

Sleep Music, No. 1

by Jonathan Ashworth

She gathers silent postcards and wanders into herself. *Time is not innocent, nor am I.*

There is nothing innocent about me, except my face. She brushes her teeth, washes her face, pats it dry.

She sits on the yellow half of the bed. She feels her subconscious unraveling. She opens the door to the keyhole in her breast: she delicately inserts the sleep key.

The flywheels of her mind slow, stop, then spin backwards. She hears the blood ticking: tick-plop, tick-plop. Her head scales the pillow. Her eyes close. “Na-night, na-night,” she hears her grandmother say. “Na-night,” her lips mouth and putter. The pillow sings mutely: roll over into the farm of sleep, and sleep into the green of home sleep home, where moss toils and bones roam.

Boys sing all night, holding their knees to their chins, hoping the girls will like them even though they killed the ravens with slings. Their faces are ruddy and roasted with firelight. A pile of beaks, stiff branch feet, and feather bodies is twelve feet away, blacker than night.

The girls slip into a mine and hide, but it is cold and dark, “spooky,” says one, so they give up and leave. Their skin is the white of apple flesh. Winter settles on their shoulders.

The girl with shiny hair is lost and sheepless. She rocks herself outside the mine, she hears boys sing. There are no teeth more bitter than hers. She lost them all to her loneliness, but they grow back when she kisses someone. The boy with the crooked face appears, smile bigger than an egg. He is kissing her softly (it is his first kiss, it is his second kiss) and so softly he falls asleep, his head rests in her lap and they both evaporate.

Wolves chase loaves down the hillside. “Those are so tasty,” says one of the girls. The wolves turn into rocks. The girls find the unbitten loaves and eat them. The girls wear school uniforms—white blouses, grey skirts, white socks. One girl falls

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down and asleep. Now they are sleeping in a poppy field, sun-drenched warm afternoon girls lying on their stomachs and sides, faces in flowers, and flowers blowing, blowing. If this afternoon were every afternoon, the world would be cured. In bottomlands of grey a boulder feels a puddle into existence. It grows into a pond at the bottom of a hill, a cottage on one side.

It is drizzling. A boy steps out of the cottage and tosses stones into the pond. He goes inside for breakfast, his mother cooks in an apron. Her face has no eyes, no nose, no mouth. Just hair and skin. The boy says, "Mummy, you lost your face."

She says, "I gave it to your father when he left."

"When did he leave?"

"When you were out throwing stones."

"Why didn't he say goodbye?"

"He said he loved me so much he couldn't."

The boy eats his toast. The mother sits down, hands on her chin. The shadows wrap themselves around her until the boy cannot distinguish her body from the shadows, as if she were becoming a torso wrapped in a faint charcoal blanket. The boy leaves the table. He gathers silent postcards. He walks upstairs and enters the hollow of his bed. His blood plops in regulated globules.

He walks through a door, into a curved tunnel. It is large and warm. It sparkles. He leans against it. The floor is soft. He feels pleasant. He tingles.

He wraps his knees to his chin and opens his mouth to sing. A moth flies out. He falls asleep, sleeps on his side, yes, yes. And now the world is good, it sleeps, yes, it also sleeps.

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