

Blackbirch Birds

My first love's name was Osprey, or maybe Egret; I don't remember.
We were twelve when we met underneath that hemlock, but she didn't kiss me
until we were thirteen. She was a narrow thing. She wore linen and corduroy.
Sometime within the next two years, we started to cannibalize each other;
we hushed into my threadbare bedroom after school hours, emerging with
chins and cheeks that stank like spit, and then we did our algebra homework.
We incised letters and numerals into our grownup-child tummies.
Once, while we were in the woods, she said that she had always figured
this would happen with somebody else. I told her nobody else could make me
come so easily. She put braids into my hair and I put syrup on her tongue;
we swam in the reservoir and we swam at sea; *grey world*, we hollered, *lighten up!*
She was bright and braver than I was and my mouth became a wound;
when she wasn't there to cauterize it, I spat up moonblood like a baby.
When she wasn't there to keep my company, I kept it myself with two fingers
and the seam of my underpants. Once, she told me we were so entwined
that she could feel anything I felt. Once she told me that she loved me
even when I was a crab. I felt mortified and said that I loved her even though
she was a bitch, but she braided my hair regardless. For six years I believed
she was the most important person ever to exist. For two years after that,
I was jealous of the girl who could believe such a stupid thing. We were twelve;
we met; we had a great long story, and then, as inexorable as crescent's wane,
the story ended. She taught me how to make a better cup of tea and how
to ask for more butter with my breakfast. I wouldn't teach her to drive,
but we turned eighteen anyway. Her name was Osprey, or Egret.
I don't want to remember anymore. In the end, we unfurled from one another
like a pair of ribbons, exhausted by a teenagedom full of breast tissue and sore jaws.
The day she left, I hung her pearl earring from the screen of my bedroom window.
Its little gold hook pierced my pinky, and I wondered if she felt it, too.

Nettle Nest

His name was Corvus and he had hands like a tillage man. We met at twenty-one and it was easy, simple; we had everything in common save for just a few. We took walks on the water, passed cardboard cups of tea back and forth, my mouth staining the rim and his mouth taking the stain. By May my bare feet had become carnal; I wore white socks until at last we abandoned the pretense and schmeared our love into the hardwood floor. He pinned my wrists to the ground when he came but as soon as it was over he let go and I tried not to think too much of it; he'd been unruly since the onset, always shoving at my shoulders, tugging on my braid; he was boyish and it was endearing. When at first his grip left dark maroon in its wake, I tried not to think too much of that either. When he turned loutish at times, picking at my pallid complexion, small breasts, I reminded myself that he was the teasing type; hadn't I liked that about him before? We studied together, poured over memoirs in paperback, had brutal sex that I tried so hard to enjoy. I made soda bread in the oven and cut his hair over the kitchen sink. He'd been unruly since the onset, so when the day came that he hit the side of my head so hard my left ear gushed open, I said very little; how unnerving, unfair it would be to draw the line now, after allowing so much, and how cruel to make him feel as if he'd hurt me. His name was Corvus and he pecked at my hangnails, chewed on my cuticles. We took walks and he paid for my hot chocolate, just to sip it down to the gritty dredge himself. The day came when I woke to that nudge of penetration, and, once I realized what had happened, I made sure to vocalize my awakesness, to let him know that what he'd done was fine, was nothing, wasn't at all what it would have been if I weren't so aware and okay with it. The second time, I put on the same performance as before. The third I was quiet and he proceeded unflinching, but by then I'd given him permission to do this, right? How worthless, to feel violated now. We went biking and I pointed out the hollyhock, aster, dahlia; I planted wolf's bane in the garden without telling him, pestled it into paste and applied it to that great black bruise on my right wrist. I stayed a year because it was so easy, so simple, and because we had everything in common. Save for just a few.

Fuchsia Flower

My sister's name is Fuchsia Flower. She came first and she didn't let me forget it. She was beautiful always, blonde blue and petaled; we sat naked together in the bathtub, little girls like two sides of a mirror, but I knew even then that the reflections did not match up. We got older and she taught me how to laugh smile walk blink just right. In the hollow of our bedroom, she lured me to sleep with *the quiet game*, promised me any prize in the world if I won, and each morning I awoke victorious only to be told I'd cried out in nightmare and disqualified myself. She was clever as a little marten, white teeth both a summons and a threat, and I loved the feel of her cool hands on the back of my neck. She let me in on one too many lies, and soon I could pick them out like lice off a scalp; our parents gave one-eared approval to her appeal for a sleepover *just with Alyssa*, but I knew from the scrunch to her nose that she'd be in some boy's cement garage that night. She was our mother's perfect thing, born in that halo of preadulthood, before all the virulence, and she did not like the woods. Sometimes I watched them sit together on the sofa, after a dinner of cheese-on-toast and beetroot from the garden, and their matched yellow heads flaunted a kinship so obvious it wounded me. When rumor got home that my sister had changed her facebook status to *a real cock pleaser*, some spiny part of me reveled in the fallout. She was stuck in the house after that and, for the first time in years, she sat with me on the edge of the tub, her red-chipped toenails submerged in my bathwater; I painted my toenails red, too, cherry-bright against the grime. I wore her outgrown panties, bleached white with discharge, and any old sweaters or skirts she didn't want anymore. I loved her, revered her, disliked and resented her; when she came in sick, stinking like our father and making a mess of the house I tried so hard to keep clean, I felt no empathy at all. She said once, in the plush dark of night, that she wished she had my name instead, because it would be *so much easier*. For the next seventeen seconds, I sat breathing in the scent of my mildewy pillowcase, and then I told her, *you lose*.