

Madra

My name is Madra. Where I come from it means dog. My mother said that when I was born I was red with fury and howling at the moon. For eighteen years, I have lived in a stone house that's built on black land that sinks. My blood is close to the skin; you can see the branching of my veins. I like to run my hands over doorframes and pull out the splinters. I like to eat gravy with a spoon. I like to pinch the petals off asters and think about the motherless butcher's girl.

Starlee. Starlee. Starlee.

Starlee reaching out to pull the ribbon from my hair as we pass each other in the school corridor. Starlee on the bus telling me her mother had died from a sickness that was all over her insides. *Ravaged*, she'd said, like she didn't know what it meant but I did, and when I closed my eyes I saw a hare flattened across the road, bugs crawling out of where its eyes used to be. I'd put Starlee's hand in mine and squeezed until it turned white. Starlee against the stone wall of the cemetery. Starlee saying she loved me. Starlee smelling of sawdust, sharpened steel and the cracked ribs of heavy animals.

I have not left this house and its black land in two winters, since my mother found notes from Starlee taped to the underside of my dresser. It feels like one hundred years.

'Why do you make it so hard to love you?' she'd asked, sat in front of the fire, handing me note after crumpled note, sighing as I dropped each into the flames.

I love you more than all the bones in the bog.

I had stuffed a note inside my mouth, trapped it under my tongue but she went in with a hooked finger, pulled it out. The wetness of my mouth skewed the blue letters, caused them to topple and fall against one another. My mother put the note in my hand and held me by the elbow. We watched as the skin on my hand tightened and blistered like plastic on a bonfire. I closed my eyes and imagined the swerve of the butcher's girl and with her perfectly crossed t's.

Starlee. Starlee. Starlee.

I did not get back on the bus to school after that. 'It's my job to keep you safe from harm,' my mother had said, locking the door to my bedroom, stringing the silver key around her neck so it came to rest on top of the others.

But that was two winters ago and now it is nearly summer and my mother is dead. Choked on shot buried in the breast of a grouse. The bird was killed by a man who smelt like rainwater on a metal gate. And fire. I thought I was finally free when her hands rose up like a butterfly to take hold of her throat. She danced across the room, turning from red to blue, collapsing into a neat pile by the door.

But I am not free. Not yet.

The days between my hand in the fire and the shot in my mother's throat were punctuated with the setting of fires in the grates of every room, washing everything that could be washed, pinching purple petals.

She loves me, she loves me not.

Every afternoon I sat on the porch peeling potatoes into a bucket, listening to the green birds that swung and looped through the rusted sky. My mother used to hiss at them, said they didn't belong here. Said they were unnatural. I tuned into them, turned the blade over and over, letting their noise pull at my edges.

When I said I missed school, my mother told me I could learn anything that was worth knowing from books. I started with Volume One of the Encyclopedia. I learned about the ribs and veins of a leaf; the thin, vulnerable bones of the human hand; the earth's hot core. To mark important pages, I turned down the corner, ran my thumb along it pushing my nail against the seam and ripping it clean off. I folded the paper as many times as I could before dropping it on my tongue and swallowing.

I suppose my mother felt sorry for me, that's why she taught me how to draw. 'Everything is just shapes on top of other shapes,' she'd say. 'It's all just lines connecting to lines.' The hare starts as a circle; birds with their triangle-wings; the elk's antlers spiking out over the page.

When I was alone, I sketched the circle of Starlee's face with soft pencils inside the covers of books. At night, I lifted the landscapes lining my bedroom wall and across their boarded backs I drew Starlee's face. Her body. In daylight, with the paintings back on the wall, I could feel the swerve of her behind the thick greens of the land, the blues of the water, the greys of the sky.

One night, after a dream of Starlee, rusted bloody muck caking her body, I angled myself out the bedroom window. Unable to scale the old fence, I worked my way between the gate railings but my body was too full to give in. The next day the windows were nailed shut and after that, when I put my fist through the glass, she had the man board them over. 'You're not too clever, are you?' he'd smiled, hammer in hand. The man came when my mother needed him. He fixed things: a door that would not open, hands on a clock that would not turn, part of the fence that had fallen down in the night. Some days he came with dead things swung about his neck and I smelt the lead buried in the meat of their bodies. My mother moved him in not long after the boards on the window. Said she couldn't manage me on her own. Said she needed him to keep me safe.

The day before she died, the man told me to watch out for the traps he'd lain around the fence. 'They're not for hares,' he'd said.

It has been twenty-six days since my mother fell into a neat heap. I mark each morning on the wall with the tip of blown-out match. When she passed the people who took her body away asked what should be done. 'Burn her,' I'd said, but that wasn't what she wanted. My mother loved the bogland that clings to the slope of this mountain. Often I'd find her black-handed at the kitchen table, wordless with a sticky joy that made her forget to light the fire. On those days I'd notice the gifts she'd given to the land: the dusted black outline of a painting from the hall,

the water jug missing from its spot beside the sink, the pig bones gone from the fridge. She said that when she died I should give her to the bog but I wanted no future where her straight-boned body would be pulled out of that claggy earth; hair still on her head, bird sat in her stomach.

But now she's gone and it's just me and the man. My keeper with my mother's keys around his neck. Keeping me away from the only thing I want – my butcher's girl.

Starlee. Starlee. Starlee.

In all the time that he was in this house and in my mother's bed the man barely spoke but after mother turned red then blue, he began to teach me 'lessons'. The first was when he found a fox out by the fence caught between the teeth of a trap. He pulled me out of bed, put a rock in my hand. 'You're doing it a kindness,' he'd said.

The night after the fox, I dreamed of Starlee in the bog. The metallic hum of her and centuries of dead leaves caught in her throat. When I woke, I used the tip of a match to trace the outline of her across the wall. I made a fist with my left hand, drew around it with my right. A heart.

For the next lesson he dragged me away from setting the living room fire down the wooden slats of the overgrown path and out onto the black. 'Vermin,' he'd said, pointing at the green flecks bolting above. He pressed the gun into my hands and showed me how to load the gold-tipped red cartridges.

When the sky was clear, we walked over the earth and he pushed each of the tiny green bodies into the back with his boot. 'They need to sink.'

Afterwards, my hands smelt like fire and there was a wetness that could not be wiped away.

It was only when my mother's ashes arrived that I was sure she was really dead. I was scrubbing vegetables on the porch, listening for the noise of birds that never came when he handed me a box. 'What do you want to do with her?' I told him I wanted to spread her over the bell heather that skirts along the fence. My mother loved its needle leaves. 'Ten minutes,' he'd said, walking back into the kitchen. 'Then get the dinner done.'

I waited till he was up the stairs before stepping off the porch. Till he was in the bathroom at the other side of the house, lathering soap over his hands and arms. His face and neck. He washed every day before dinner. He knew I couldn't get far in ten minutes, not by running or pushing myself through the railings of the gate. But it was time enough to get to the fence and snap a branch from the dying alder. It was enough to drag a trap back and leave it along the path, hidden in the grass. Enough to dump my mother into the wind.

The noise of him pulls me into the morning. I dress slowly and run my hands over the thick greens and blues and greys. When the noise stops I claw off the boards nailed over the bedroom windows. Beneath I find the hole my fist first made, before the man moved into this house. I punch the rest of the glass out of the frame, climb out onto the land, hands dripping red.

He is by the path; star-shaped and wild. Ankle shattered. The whiteness of bone is obscene and celestial.

'Madra.'

He looks like a thing that cannot be saved.

'Help me.'

I kneel on the wooden slats of the path beside him and reach out for the twine strung about his neck. I pull until it breaks and the silver keys fall into the black. I dig them out before getting to my feet and stepping off the path and onto his chest, as if he were a stepping stone.

'Sink,' I say and jump, listening to the crack of his bones beneath my boots.

It's a straight line down the hill to the town where the land is harder. Everything looks the same. The cemetery, the school, the bakery, the butcher.

Starlee. Starlee. Starlee.

There she is, behind the glass of the shop window. She doesn't see me as I walk in behind a woman with a child in a harness. Does not look past the woman who orders a pound of sausage meat and a neck of lamb. She reaches through the cabinet, her fat hand against the lamb's neck. Her even face reflects all the light. She smiles, dumping the neck into a bag and making a knot. The swerves and bends of her are softer than I remember, softer than the lines drawn across walls and the backs of boards.

'Starlee.'

She turns and takes in the whole of me. The black-handed girl that has come for her. The girl with keys strung about her neck, blood dripping onto the sawdust floor.

'It's me.'

She drops the neck onto the scale and steps back.

'It's Madra.'

She shakes her head and the woman pulls the harness so tightly the child tumbles back onto the floor and turns red. Somewhere in between a man who is not Starlee's father has appeared beside her. His hand on her hand. A gold ring on his finger. One on hers too. Glistening. The man edges in front of her and looks at me like I am something to be caught.

'All the bones in the bog. Do you not remember?'

She shakes again and I lose the line of her. All at once she is shapes I do not recognise.

'Madra,' I say, closing my eyes to see a hundred ribbons pulled from a hundred heads, the sticky purple inside-outs of a hundred hares disintegrating on the road, a sky's worth of green birds cracked apart across the black like shells underfoot.

I say it again. And again.

Madra. Madra. Madra.

I say it until it is no longer my name. I say it until it is just noise. A howling.