

WINTER'S COLD GIRLS

poems by Lisa Baird

Dagger Editions

WINTER'S COLD GIRLS

All words transcribed from the Hawthorn Farms seed catalogue

They like winter's cold girls
frozen in rows—blanched
candy beauties. They are
not gentle with their collections.
They like them tight, inside
bottles.

Not this birdhouse
wildling,
 this veined twisting
 tiger,
 this giant
 bloody
 boil.

They wonder

Why these hot thorns?
Why these problem nights in red?

and

How did this one punch through the glass?

WELCOME TO THE MUSEUM OF ARTISTIC APOLOGY

In the first room, a classic water colour
apology quartet: a series of self-portraits
of the penitent's mouth
shaping each of the four syllables
of *I'm so sorry*.

Next, a massive photograph of apology graffiti:
AMY, I'M SORRY ABOUT LAST NIGHT
stencilled across the Bank of Montreal's
west-facing wall.

Around the corner, a single
apology haiku found inside a stall
in the women's washroom
of a gay bar:

*I didn't mean it
I really really miss you
Please do come home soon*

At the textile exhibits
you can view apology hankies
embroidered with *I humbly beg your pardon*
along each edge, apology catnip mice
sewn for cats left out in the rain,
and at least one pair of sturdy woolen
apology socks knitted by a mother-in-law
who can't—or won't—speak about feelings,
but after seven years has decided
you're in the family to stay
and may as well have warm feet.

The Museum of Artistic Apology
is carefully curated.

There is no fauxpology art here,
no *I'm sorry that you feel that way* sculpture,
no song or dance about whether
offence was intended.

On the second floor, an entire kitchen suite
with carefully shellacked recreations
of the sincerest apology meals: made-from-a-mix
brownies, elaborate lasagnas & quiches—
many foods involving chocolate and cheese.

In a small nook nearby, photographs
of several apology tattoos,
briefly popular in the late nineties
and often involving animals: a weeping snake
curled around an ankle, a shoulder blade
framing a regretful falcon with
I hate that I doubted you
in cursive script below.

On the top floor, the rarest
of apology art, that of adults made
for children. Fourteen *I didn't mean*
to shout handmade dolls,
an *I'll Try Harder Next Tuesday*
teddy bear, a collaborative
We are sorry that we're fighting
with each other but we will never
stop loving you apology quilt,
and, spooling out over an entire corner,
a carefully painted wooden train set
with a hand-lettered note: *Even when I get mad,*
you are still the conductor of my heart.

Down the road, the Museum of Amnesty & Forgiveness
is a wide empty room—each wall a window,
the ceiling a skylight. It is unstaffed.
You decide if and when you enter,
how long you stay,
and whom you take with you.

ATHENA FINDS THE MEDUSA ENTRY IN THE WORLD
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREEK & ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

After Poseidon, God of the Sea, raped Medusa in the temple of Athena, Athena punished Medusa by transforming her hair into a mass of writhing snakes. To look upon the horror of Medusa was to be turned instantly to stone. Years later, Athena lent her shield to the hero Perseus so that he could cut off the head of Medusa. Athena then wore Medusa's face on her shield.

No. I never blamed her. It haunts me
still—that slight form crumpled on the floor,
thighs bloodied. A god-sized hurt,
and the stench of seaweed

that lingered for weeks. If I'd come back
thirty minutes earlier. To spear him
like a fish on his trident. I did
what I could. Heated bathwater

each morning, made her eat
at least once a day. When
she finally spoke, it was to beg
for serpents. A venomous halo,

so if another man even looked at her—
I couldn't say no. I knew that history
would twist us. Even today, no one believes a woman
would choose power like that

over beauty. After she left I re-consecrated
that place to protection. Women and girls
came from all over the island
to learn to gouge at eyes

and kick at groins, to shatter collarbones.
To pray with muscle and knuckle. To shake
the temple roof shouting *NO NO NO*.
They don't mention that either.

Instead, they say her murder
was my fault. Each day, a swing
between numbness and choking
on this atlantic fury. So yes,

that's her face.

To remind me of the slow
gleam of the sun before
they buried it.

THE TAXIDERMIST

In the last year of my childhood
mama turns into a deer.

We see it coming, a tail
flicking, a white warning flash just above her jeans, the fits

of whole-body trembling.

The changes come and go. Mostly she passes as human.

Some days she shuffles
as if on hooves hidden inside shoes.

I roll my eyes, hiss *Get it together*
when I catch her licking road salt.

Mama becomes more
unpredictable,
ears lengthening and twitching.

She stomps a foot at traffic noises, stares mutely

'til I lead her home.

Father makes rough jokes about rutting season.

Late one night I hear *GodDAMNIt Sheila!*
from their bedroom—

she must have sprouted fur
in an inconvenient place.

The night Father backhands
my brother for the way
 he handles a fork,

mama makes a strange bleating sound

then falls
 silent, looks me in the eyes one last time.

 I want to spit at her elongating face.

Reddish-brown fur ripples over skin, her hands
 harden into perfect black hooves.

She drops to all fours, leaps

 through the kitchen window,

 bounds across the yard and over the fence.

We sit stunned
 in a hail of broken glass, blood
 beading from forearms and faces.

Shortly after, Father stops speaking,
spends most nights alone working in the basement.

 One day I come home
 to find a doe's head stuffed

 and mounted on the wall over my bed.

LITTLE SISTER

My sister and I hatch from the same egg,
sleep in a nest in the backyard maple,
climb down once a day to trick food from strangers,
grow feathers instead of pubic hair. No, sorry.
We're a normal family. My sister and I share
the toilet, tiny bums pressed together on the seat to pee.
Everyone asks if we're twins and we lie proudly: *Yes*.
We scramble onto the school roof, collect lost tennis balls
and sell them back to the boys. We wear spaghetti straps.
Freckle across the shoulders. Race our bikes downtown
to dive off the docks at the harbourfront
—no, that was someone else. We read books
in acceptable dresses. Dad locks us up anyway. The only
light a crack between the door and the floor
at the top of the basement stairs. She and I fight
over mouldy bread, the one thin blanket.
We tell each other the best lies at night
when one of us can't sleep: *Mom and Dad love
each other. Mom's divorcing Dad and we'll get to live with her.*
My sister smokes weed in the mall parking lot during gym class
and Mr. Mathison calls our parents. I don't let Dad hit
her, run screaming at his face with a butterknife.
We steal the car after I get my learner's permit,
drive it across the frozen lake to Wolfe Island
on Christmas Eve, lie on our backs at the edge
of the ice watching the stars. We never get caught.
We're invincible. Dad calls me a witch, sets fire
to my hair, and compliments my sister's blonde braid.
I've worn a wig of feathers ever since. Just kidding.
It's not how it sounds. Before I leave for college,
my sister and I pledge never to suck in our stomachs
for a guy. Later, amend it *for anyone*.

When the pills don't work she calls me in the night.
Tell me a really good lie, will you? She's the first
to say, *Your girlfriend controls you just like Dad controls Mom.*
Doesn't judge me for it. When her black kitten goes missing
I fly out to Montréal to walk the parks with her calling his name.
I'm sure that happened. I remember the frozen little corpse.
When I do my first poetry tour she brings her friends,
coworkers, three roommates and two—no—three dozen roses.
Sits beaming in the front row at three different shows.
Isn't jealous. When Dad arrives at the Ottawa show
she helps my girlfriend kick him out. *This isn't for you.*
Get the fuck out of here. When her baby comes three months early
I spend the night on a blue plastic chair in ICU.
My tiny niece: my sun and my moon. I promise
to give her Great-Great Aunt Emma's necklace
when she's older. We plan how to take care of Mom
when Dad finally dies. Sorry, I've misled you: I am
an only child. I hatched alone, raised myself
and don't miss anything.