

## (SUPPOSING) MY MOTHER WAS A BLUE HERON

I.

My mother was a blue heron who blew in off the Delta in a hurricane and wound up land-locked in Alabama surrounded by red clay and peaches and zigzag fences somewhere between the Romulus and Remus of almost-central Alabama, Jemison and Clanton. My father was your ordinary earthbound swain, and together they accumulated memories to feather their imperiled nest the way limestone cliffs alluviate dehydrated lichen. He bound her feet to the stone to keep her at home where they gave birth to five ugly ducklings, or perhaps five red herrings, or maybe five black sheep whose mother thought they were all the first lambs of spring but not at all fit for slaughter. She thought they were the very first.

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My mother was the hurricane that blew the blue heron over the bridge that was my father, and in that storm she spawned five tornadoes that tore up all the trailer parks and knocked the battle-flagged dome off the Capitol building, bringing in five separate thunderstorms that washed out all the gutters and left trash walking in riding boots on the streets of Birmingham, Montgomery, all the way to Ohio and Chicago. My mother was the hurricane of many names bearing down on all the levees but my mother had no calm still eye. My mother was a cyclone, a full force gale, unbuilding things, washing away sandbags, but she herself was never thrown, because she stood one-legged, the other tied to a stone.

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Suppose that my father was a swan and the swan was called Zeus, and that I do not have a mother at all but sprang straight from my father's head, full-grown and fully blown from his laureled godhead, and that we glide and glide together on lakes of obsidian, eating all the manna that rains across the wilderness, rains down from the quartermasters at Mount Olympus. Suppose that my father was a swan. Suppose that he glides and glides in his own reflection.

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My mother was a blue heron. My father was Zeus, within her wingspan.

## II.

Supposing that my mother was the Gingerbread Woman, iced and frosted and that she buttoned up her jacket and set her raisin eyes homeward and that she ran whee whee whee all the way home, to her licorice-scented gingerbread house near the river and my father chased her all the way there, stubbing a toe in the water, and that he started to melt. He melted until he lost a leg but still they had five ginger snaps that burned the mouths of their lovers from Birmingham bars to Michigan Avenue van de Rohe corporate mousetrap cubicles but every Mother's Day, Mother got five fresh bouquets of snapdragons. Father thought the snap children were not quite done, and were raw inside but Mother kept them warm in parchment skins and pronounced them crisp, perfect. Two turned blond as sand dollars and three stayed the russet of their birth and built their own gingerbread houses right down the street where Mother and Father ran and ran and Father melted as he ran and mother smiled a frosted smile at him. My father was a one-legged gingerbread man who ran until he caught her and set her up in her gingerbread house with peppermint shingles and bitter anise trim. Suppose that five ginger snaps grew into crumbling, hard-bitten lives after leaving Mother's pungent house but it still was perfect.

## III.

Suppose my mother was a blue whale and that my father was oracle-eyed Jonah. She was out for a casual stroll in the same old neighborhood, so she yawned and drew my father in whole, where in her belly he acquired tastes of Biblical proportions and took in prophecies of heaven and changed them into intimations of despair. He dreamed in there of a chariot hell-bent on the firmament that would let him rise like Elijah, up and out of the belly of this beast. And in the belly of my huge blue mother he was sentient but mute, wishing for the gift of ventriloquism to hurl his prophecies forward past her viscous entrails. He wondered whether God gave him the short end of the stick when He made His prophet His pensioner, surviving on nothing but Mother's indigestible bits and the timely repentant expedient of prayer. While he was in there, God imprinted in him the sacred grief of the aggrieved, apoplectic priest and that of the eternally temporizing penitent, there in the slimy belly of the beast. He slept in there with a wall-eyed stare, tossing in his doomsday dreams of Ninevah, Thebes, thinking unawares of Nebuchadnezzar's mess halls, curious writings on the walls, hieroglyphs drawn from the mouths of babes, of griefs in the lions' den for a prophet's shattered peace.

My mother tired of his wrathful sleeps, his tossing in his bunk, found him too unsavory even for her bilious entrails, was bored that he was doomed to compose jeremiads about his disappointment and hunger. So my mother spewed him and ejected with him five sententious serpents born with guns and spears instead of arms and hands, and Father named each and every one of them for a mad captain named Ahab, but Mother played with them in the waves, tossing them from time to time in the air. When they misbehaved as children will, she rapped their guns with a spar and trimmed their spears to toothpicks. These mad captains would blubber after her, struggling fruitlessly to capture her full attention and to learn her name.

My mother was a blue whale. My father was a prophet who saw in a vision five sermonizing sea snakes, born in God's image, their mother's perfection.

#### IV.

My mother was a through-the-glass darkly blue-tinted mirror with a whalebone handle. My father, always standing behind her like a stalker, cast his reflection forward and its ugliness shattered the glass. My mother, not one to waste things because squanderings always count, scooped up five slices of glass in her ungloved hands, bloodying herself in their handling. The five shards were born with telescopic vision that left them prone to punishment because they always threw light when they were told to leave the dark corners alone. But Mother thought they were perfect, so jagged and so shiny. Bright and sharp, all the teachers wrote on their deportment cards. All her fragile fractiles shattered again, casting their father's reflection over their shoulders from Red Mountain to Lakeshore Drive, glinting in the sun, glaring in the snow. They shimmered like diamonds cast into the sand, dangerously sparkling at strangers.

#### V.

My mother was a riverboat that ran up to the bluffs by the melancholy Natchez Trace and sometimes picked up passengers like my prophetic peg-legged gingerbread father who was either a gambler or a drowning washed-up riverboat captain whose boat he'd let run aground when his drunken sailors hit a sand bar at Pas Christian. He called the dice five times at the roulette wheel and Mother said he always bet against the house but that it was perfect, just perfect that way. Five die rolled themselves through life like it was Russian roulette. They kept Mother in perfect suspense, but she was well-moored and never was tossed or troubled. The gingerbread captain had anchored her with a stone.

#### VI.

My mother was a blue-blooded mermaid who swam out of the sea oats at Mobile Bay. My father was the Minotaur who found her there, washed ashore and flailing. He split her tail so she could be taught to walk on land but she always precariously tottered like a footbound Mandarin courtesan. My father thought this was just as well because she was too beautiful to let her get away. It was just as well that she stayed, now that she walked on land. They had five mermaid-Minotaur children, born scaly and hairy, and clumsy on land. Their awkwardness made them angry, so they shook their horns and gored their lovers all the way from Birmingham to Binghampton. They were loud and hobbled along on their little splayed feet, stepping on cracks on every sidewalk. Mother laid them a trail of sardines and wild game so they would not starve out there. The children sometimes walked on glass from the time Mother was a shattered mirror and sometimes there was ground glass in their food when they took sack lunch to school. They walked on bloody feet and spoke with bloodied lips wherever they went. Father thought they were awkward and quarrelsome, but Mother said they were doubly blessed, once by Poseidon and once by Demeter, and that from their first bloody steps and their first blood-lipped words, they were perfect.

## VII.

My mother was a blue like cyanide is a blue, Prussian, evaporating. Heron, whale, mirror, gingerbread woman, riverboat, mermaid. She married my father, an ordinary swain, a swan on a lake of obsidian, a reflection in blue light with piano music, a whaler with a roulette wheel on a riverboat made of gingerbread, a beast with a horn. Together they had five red herrings, black sheep, ginger snaps, slivers of glass walking on bloody feet, slew-footed, who gored their lovers with their ghastly horns.

But blue blue blue blue Mother blew in off the Delta and blew kisses to them because they were perfect.