the infinite blackness
that had fallen in front of familiarity.

Let the bodies hit the floor,
called a voice of echoes and gravel.

The racket of drums,
the odor of skunk, &
the skittering of beetles
invaded her senses.

This was no charming cottage in the woods.

Snow’s skin was slimy,
frog spots crawling
up her arms,
while her eyes crystallized
with glazed caramel oozing and crackling
before falling away into cold, blue gemstones.

Let the bodies hit the floor,
it reminded her,
ripping deep into her ears
with screeching daggers,
stretching deep into her nerves
with cat claws let loose.

All at once,
her throat coiled up like a spring,
tasting blood and bile,
at the crunching of an apple.

Bite, munch, chew:

pounding drumbeats
of a call to action.

But who would hire the old woman?

The lecherous blacksmith
who saw Snow White as a rack of barbecued pig’s ribs?

The sterile maid
who glared at Snow’s ample hips?

The hardened stable boy
who stole the queen’s pearls and longed to take more?

The cruel voice began to chant and cackle,
penetrating her weak mind with gliding ease.
Let the bodies hit the floor.
Let the bodies hit the floor.
Let the bodies hit the floor.

“Please stop saying that,”
Snow White whimpered.

Her fingernails bit into the palm of her hand
as she sucked on her cherry lips.

She pulled her straitjacket arms close to her body,
chest heaving,
ears pounding,
throat drying.

The howling silence grew like ivy,
creeping with chuckling cobblestone.

“Stay calm; stay calm; stay calm.”
Her eyes rolled up toward the ceiling
of her tremendous starless coffin.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.

No windows.
No doors.
No escape.
Her skin pinched and pulled and stretched, luminescent opal scales popping up in painful patches.

Seashells crumbled in her fingers, dusting her hands with powdered fragments.

From her back grew bones and leather flesh. From her teeth, poison fangs. From her eyelashes, fluttering emerald feathers.

Let the bodies hit the floor, the voice said with urgency.

“Stop saying that,” she snapped. “Who do you think you are?”

Her claws flew to her mouth. Had she ever spoken to anyone that way? Stabbing guilt wrenched her gut, twisting the memory of her mother into that of disappointment. An amethyst tear fell down her spined cheek.

The voice became a hoarse whisper. Let the bodies hit the floor.

“No.” Her voice was everlasting stone, harsh stardust crackling in her throat.

That is quite enough of that.” Her prim, old-world charm still wound itself tightly in her stomach.

She blinked her glassy sapphire eyes and lifted her too-heavy hand up in the air, visualizing her true self.

The princess had no intention of being a grotesque creature while waiting to be awakened.

That layer of mucus, those gills, the fangs, her scales—they all at once fell to the floor,
fading with a blur into the ink of eternal dusk.

She folded her twiggy legs up underneath her like when she used to watch the sun set.

At last, the voices had stopped grasping for her sanity.

At last, the savage drums of war had stopped calling her name.

At last, the people who had expected so much of her had finally fallen away.

“It doesn’t matter
if this is Paradise
or if it is Hell.
As long as it is quiet.”
Inertia

Imagine:
a car
that won’t
start
in the
crunching ice
on
crunching ice

her glacial engine clicking,
clicking,
clicking,
as the key turns in vain,
and she’s groaning,
becoming an old man
in the too-cold morning air,
gumming his oatmeal
and staring at the empty chair
behind the dusty place-mat
that hasn’t been touched
in years.

Bones creak
as muscles stretch
with the instinctive reaching out,
to hold the hand
that is no longer there.

A plume of smoke
filters
through the high-beams
streaking across
the frozen, silent ground.

She wants to see the light shine in through the window and gauzy curtains as
the other car pulls into the driveway.  
She wants to see the headlights dim and hear the jingle of keys 
just outside the door.

But it’s always just more passersby 
trying to get their bearings 
before they too vanish 
into the looming mist.

This shallow street, 
this gloomy graveyard of the 
in-between, 
sits abandoned 
and silent,

lingering like Plato’s hollow cave, 
full of vacant spaces

blighted by echoes 
((echoes)) 
((echoes)) 
((echoes)) 
((echoes))

of burnt rubber as she, 
the dejected stranger, 
s t f i 
 r 
toward the heavens in 

lazy, 

billing fumes of toxic fog.
Paradise Lust

The tricky fruits of Hell seduced her.

Her silence had faded
into a car lot
and then a luscious orchard,
tempting her with delights
she had never imagined.

And so she sank into the earth,
her toes feeling the mud
squeeze in between them.

The huntsman’s words
 echoed in her ears,
a hollow warning
the girl never could have understood.

Her filthy feet could feel
the smooth bed-rock reaching up to meet them.

“Hello?”

The heat and ash baked into her pampered skin
as a warm hand slithered around her neck.

“My, my, what have we here?”
a male voice rumbled.
“Did you steal some of my pomegranates?”

Her voice got lost in her throat.

“Such a bad girl,” he murmured,
the steam of his words curling into her ear.
“Didn’t you know that you’re not
supposed to take things that don’t belong to you?”

She nodded, her lips trapped shut,
her feet snapping together as if he were a drill sergeant
who had just caught her slacking off.

“Do you know what happens now?”

She shook her head,
her neck still within the man’s grip,
her breathing growing shallow.

“You belong to me now. After all, possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“What a strange saying,” she thought.

“You’ll understand in a few thousand years.”
He chuckled to himself at some inside joke as he stepped in front of her, his hair crackling like flames.

The way his jaw was chiseled so firmly, how his nose jutted out assertively...
He was very different from the prince who had danced in her distant dreams.

“Oh, Persephone,” he said, pacing, before the young girl could speak.
“It seems I’ve hit the jackpot.”

“The what?”
escape from her lips.

“It’s nothing. Do you know who I am?”

“I don’t even remember who I am. Is my name really Persephone?”
She stared at her moon-dust arms.
There was something that she was forgetting.

“I am Hades, your new lord and master.”
He pursed his lips.

“Do you know what is different about the underworld?”

“Besides the souls of dead people floating around?”

“Yes, besides the dead people.”
A ghost of a smile danced behind his composed veneer.
The snow-white Persephone looked to her feet,
a small sprout withering and browning on her toes.

“Nothing around here is alive.”

No singing birds,
no scurrying mice,
no prancing deer.

“Good girl,” he breathed,
caressing her cheek
with just his index finger,
her skin tingling
under his gentle touch.

His hickory-smoked scent already made this place feel like home—but far more alluring.

“Now that you are mine,
I’d like to ask you something.”

“Of course,”
she squeaked,
hers face flushing
a stabbing pink.

The look in his eyes was bewitching
but, somehow, sincere.

Not in the same way as the prince from her dreams—
much more captivating than that dead-eyed royal.

He glided closer,
their noses almost touching,
his brimstone breath
filling her lungs
with the first exhale,
the second, the third.

She gulped it in,
letting it course
through her greedy body.

“You aren’t planning on
trying to escape,
are you?"

Where else was she to go?
“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

Her breath caught.

“Good girl,”
he said again,
his voice melting
with ambrosia.

Hades’ warm, rough hands
cupped her face and tilted her chin up
so he could kiss her on the forehead.

“Things are very different around here,”
the deity murmured.

“We don’t have springtime.
We don’t have solstice nor summer nor snow.
The only things here are

you,
me,
and the suffering souls of mortals swimming around,
moaning and lamenting their former vapid little lives.”

He shrugged.
“It’s a living.”

“This means that we’ll have a lot of time
to get to know each other.
Is there anything you’d like to do
for your first act in the position of my mistress?”

Hades tucked her hair behind her ears,
his face so close to hers that her next breath
had been his previous.

Without thinking,
the virgin mumbled,

“I can think of plenty of positions.”

In a mere instant,
she was in the arms of the deity of death,
who leaned down and whispered just above her lips,
“Good girl.”
The Art of Misdirection

Sherbet unicorns
and seven swans are swimming
through unending filtered
steam
sucking for air but craving coal instead.

Owl eyes gaze
with harsh sunbeams,
casting judgment
on those ground-bound.

Peel away my sheepskin,
my magician’s cloak.

Let false words roll on your tongue;
soften the blow before they spill out.

Pump the water out of my lungs
and scrub my clown paint away.

Listen to the ocean as it bubbles in my throat;
drink it up off my gums;
draw it out like poison.

Purge the saltwater as I come back to shore
and clean away the bile of falsehoods
and stagger back as you see my true face.

Linger over my burning lips of crimson;
brush your cheek against my ashen skin;
tangle your fingers in my hair of coal;
feel my heart erupt into fluttering doves.

I thought I was dying again,
but this time was much less like dreaming.
An Unseemly Fascination Drained

NARRATOR:
“The endless masquerades were growing dull.
The leeching parties had gone dry.
The vanity of courtiers could only stretch so far.”

INTERIOR: PRINCE CHARMING’S ROOM
(PRINCE CHARMING draws a single drop of blood from his left index finger with an errant sewing needle.)

ENTER: PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER

PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER:
“Charming!
You put that down, right this instant!
It’s time to put these silly games to rest.
Why can’t you be more like your older sister?”

NARRATOR:
“Mucus drained down the back of his throat
with sharpened blades;
    his eyes felt the sting of tears
    bubbling up at the brims.”

PRINCE CHARMING:
“Because I’m me.
Can’t you call me by my name?”

PRINCE CHARMING’S DEAR MOTHER:
“Nobody else does.
Maybe you should try to live up to this one first.”

EXEUNT: HIS DEAR MOTHER (with a flounce)

(PRINCE CHARMING crosses to the window.)

WINDOW: SCENE OF SNOW-COVERED PINE TREES

NARRATOR:
“He wagged his index finger at the crow atop the tallest tree.
Why could that bird be what it wanted to be,
go where it wanted to go?
The madness grew deeper, cutting into his wrists with cravings of agony.

A single last hope bobbed up: the rumored vampire princess—a girl with a deathly pallor unmatched by the living, lips as crimson as blood, hair as black as coal—a woman shrouded in mystery and darkness.

The idea lodged itself as a fish hook into his mind:

his salvation, his kindred spirit, his darling princess of darkness—someone who would share his worries and fears about the futility of life.

Until the groomer came.

Day in, day out: proper pedigree of princeliness—boiling away the gloom and doom.

No more needles. No more talk of death. No more dreaming of spirits.”

EXTERIOR: MEADOW
(PRINCE CHARMING stands over SNOW WHITE’s coffin.)

NARRATOR: “When he finally found the princess, he knew it was for the best.

Her crystalline coffin glimmered with dew, the daylight shimmering across her perfect skin.

She was so perfect, so peaceful in her grim state.
He needed to be better for her.

He reaped his coldness, melting it into dawn.

He closed his eyes, swallowed the sun, and chose to begin his life anew.”
Sleep Paralysis

Mouth clamped shut like a chastity belt,  
I’m choking back dragons—  
their slimy tails  
    hook into my tonsils  
    and latch onto my words.

I’m being yanked back under  
every moment that I think I’m free.

My throat gurgles as I  
swal  
    low  
    my fears  
    and lock them away.

What just fell?  
The darkness will never tell.

My cocoon of blankets isn’t enough.  
Abstract geometry creeps across my too-small ceiling.

A faceless entity,  
some shadowed figure  
that looks half-familiar  
looms over me and  
somehow peers into my soul,  
the glass of my coffin coming into focus  
and glimmering with the lilac smell of new beginnings.

Words unsaid bur  
row  
de  
eper into my skin,  
scraping at my dignity with iron claws.

Windows clatter and shatter.  

    My nightmares have broken through.

The illusion of peace was far better  
than stepping out into the harsh sunlight,  
into the greedy arms of Charming.
A Dream I Had

Snow White was tangled between linen and the smooth legs of death when she awoke at last.

Yet instead of being naked and free, she was enveloped in the silk of her coffin lining and the cumbersome layers of petticoats.

A plain visage loomed over her. He smiled. How charming.

She found herself smiling back, reaching to twirl one of her long locks of hair, but it was chopped short, perfectly coiffed around her round face.

Oh.

“I’m here to save you.”

An embrace.

“How comforting.”

A kiss on the forehead.

She flinched, the memory of Hades jarring her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just remembering a dream I had.”

He pulled her close again, burying his face in her neck, wrapping his arms around her with the kind of warmth reserved for your favorite scarf in the winter.
Snow felt on her skin the first sensation of tears springing from the prince’s eyes.

“We don’t have to be alone anymore,” he said, his voice cracking like the caw of a raven.

The princess leaned in, her heart trying to sew itself back together.

She let loose a sob. The here and now took hold with a padlock as Hades faded into the mists of her distant memory, safely in the vault of things best forgotten.
**Original Sin**

Blood tastes like cherries and rubies on tainted sinking fangs, crumbling into crystals on the cold unfeeling ground.

There's no real difference between right and wrong. All that matters is who's telling the story.

Haunted hearts and sallow skin stretch over stone walls like crackled coffee-stain paper.

Dust begins to settle in the old nursery, maids long gone.

Clutter piles up in the cottage of the dwarves, Snow long gone.

The fallen queen vomits once more: her body, her choice.

The risen queen vomits once more: a baby was coming, whether she wanted it to or not.

She feels the apple and the pomegranate still lodged in her throat—not in the physical way, but is there any real difference?

Snow picks at her cuticles, bored of Charming, bored of perfect.

Lilith licks trifle from her fingers, bored of hatred, bored of violence.

Some violence is self-inflicted.

All is born of fear:

fear of decay, fear of change, fear of fighting back, fear of being peeled to truth,
fear of the point of no return,
fear of the thoughts that silence brings.

Snow rubs the shiny plastic-like peel on an apple.

What had one bite cost her?
What had one kiss cost her?
What had Charming cost her?

Lilith rubs the bottom of a greasy baking bowl.

What had envy cost her?
What had revenge cost her?
What had vanity cost her?

Who can say?

“My life, my choice”
is what Lilith says to herself.

“My life, my tragedy”
is what Snow wishes she could say aloud.

The fallen fruit had brought them to this life.

Hades would be waiting for the queens,
salivating at their berry- and earth-scented returns.

Every angel loses its wings someday.
Some just take a little longer to hit the ground.

“You can’t take it with you,”
Hades chuckles.

The queens each sob alone.

They had had their chance to change the world,
but choosing freedom
meant choosing to fall from grace and
choosing to never return to paradise.
A Love Note to Myself

My husband is bringing me breakfast in bed.  
My husband was long ago found dead.

There once was someone else, but that’s a dream from long ago.  
There was never anyone else in my tale of woe.

I’ve settled for “good enough.”  
No one else is up to snuff.

I’m told I’m beautiful in every way.  
I tell myself I’m beautiful every day.

Sometimes I dream about the soundless nights in the void.  
Sometimes I dream that life was something I enjoyed.

My husband is aging. My life is dull.  
My hair is wearing down to skull.

I’ve gained more gems and gold than I wanted.  
My home is shadowed, cold, and haunted.
Mirrors are smashing;  
the gates are crashing;  
puppets and purges,  
lipstain and lashings—

all masks,  
all failed schemes coll

along

into rum  
bling rubble:

fists of flame and shades of shame—

further festering mechanisms designed in her own mind for  
desolation of the countryside  
but only ended in sore throats and dancing silhouettes in the dark,  
hauntings of husbands and courtiers long gone, spattered with blood and bile,  
stinking of sickly sweet passion and overripe dreams  
spoiling in the sewage system.

Terror retching in intestines,  
hollow desire boiling to fiery fever-pitch—

all for nothing,  
all for nothing,  
all for nothing.

The years since the brat had left  
were etched into the caked dust  
and mouse holes decrepit with bones.

Lilith’s castle is rotting  
with mildew and cavernous cobwebs.

At last,  
her heart purrs,  
something that finally feels familiar.
Between Two Worlds

Gray hairs fall upon the lap of Queen Snow White as the eternally-young blue jays whistle through the wide-open window.

“Snow White indeed,” she mutters to herself, the grayness a bitter reminder that she was still breathing and still separated from her true eternal partner.

Her dormant husband, with his endless wrinkles, lies in bed with interminable coughing spells.

Does he even know she’s there?

His eyes are glazed as doughnuts; his breath wheezes like the winter wind.

“I’m wishing,” she prays hoarsely, blind faith gripping her.

Even this generation of birds knows what to do, despite the lack of wishing well. Their loud reply is just as it has always been.

“For the one I love.”

Her mouth snaps shut.

Her heart racing like a teen girl sneaking out, she jerks around—is her prince listening?

No. Still asleep.

“To find me.”

She leans forward, her gaze darting from tree to tree.

A whisper with the youthful hope of many years ago: “Today.”
The world plunges into soothing cashmere darkness.
Candles appear in the air,
bobbing like fishing lures,
reeling her out of dismal reality.

The instant smell of brimstone
and the gravel of a warm, familiar voice:
“You rang?”

Snow releases a laugh she’s swallowed for years.
“You and your strange sayings, like always.”

A blush floods her face
in a crimson tide,
her fingers grasping for her hair,
something to cling to.

“Just like I remember you.”
Hades strokes her cheek,
relief etching into his expressive eyes.

“I’m ...”
Blush.
“... young.”

“For now,”
he says with a wince.

“Please don’t make me go back!”
she moans,
tears pricking at her eyes already.

The lord of the dead envelops her with a hug.
“You know I have to.”

When was the last time
she’d heard such emotion?

When was the last time
she’d felt brave enough to escape?

When was the last time
she’d felt in her belly
the rippling desire
for something unspeakably old
yet untainted by time?

“You don’t die for quite a while, my sweet.

Him on the other hand? He’s almost gone.”

“I have to be alone?” Her voice resonates in the hollow chasm.

“Just like your step-mother before you.”

The words rip like burs.

The birds resume their song. The old man resumes his dying. The woman resumes choking on her words, trying to smell the lingering sulfur, trying to remember the feel of her luscious hair, trying to capture the image of Hades in her mind.

The king coughs out a chuckle—death was easing in at last, an old friend sidling up, gently saying that he could finally rest.

His sagging skin rises and falls, ribs mounting like the crests of the sea just before the succor of daybreak welcoming sailors to their final resting place.

His limbs grow weary, sand trickling through his veins as the hourglass runs dry at the horizon of Eden waiting for him in the sweet cradle of death.

His lungs rasp for the final time, phlegm rattling in the echoes of all that has been lost.