

The Ice Puzzle

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First Shard

The Snow Queen sat quietly at her kitchen table, stirring cream into her still-steaming coffee with a delicate silver spoon. She was entranced by the pattern of it, the white swirl into the black brew, the slight froth whipped into being by the edge of the spoon. The crisp pre-dawn light filtered through her window, blue and unearthly, tracing Neptunian patterns on her bone-thin wrists.

Mornings like this, she could never keep her mind moored to the table, the imported lacquerware mug, the airy kitchen with its rooftop garden of basil, mint, rosemary. Her car keys, she already knew, were hopelessly lost, and the plants would remain unwatered, sending up the thick, green fragrances of their deaths into the Copenhagen wind. She wanted to make sure that last night's dishes were hanging where they ought to be, drying like bundles of wine-grapes. She wanted to brush the cobwebs from the high and ornate cornices. But mornings like these, she could so easily lose herself in a single task: the pruning of the sage plant, the eating of a teacake, the drinking of a cup of coffee laced with milk.

The Snow Queen lived alone. Of course she lived alone. Who would share with her this place, floating over the city on the twelfth floor of a baroque apartment building, behind frost-crusting wrought-iron bars that crossed the windows like a girl's ribbons? She was never disturbed in her tower, and she had lived [there](#), with her cups steaming into the chill rooms, for a long time.

The Snow Queen's radio, an old 1925 model with a black speaker gaping in its center like a mouth, played a tinny piano-hall tune, the clinking ivory notes echoing on the white tiles and walls. Once, when she was a child and not yet the Snow Queen, she could remember her blind grandmother playing a dilapidated old piano draped with lace and yellowed sheet music. She used to love to listen to the gliding sounds, and breathlessly wait for her lessons, when grandmother would teach her Hungarian waltzes by placing her little hands over those ancient ones, dry and withered as paper. She could remember, even after all that had come to pass since, the feeling of her fingers over the old woman's, a secret method of learning the weight of music.

Outside, snowflakes drifted lazily past the windowpanes -- they always did. She had become accustomed to it over the years. Even in the sweat-ridden depths of July, the little white stars clustered around her, melting on her skin, swirling, breathing. She watched the icy bees collect their alien pollen from the fat red roses in her roof-garden, roses whose edges had already seeped into black, already frozen and brittle. She had never wondered what a living rose looked like. The coffee was hot in her throat, hot and foreign, spiced with the dust and sun of Sumatra, Guatemala, Ethiopia -- she could not tell which. She had never been to those places, never learned the taste of that parched earth. It did not bother her. She had long ago ceased to long for such things.

An enormous mirror hung in the corner of the Snow Queen's house. Its frame was heavy, ancient silver, tarnished with the oils of uncountable hands, all white and slim, all cold

and bloodless. The glass itself was shattered, spider-lines fracturing the surface which might once, in the beginning of the world, have been as perfect as the surface of a frozen pond before a single skate has etched its track into the ice. The Snow Queen watched herself in the mirror, a pale-lipped Narcissus wrapped in a coat of fox-fur with black braids wrapped around her head like quiescent snakes. The glass ruptured her face, inverted it, caused schisms and rifts in her cheekbones, her eyelashes, her earlobes. She was broken like a Picasso -- her mouth a camellia pinned in her hair, her eyes blinking on the surface of her tongue.

The Snow Queen extended her arm gracefully and plucked a tiny shard from the looking-glass, dropping it into her mug like a cube of sugar. It bubbled and dissolved in the rich liquid, and she sipped her mirror-coffee with an inscrutable expression, letting the glass-brew expand through her veins, opening her throat like the entrance to a cave. She lifted her blue-black eyes finally to the dead fireplace, whose ashes in their grille scented the room with the ghosts of cedar.

Before the fireplace was a dainty little table with legs of marble and iron. In a tufted chair sat a little girl with hair so blonde it was almost white, combed neatly into pigtails which tumbled to her elbows in perfect curls, like a Victorian lithograph. The girl was utterly engrossed in her work: with blackening, frostbitten fingers she was arranging shards of ice like pieces of a puzzle, trying to fashion some new thing from the jagged slivers. She tried to swing her legs beneath the oversized chair, as children will, but her sweetly curved ankle was shackled to the chair-leg with a delicate silver chain.

The Snow Queen turned her gaze back to the window, and drank the last of her morning coffee in silence.

Second Shard

She began in light.

In whiteness as pure as ether and the bones of fish, in light so total that it admitted no shadow, no depth, no breath of gray.

The world began in winter. There were no lakes but there was ice, there were no trees but they were bare. The first earth was frozen to a depth of dreams; the first sky was white as a cataract. There was no shattered star, no cell splitting sinuously along a shining meridian. There was only snow, and light, and a wind that wept.

And there was her. Where she walked, December followed her like a bony hound, and her face, her blue-lipped face, was framed in the pale fur on animals which had not yet opened their eyes in the depths of ice caves. She stood in the snow of the beginning of the world, shrouded in light. She looked up into the glacial clouds, illumed by the first moon, and her eyes glittered as though crusted in hoarfrost.

She wanted for **nothing**, and her skirts trailed over the earth like trickling milk. Her Eden bore no fruit, no slash of red to tempt any crawling beast outside herself. She could not imagine the need for such a beast. She was content to watch the play of her hands over arctic seas, listen to her own silent footfalls in halls of dead-armed yew. She loved her reflection in the utter stillness of the blue-banked ponds, and pried the ice from its cask of earth, setting it aright against a black-barked tree. She drew up her knees before its glistening surface, and watched her pale face, her skin so bright and hard it seemed to be made of something beyond skin, the tectonic limbs of her body, folded together like a spider at rest.

But, in time, the beasts came, and they thirsted for redness, for hot blood and cracks of blue to shatter the perfect sky. She did not like the smell of them, and retreated to places of white and hoar, to a palace of ice far to the north where she and her mirror could dwell together with only the snow to witness them.

It would be a mistake to think that she first did it because she longed for a child. Her womb was no hungrier than her mirror -- its shoals and shallows were dark-limned ice. In the beginning, she was merely curious. A child stumbled into her hall, separated from its Laplander horde, seeking water and warmth, as animals will. She drifted down her silver stair, icicle-hard, and stood before the boy, implacable, her black hair streaming over the sparkling floor.

It begged for water.

Graceful and hesitant, she extended her hand, and when it touched her, trickles of water spilled from it, as though her flesh melted. It suckled at her fingers like a calf, eyes growing large and limpid, adoring. It was then she learned that little boys are greedy, as it took more and more of her hand into its mouth, slurping at her cool skin as though it

dripped honey into his throat. It licked at the thin web between her fingers, and moaned in content. As she had never been eaten before, she did not quite understand the hot pulling of his mouth on her skeletal hand. She simply stared at the creature affixed to her body, and found with pleasure that as she passed into him, his smell became more and more like her own.

Tentatively, she stroked its hair with her other hand. It leaned into her touch as a kitten will, and drew more of her flesh into its mouth. In its blue-black eyes she could see herself reflected, as in her ice-mirror, and was enchanted by the doubled image, the shine of her twinned body staring out of the body of the little creature.

Slowly, she withdrew her fingers from the boy's mouth, still slick with its hunger, and it whimpered as she pulled away, its mouth still sucking at the phantom air. She stretched out her long arms, pale furs cascading like a slough of snow from a pine, and enfolded it into her chill embrace. It crowed softly in delight, and searched her body for more of the sweet melt.

As if walking through deep water, the Snow Queen retreated from the hall and floated back up the silver stair, the doors of her palace grinding shut behind her, leaving a track of ruined ice where it had been.

In the folds of her dress, the boy's fingers had already begun to frost over, blood slowing to still within him.

Third Shard

It is not unlike the action of men; I move through the steam of chestnut-roasters and hawkers of octopus-eyes in search of a body that stirs me. I search for a beauty among the salarymen-ties -- red and blue and red again -- I look for a face which does not let know that it longs for winter.

I walk the streets of Kyoto, and my feet are very white.

I have been doing this for a long time -- you could call it a career. I know, by now, the look of the ones who will be easy, fish flailing in a waterfall. The slim hips, the gaunt cheek and hollow eye. The body: a tree stripped of leaves, bones in terror of flesh, jutting through the skin as if to escape. The black lapels of the jacket flap like blackbird's wings, and oh, how the blood burns. After so much time, they hang out of the crowd peach-bright, and the bough bends low to bring them to my mouth.

I am patient, I can afford to choose well.

The bereft give the best flavor. They cling to the silver poles on the night-train, and like scarves their ghosts hang around their necks, strangling, scrabbling at their mouth for breath, at their eyes for sight. The conductor drones on as they gag on the whisper-aether of their dead; they cannot see it, they do not know it, but they can taste it, behind their tongues, ever so faintly, like a vapor of soured milk. Even without those pale bones scratching at their scalps, sawing through their skulls with insubstantial teeth, I could find them. I know that eye, that desperate eye, and I pull myself along the gaze as though along a length of fishing line.

They always recognize me. It is not surprising; I am what I am. Even my name is nothing more than a statement of fact, almost a corporate title. Snow Woman, Woman of Snow, death walking cold and quiet. If the drummers in Gion see no more than a woman with a great length of black hair and a white coat trimmed in rabbit, the man who has buried his wife will not. For him, I am naked, my skin so white I would disappear into the snow, save for the black splash of my eyes, my sex, my hair trailing over the earth like ruptured night. He cries my name with the voice of his deeps, and does not for a moment question my claim.

I did not ask [this](#) one's name. I do not care; I do not want him for his family connections. He is young, [the snow](#) seems new to him, his eyes roll in his head like a feral cat. His grief is pinned to his shirtfront, a red smear in my vision. His dead woman crouches on his shoulder, her incandescent fingers cutting through the fabric of his suit, and her grin is terrible, hungry, her tongue a-slaver.

I make a bargain with her. Ghosts do not haggle over the price.

I open a small space between my breasts for her -- there is no blood, only a sliver of openness, a little fall of snowflakes that vanish before they reach the street. Her eyes are

huge and full of sick-sallow light as she leaps from her husband-perch and into me, the last of her glassy braids snapping off as my flesh closes behind her. They, too, fall, and disappear.

I am full of her, and she is impatient, writhing inside me like a daughter. Her name I ask; it is Kumiko. And the man winces only once when I slide my hand into his, but then -- do I not smell like his Kumiko, like lilac-leaves and orange? Does my hand not have the weight of hers, her sweet fingers? Is my hair, now that he looks closely, not of a shade with hers, does it not have the gloss, the heft, of his dead bride-child? It did not seem so at first -- but yes, now that he is near enough to touch, he can see a kind of Kumiko in these depthless eyes.

Enough, anyway, to tell himself it is her, and follow her away from the noise of the evening street, the strung lights and rhythmic festival-drums, the pounding of wooden mallets into wooden barrels. It is Kumiko, he thinks, and cannot run fast enough after her.

Come with me.

It is a secret.

We are Yuki-Kumiko now, and we lead him away from light and sound. We lead him through curtained alleys, and Kumiko whispers to me that her lover is beautiful when he is out of breath, that the blush rises in his cheeks like a woman. And of course, he is. She strokes the cool surface of my bones and trembles with lust.

He protests, a little, when we come to the Imperial Gate. The tourists have all gone to their hotels drunk and bloated, it's angles are all silent. Why should I not enter? I am Queen of Death and Snow, Queen of Ice and Darkness, Queen of Desolation. What house is barred to me? What dais would be ashamed to bear my weight?

No, no, you are Kumiko. You are Kumiko.

He is afraid of the guards. But they know me like a farmer knows the first signs of winter, and they salute as we pass through the gate. This is my place; this is a dead place and I am the Lady of Death. There is no Emperor here, there is no chubby boy-heir soiling his hakama and killing butterflies for sport, there is no wrinkled matron slathering her dewlap in rose-water. The faces powdered in lead are all gone, the solemn pluckings of koto-strings have evaporated like rain into the air, no forehead has touched the ground here in years, no oil seeped from skin to floor.

There are only shadows, and dust, and seven grey spiders weaving away.

Look at the trees, my husband. One cherry, one orange. They would never bloom together, but look now, see the flowers like icicles floating on the black branches of both, so white they would disappear into the snow, if not for the dark centers, dark with snow-pollen, dark with love and the foreknowledge of death.

You always loved flowers, Kumiko. I remember you filled the house with cherry branches that spring, and when we woke up the next day, all the petals had fallen onto the floor. We picked pink petals out of the couch for years after that.

I pulled the man onto the great steps which lead up into the Palace, to the thrones standing still and stern as wolves in the interior. But I have no use for houses. Under the stars like holes drilled into a frozen lake I pulled him down, down, onto the dewy steps. He had not noticed before, the heavy kimono, white as the day of her wedding, and the blue sash gleaming. He cries my name with the voice of his deeps, and puts his face to my neck, his hot tears scalding me -- but the pleasure is greater.

Kumiko, Kumiko. I knew you would not leave me.

He tears the sash, and it melts to water under his hands, wetting my belly, his thighs. He pulls open the kimono, and for a moment -- only a moment -- he sees the whiteness of the body within and is afraid. It is as though he has cut open a persimmon and found a diamond worm. He is revolted, but he wants it all the same. It passes like a cloud drifting over the moon. I pull him onto me and he is crying, tears catching in the stubble on his chin, he is crying and his is screaming as he keens over me like a monk in rapture, his mouth gapes open and his teeth are rattling, the sickle-whites of his eyes are showing and inside me Kumiko shrieks, putting out her arms through my arms and pulling him farther in, pushing out of my mouth to taste his tears, to swallow his sweat, to grip his sinews and his bones. I must tell her to be patient -- I, too, want to enjoy him, and he is shivering now, the first crusts of snow forming on his lips. He is trying to burrow into me, to find warmth, biting at me to draw blood or milk, but he finds only the snowlit forest, the blue air, the slick freeze of leaves in mid-decay, and small, sweet footprints in the snow, leading away, away, into the trees.

Kumiko, Kumiko, Kumiko.

Yes, yes, it is Kumiko, and I remember the cherry-branches, I remember, give me your mouth, husband, give me your heart to eat.

He sobs and bellows all at once, and I fasten my mouth onto his, my icy tongue searching out his grief. His skin has hardened and grown a scrim of hoarfrost, it is blue against me, and shuddering, still thrashing against my torso, his knees knocking on the stone steps, a bit of blood trickling from the corner of his pink mouth -- but it is not the blood I want. I press my cloud-fingers into his spine and it roars into me, the sharp, smoky sweetness of him, I can feel it heavy as candied plums in my throat, and Kumiko, too, exults in the richness of it, the stream of his ghost like cacao and pomegranate wine. We swim in it, we let it run over our fingers like black honey, we lick it from the teeth of the other. We roll in the melt of a vanishing wedding-kimono, laughing and thrilling to the sugar-satori of his exhalation, the stars spinning and blurring in our shared vision, like a shower of snow from heaven.

And when the sun came, cold and bright as a shard of glass, the guards found a man lying on the steps of the Imperial Palace in an ecstasy of rigor mortis, his cheeks sunken blue-black, eyes rolled back and frozen to his lashes, his body twisted around a skeleton, the snow-scrubbed bones clutching his corpse tenderly to themselves.

As they always did, the guards made certain the bodies were gone by the time the first tourists arrived to view the gardens.

Fourth Shard

I would like to tell you it was magic. I would like to tell you that I buried a hangnail by the light of the new moon and whispered Greek over the little mound of black dirt. I would like to tell you that I spat on a penny and hopped widdershins around the house with that bit of copper clenched in the pit of my knee, and all these wonders sprang out of the earth for you, in shades of orange and violet.

But those marvels are for her, not for me. My hands are so much smaller.

It took a year and more, bushels of suns and moons lashed together with strips of calendar, weeks torn off and knotted, one to the next. I knelt in the soil, I pushed my fingers into it, I let it into my skin, my hair, my pretty nails. I folded seeds into it like eggs into dough, and I kneaded the blackness well. I carried buckets of well-water and spilled them into the quiescent ground; I watched the water seep rootward like coffee draining into a pot. My skin turned brown with the work, my aprons became streaked, a tiger's vestments. I planted all these things for you to delight in.

It was like a Mass.

I planted the callalilies at [night-time](#), under a garlic-bulb moon. Is that magic enough? When they bloomed, [breathing](#), they filled my windows with such light, dead and pale.

When the irises bloomed, I smiled over the morning's wash, unslept sheets snapping in the patchwork sun. I knew you would love the purple, and the winking yellow within.

When the marigolds bloomed, I held my hair to the petals, and the colors melted -- there was no place where I ended and the flower began.

When the sweetpeas unfolded, it was a smear of blood and lymph, pink and white and red, trickling out from the flesh of the gardenias.

When the birds-of-paradise sent out their jutting spikes, I thought that your eyelashes would be like that, when the sun shone through them, a fringe of green and flame, bright as burning.

When the foxglove came, they stood straight up to my shoulders, lavender horns trumpeting the clouds.

When the bougainvillea came, it spent its red over my roof, the color of virginity, the color of birth.

When the hyacinth came, when the tiger-lilies came, when the gorse and heather came, when the lilacs came, when the bluebells came. When the daisies came. When they all came pushing up out of the scrim of earth like babies crowning between their mothers'

legs, I named them each for you, I dedicated them, consecrated them, taught them to know your face against the day when I first laid out milk and tea for your little hands.

But when the lily-of-the-valley sprouted, it was as though snow had come to my garden, and the forest of stems was sheathed in ice.

Was it so terrible that I wanted a child? It would be easier, I think, if I were a witch, if this little thatched house were balanced on chicken's feet, and my belly were not so big with frosted cakes and buttered rolls. It would be better for you if I had a mustache and a wart. Then you might have been able to tell yourself that you did not like the flowers, that you always knew there was an apple hidden somewhere in my garden, malevolent and red, beating like a heart. Lying in wait. You could pretend that you did not like my biscuits, or my rabbit stew, or the lemon I used in your tea each morning. You could tell your sweetheart, in days hence, that you did not crawl into my arms by the fireside and lay your head on my breast while I sang to you in French, that I did not cry over your little golden head. That you forgot him because I cast a spell -- I put a charm of braided hair and black ribbon beneath your pillow -- not because you wished to, not because you liked my house, my flowers, the place I had made for a daughter that never came until you walked up my path, seeking out that other woman, the white-faced banshee, shadow of my sister of my soul.

It was the roses that ruined us.

It was not that I could not have planted a rose-bush -- in red or cream or salmon I might have planted any number of the fat things. And I would have, I would have, my darling, if I had known that you would miss them. If I had known you would somehow guess that useless boy's face in the absence of those particular stamens, those arching thorns. Perhaps I should have been more careful, perhaps I should have considered the nature of gardens, which have never satisfied anyone. Perhaps I should have learned magic, and erased the longing for roses from you before you crossed my threshold.

Perhaps it was inevitable: every child must look at her mother the way you looked at me, clear eyes so full of hate and betrayal, furious that the parent was revealed to be fallible, that she dared to try to keep the world, in all its ice and storm, from her dear one.

I held you in my little house, closer than a womb. We were happy, you and I, for a little while. And now you are born, and you seek her out -- I am only a woman, I cannot help but be jealous of that. And through her you seek him, your plump and childish body learning what lust is, what desire, and that is her lesson to teach, not mine.

But Gerda, my Gerda, you must ask yourself, in the Lapland nights: what is the opposite of a Snow Queen? What is her white shadow, what is her other self? Is it not the summer-mother, fat with flowers, on her knees kneading the earth like chocolate cake, washing her linens in sunlight? Is it not Demeter, hips wide as cauliflowers, filling up teacups with steaming water for her little girl, newly returned from the Underworld? And who is to say her daughter is not the Queen of Winter, and who is to say her daughter is not herself,

turned inside out and frozen, her organs glittering black and bile, entrail-jewels glowering at the injustice of her separation, self from self?

You go out from me, beautiful child, and the moon is on your maiden-braids. You travel north on unhallowed roads to find her -- yet I could have given you that, too, if you had only asked. A mother does not deny her child. For you I would have worn my other face, and the three of us, the two of us, the one of ourself which sat among the flowers and taught them their alphabet, might have forgotten the boy who would steal winter from itself so that he could enjoy the spring, and eaten the delicate fruit of all these lilies together.

Fifth Shard

The sun scalds my eyes.

This is what I can never say to my mother, when she folds her wheat-threshing arms around me. When the April rains drip from her lashes, melting the snow from my shoulders, the scrim of ice from my teeth. The droplets sear through, and I cannot tell her that she is hurting me, that I am too new, too cold, to bear her touch.

For weeks after the equinox, I am blind as an infant mouse. I mewl and whimper, I curl into myself on a bed of sweetgrass and crocus. Tiny green spots float before my eyes, burning at the edges like cigarettes stubbed out on silk.

I had become so accustomed to the dark.

I had become accustomed to robes of hoarfrost glittering at my heels, at the gown of pomegranate peels that leaves its trickles of juice on my skin, the black roof of the earth drooping in its crags -- and the asphodel, the grey-leafed asphodel! I grew to love those myrrh-reeked flowers, I grew to find them beautiful -- yet my mother sets the table with crocus, and fills the salad with yellow and purple petals, and looks for me to smile. It makes her happy -- who am I to demand asphodel in her house?

I am no one.

I am the taken child and the Queen of Winter, and I am neither. I am lost, I cannot inherit the smallest thatch of my mother's house; I cannot ascend without her assent, or descend without his permission. I was only a girl, I had no say, and I was wed to midnight in a dress of nettles, barely blooded. I am past that now, but all I own is this limbo, this no-self, blinded by summer light, a mole-woman who knows only how to eat earth and dig deep.

I am a good girl. I fold my hands and eat her oatcakes; I watch her long fingers disappear into the dough. Sunspots nestle in the whiteness, in the dribble of butter she folds in -- they dance in the bread like golden beads, and I say nothing, nothing, I lay my napkin across my lap and say nothing to her frantic gaze, her fall of marsh-grass hair, her relief bubbling out of her like ground water. I pretend I have not eaten this meal a hundred times and more. I pretend my tongue has not changed, that I want her sweets as I did when my breasts were flat as glass, that I do not prefer, these days, black wine and a bull's thigh.

I am a good girl for him, too. I fold my hands and listen to the drums of Elysium, I sit lightly on my topaz chair. His black arms bristle around my waist, and I allow it, I allow it as I allow my mother to place her honeycombs on my tongue, and answer that yes, even after all these years, I still revel in the taste. But my hips were so narrow on my wedding night: long before the pomegranates he lay me down on the onyx stair -- he could not wait, not even to ferry me across the river. He pushed my face against the stone

and called me wife, called me niece and Queen, called me by a dozen names which were not mine, and his skin smelled of mossy tombs, and his breath of asphodel. His dead seed pooled on the steps.

I am sure I was wept for -- how often has my mother told me how terrible the ordeal was for her, how she suffered -- but I simply stood and straightened my little dress, curtsied to my uncle, and stepped gingerly onto the straw-lashed ferry. Charon touched my hair -- they all do here, as if they cannot believe in a flash of gold in the dark. Charon touched my hair and the river rushed by, snowflakes skittered across the deck, and I hid the red welts on my legs from all save the gardener, the vetiver-voiced gardener, who promised that his poultices would heal the wound, and those little ruby seeds, so like the color of blood, would scour my body of the little gods sown there.

I believed; children always believe.

And perhaps he did not lie -- I am a daughter still, and no mother. I am resigned -- I survived, and some time later there was an eventide when the half-light sparkled on the rivers in a way which did not seem cruel and hard. But I am bound by those seeds as surely as by a black-browed child, and banished to this nothingness, this doubled being: both the stolen and the thief. I am winter; my absence devours all my mother has made -- all I must do to bring death is step from one field to another, crocus to asphodel. But she is the crowned Queen, the monarch of [living things](#), and I wallow in Acheron, in Styx, in Lethe, lost in the depths of a husband.

And yet, I am not so much a wife as a child, still, ricocheting between my mother who stuffs me full of sugared flowers, and the other, the opal-eyed seraph who, in the most secret corners of the night, begs me to call him by my father's name. They spend me between each other like currency, taking their turns to seize a forearm, a haunch, squabbling over the right to punish me for sweeping the hearth too infrequently. They make me swear that I love them, on their knees, pleading like penitents.

It becomes tiresome. I hardly remember either of their faces anymore, only the length of land between the worlds, where I walk the last steps alone, stealing myself into the snow and hoar, gathering up my limbs into my own chariot -- no one need tell me, any longer, that I must go, and where. The horses know me, they whinny and snort.

The dark flows over my eyes like a balm, and yet, I am still blind. The sun-watch is ended, the uniform of lily-strewn laughter shed. I will be the hard-eyed death-woman -- I work the shift with industry, I wash my hands after each soul. Only here am I naked, neither of these. I do not know what I am, except that this place-between, alone of all, belongs to me truly, this path from mother to father, from hut to palace, self to self.

And the asphodel is waiting, soft underfoot, its familiar reek sighing into my skin again, a cold breath circling my waist like a daughter's arms.

Sixth Shard

The Snow Queen considered, for a moment, building a fire in the twisted knuckles of the iron grate. It was not that she was opposed to fire, after all. If it burned her -- well, would it not burn the flesh of any woman? She allowed that it was beautiful in its way, having the beauty of all red things -- flushed cheeks, apples, candies, and roses, roses most of all. The flames seemed to her like golden stems exploding into scarlet blossoms, incandescent petals licking at the charred wood as if to savor its taste. She understood that -- the need to dwell upon the thing devoured, to love it and sear it black in the same motion. If she wore a preponderance of white and blue, if her fingers were cold as birch branches stiffened in an ice storm, that did not mean she denied the fire its own peculiar, incomprehensible allure.

And the girl might be cold, she thought.

Immediately, she chastised herself. Of course the girl was cold. She ought not to care, or if she cared, it ought only to be a kind of delight in the shivering of those lissome and youthful bones, clattering in their sheath of skin like castanets. The last Snow Queen would only have laughed, her harsh voice cracking whip-slick across the child's shoulders, and brushed her lips across its brow, leaving a scrim of ice in the shape of her mouth. The old Queen would have crooned and cackled while this girl froze into a blue and gangrenous statue in her arms.

She would certainly not have stood in her fetchingly tiled kitchen with an empty coffee mug in her hands, staring at the mirror-dregs, wondering whether she should build up the fire to make her captive cozy as a babe on Christmas morn. But, she mused, it is true that we each of us degenerate from our parents. If I am softer than the old Queen, less sure and less beautiful, if I relish my life less than she, and wake to less sordid joys, I am only the product of my age. It was easier, she supposed, when Copenhagen was provincial and quiet-chimneyed, when its streets were perfumed only with baking bread and washing-soap, when children could be so easily plucked from the rooftop gardens, when a cobbler's son was a cobbler, and a banker's son a banker. She doubted any of the other Snow Queens had looked at their charges with her own uncertain, half-ashamed gaze, had wondered if it would be polite to offer it coffee, or tried to remember whether one ought to give caffeine to children. For them, there was no hesitation, no questions of etiquette or comfort for the stolen whelps -- only the ritual, the puzzle and the mirror, and the terrible pleasure of the deaths, each different, perfect, delicious as the first snowflake caught on the tongue. She could not deny that -- the pleasure was very great, glassy and bright, and she was sure that it was this the old Queen had meant to give her, the sweetness of the kill, dissolving like sugar in her icicle-throat.

And what sweetness she had known! She shuddered within herself. Even now, she would not give it up, not the mirror, not the cold, not the perfect-limbed girl-child chained to her parlor chair. How could she? Her hair was so pale, almost like snow. Many times she had sworn to the witness of her walls that this boy would be the last, this girl would be

enough. A story ought only to have one death, after all -- there can only be one annihilating meeting of child and mistress, or else it loses all meaning.

*Yet the day would come when she would glimpse snow-braids swinging wide and sparkling on a frozen lake, **and** the flash of silver skates like a shower of diamonds. And she would sigh, for she was **hungry** again. If the old Queen had worked with greater abandon, she had not been more ravenous. She was ashamed, so ashamed, but in her heart, hanging like a crystal lamp within her, was an unanswerable gluttony.*

Tears had frozen on her cheeks as she stared into the empty cup. Disgusted, she let it fall from her hand. It shattered predictably on the tile floor, chipping the petals of a few painted daisies. Its shards lay under the great broken mirror, clay under glass, fractured into an infinite number of silver-white splinters, radiating out, each shatter-silver reflecting the other, multiplying like cells, a fragmented wasteland birthing itself at her feet, seeking after itself, its afterbirth seeping over her toes like tremulous water.

The girl started at the sound, and stared in wonder at the slowly merging pieces of cup as they crept towards the mirror and shimmered into its ruined surface.

"All broken things belong to it," the Snow Queen whispered hoarsely.

She stepped away from the sink, shaking the last of the cup off her foot, and in a single motion, seized a length of fabric from her table and brushed her fingers gently over the sharp-edged mirror, as if one hand moved in a world utterly separate from the other. With her right hand she tenderly touched the mirror's face, almost a caress; with her left, she knotted the fabric and gripped it tightly in her white fingers. She seemed to fill the room, her long, colorless arms outstretched, like a seabird's wings.

The Snow Queen knelt at the side of the girl's chair and fingered the silver chain that anchored her there. The child looked into her eyes, not quite afraid, but not quite brave -- she saw no blackness there, no pupil, no iris-rim. Only glacial blue, and a center of white, like an ice cave lit by the filtered rays of the moon. There seemed to be no end to the depths of that cave, no shelf to stop her from falling through the Queen and coming out somewhere deep within the earth, where warmth had never reached. She breathed shakily, and tried to turn back to her puzzle -- the puzzle she understood, the puzzle interested her and made her feel as though she was not in such an awful place, but merely having her lessons in a schoolroom, and when she finished, it would be time for lunch, with a honey-and-butter sandwich waiting for her.

But the Snow Queen caught her wrist -- and she was so strong, her hand like frozen iron, pressing down. Before the girl could shy away, the Queen had gripped her head and tied the fabric tight, pressing the knot into her mouth until she nearly gagged. The girl could taste the lemony detergent on the cloth.

"I'm going out," the Snow Queen said carefully, trying to keep her voice from quavering, "be a good girl while I'm gone. Quiet little mice shall get presents when I return."

She swallowed thickly and locked the apartment door behind her.

Deep in her belly, hunger unfurled like a black flag.

Seventh Shard

She watched the boy sleep.

His skin prickled and fluttered into pale -- and then blue -- and then black -- where it touched her bed of ice. She watched the colors change with some fascination. It was not unlike the change of the trees, red-fulminate to crackle-black, frozen, bone-brittle. She turned her head to the side to catch the last escape of spine-gold into the glassy pillows -- somehow, she found, she did not want to miss any part of the process, the metamorphosis of flesh to diamond. It frightened her, the pull of putrefaction, the mottled, over-sweet lure of his body reflected in her pale eye.

She sat with her thin limbs crossed, zazen, calmly regarding the lichen that blossomed like roses over his ribs, the hollows of his elbows. The green against mushroom-grey seemed to her a contrast worthy of being called art, of being called beautiful. The milk-water of her fingers coursed through him, hardening the veins into calligraphy as it went, writing itself into the marrow of his bone, the cells of his blood, the arcane creases of his brain -- and she considered that this, too, was art, this scribner-fluid, etching her name into this boy until his own name was vanished, forgotten, obliterated like the lay of earth under snow. His shallow breath owed its exhale to her own, and though she thought of him as her private *kouros*, her Galatea-infant, she could not yet bring herself to touch him. She was afraid; she did not understand how he worked, what the nature of a child might be. She did not understand that such a creature might take hurt from the cold -- she was incapable of death. She feared that he would wake and the bond between them would be broken -- he would recall his name and loathe her, call her dragon, call her *you horror*, *you blight*, call her demoness. She wanted this faceted limbo to last, in which he was her sparkling golem, her automaton, her homunculus floating in a frosted glass.

It was not him particularly she craved, but the ownership of him, the possession of a thing not herself. Since the beginning of the world there had been only herself -- and then the horde, of which she desired nothing and no one. But here was a quiet, naked thing, a self separate from her endless snow-body, a chest that rose and fell, lips that empurpled themselves in her sight -- and all this she found incredible, beyond belief.

She could not say when the boy died.

The scent of his flesh changed subtly, but it was not unpleasant, even then. She was accustomed to the decay of things, which was, of course, the province of winter. Nor did she find the blackening of his face, or the shine of his bones pressing upwards as though exalted, the arch of a chapel hung with frozen banners of his sinew. None of these perturbed her, not even the grimace of his sunken cheeks and the collapse of his teeth -- she considered that this was the natural evolution of child to adult. But when a mouse, tender and velvet-furred, crept onto the ice-dais and began to nibble at the boy's hand, she thought that perhaps this was not as it ought to be, and that the boy, if he had any life in him, would surely shoo the vermin from his flesh.

She was alone again.

But now this did not satisfy her, and she longed to craft a body into perfection again, to witness its moist softness shiver into adamant. She began to venture out from her glittering cathedral, to scour the hordes for small ones that might not be missed.

The second time, she took a girl to her breast, and suckled her into a sublimity of rigor mortis. This one, she ventured to touch, and the girl was like the surface of a frozen river. She put her hands into it, and the girl cried out meekly in her sleep. She treasured these things -- the little cry, the rigid limbs, the receding heat of the body. That time, she was astute, she caught the death almost as soon as it occurred, and without the help of a mouse. But the girl had lasted only a few days longer than her brother, and she was again desolate and disappointed.

It was then that she conceived of the Puzzle.

Eighth Shard—Totentanz

Do not say my name.

Do not say. My name.

Do. Not say. My name.

Do not. Say my name.

Say my name.

Never utter, never speak, never let it pass your lips, never seek its flavor on your tongue like first snowflakes -- do not say my name. The clouds have ears -- perfect, ashen, with cochleae of crystal -- they hang out of the sky like chandeliers. Put your mouth to the noon-mist and push the word like a deluge of salt into the cold mass. The dark will detonate within, and in its center will I be dancing, white and sere.

Szepasszony.

It is difficult to trill, its glassy consonants cut. Kisses are all the sweeter when my name has shorn your tongue from your mouth.

There is a story -- twelve princesses went into the Underworld to dance their shoes away. A prince followed them, and exposed their secret vice. I have no interest in princesses -- girls go down into the dark and find there dancing-masters with cratered eyes. Boys come up into the light, and find me. But still, the dancing is the death, always and always. In red-hot shoes or in the arms of a demon-queen, under the earth and over the mown field with its hay-weals, the patterns of the foot and stiffened arm [are the](#) patterns of corruption, of hell and hoar, of last breath. It must have been the plague years that taught that tune -- the waltz of rigor mortis, the czárdás of seizure, of bursting flesh and pulverized bone. These things trim my gowns like ermine, and since death is dance, I heel-toe, step-two, step-four across the wet grass, and my feet are stained a mordant green.

There was a boy in Budapest -- after the plague, after the crank and crash of industrial sorcell-towers -- a boy at a train station, who stared at the gush of rainwater spouting from the tin gutter, who watched the pale splash with black eyes. He watched the drops cascade through fallen pinecones like fountains in a city square -- his city square, even, where the gold-tipped spires of St. Stephens reflect the afternoon sun, where women with buckets of clear water went about their soap-addled hours. The train chuffed its clockwork chains behind him, the terrible train full of grey arms, mottled ankles, mouths full of fateful gold -- terrible train that the boy was to board, terrible train with black cars uncurtained, terrible train gagging fire into the pure snowy sky, croaking bullfrog-fat its greasy smoke into the white.

*The boy wore a red cap, a red cap, a red cap,
the boy wore a red cap to travel on the train.*

And the boy stood straight as a soldier in a circle of grass, stood nearly inside me to watch the water, my invisible skirts brushing his wind-chapped face. It was as if he could not turn to look at the train, waiting for him to climb aboard, waiting as though it were sweet and clean, with cakes and tea in the dining car. He stood between mouths, the black maw and the white slip, and I put a translucent hand against his head, cupping it like a Madonna cups the crown of the Christ-child, painting on my best mediaeval smile, pieta and penitent:

"Little Viktor, wouldn't you like to never smell the bowels of that terrible train? Wouldn't you like to have peppermint cremes for tea every day? Wouldn't you like to learn to dance, and have a fine leg, a dashing suit of velvet and silver cord? Wouldn't you like to put your poor, cold hands around my waist and whirl very fast, so very fast that the smoke-browed conductor will not see you, will not guess that you have gone?"

"Oh, yes," he breathed, the hollow glance melting from his eyes -- he knew the water was special, did he not? He knew the slash and splash of that icy foam was more than foam. How relieved he was that the Angel of Rainspouts had blessed him, come to take him away as his mother and father did not, as his grandfather and uncles did not, as no one did once the trains had started to come, for they had all gone on ahead, and must have forgotten him on their splendid holiday, for he had received no letters, no postcards, no pretty bauble from the seashore. But now that the train had come for him, he was frightened, and saw through the slats terrible beasts with bony limbs and hungry eyes. He imagined that the engine belched his name over and over, starving for its supper: *Vik-tor, Vik-tor, Vik-tor.*

He put up his chubby arms like a babe hoping to be carried after a long day of walking through the park, and I laughed softly, like an angel should, before gathering him up into my arms and away from the cannibal-train, just as I promised. And I let him stand on my feet to learn the steps, as a mother will.

And oh, we danced, we danced past the train and the grey wasteland, the barbed wire palaces marking out the countryside into vast estates of some iron-shoed god, we danced over the dead grass and the dance was death, the dance was death as dances must be, a dervish, a demon, a little cold child missing from the manifest at the end of the tracks, fluttering like a sparrow's heart against his new mummy's breast instead. We danced our Magyar-waltz, we danced our secret steps, over Dohany Street and *korut Erzsebet*, over the Szabadsag Bridge and the Danube, the silty, blue-green Danube, algae-hemmed, sparkling in its own drowning dance, bound with bridges like a lunatic, flashing its currents at the moon. We danced until his bones showed through his heels, danced out of the city, the knob-cartilage striking sparks on obscene chimneys bellowing out flesh-smoke and bone-flames -- the ruined stumps of his ankles made their pirouette and reel, made their heel-toe, made their step-four.

Yes, the boy died, died in a frenzy of hail-music and flailing three-counts -- they always die, and I am not ashamed. But tell me the dance is the death to be feared, tell me the fire is better, the fire and the shower of boiling fume, tell me the black and grey is better than the white, the furnace is better than the rain. He died smiling, he died thinking, at the last, that I did not look so different than his mummy before she went on her sea-holiday, and nestled his head in my arm like a nursing infant -- that primal pose of rest. His body went into the cloud, and he said my name with love. So tell me the dance is the death to be feared, when the death without dance marches on through siege and storm, with the death without dance gobbles up train-loads into a slaving gullet.

In the end, the death I grant, white and sere as it may be, is civilized as bread.

Ninth Shard—Snow Into Sugar

Christmas is the kingdom of the lost child. She is its capital, its prized relic, closed up in a box of scarlet and gold, ribbons tumbling like tiered waterfalls to a crystal floor. She peers through green and bristling boughs at the banked fire, the laughing brothers and cousins and nephews, the fantastic doll whose black eyes seem to follow her steps. The steam from dozens of cups of mulled wine circle her head like a diadem. She is hardly marked among so many blonde-curlled and bauble-eyed babes, so many ruddy cheeks and rolls of fat, so many squeals of delight and envy. The lost child is quiet, and folds her hands very gracefully in her lace-clad lap.

It is her silence that draws his gaze. His grey beard, so neatly combed, tingles at her presence like an antenna, subtly excited by her nearness, her watchful glance, the ease with which she melts away from the attention of her parents. She is the one, he thinks, even as he dazzles the other children, sleepy with German pastries and cocoa, with his tales. The Queen will want her, and no one will miss the taciturn girl whose dark eyes glisten like ornaments from behind the blazing fir.

And so he coaxed her out from the brocade corner, from the Corinthian fireplace, from the forest of polished black shoes and miniature coattails. He produced a doll, plucked from the cigar-fragrant air like an apple from a tree. Of course, in the eyes of the lost child, the doll is paramount, the doll is a world unto itself, a perfect mirror for a lonely girl. But the doll is only a large wooden key, grinning stupidly at the chandeliers, and the grey-whiskered magician will turn it in my name. When the candles have been snuffed out, and two dozen children kissed wetly on the brow, he tiptoes back into the great room with its lordly tree, and sets the little ash-legged soldier in motion, whispers in his birch-ear. He is a procurer, and he has chosen.

It is not long before she creeps out to cradle her prize in her thin arms, press it to her childish breast, warm its unyielding grain with her quick blood. Secretly, she calls it her betrothed, her adored. She rocks back and forth, in an ecstasy of ownership. And its grotesque smile widens, teeth growing long as doorways, red throat gaping like a great hall. The tail of his brass-buttoned uniform raises up like a husband's need.

And so I took you, sweet little Clara, into the land of winter, which is mine, which is purgatory, which is a cloister whose chapel is draped in plums and ice.

I was the first thing you saw, drifting out of the trees. You put your hand up to my frosted face, my bone-blue hair, and my snowflakes filled the perfect irises of your eyes. You recognized me then, saw the cairns of snow pile up beneath my skin, saw the crown of blackthorn branches, the trail of diamonds streaming from my bloodless heels, and asked politely where my king had gone. But there is no king in the province of winter, only myself. This is a world of mirrors, and I am reflected over and over, blue and white and blue again. But when I danced for you -- oh, when I danced you could not see the snow then, only the sugar, the crust of marzipan over the trees, the peppermint filigree winding

upwards like a staircase, like your own staircase, and the chocolate banisters glistening with raspberries.

Snow and sugar are all alike beneath the moon. But you could not see it, could not see how fiercely I danced for your love, how no matter who danced, what caramel shoes tapped out their rhythm on the golden floor, it was my eyes whirling, spinning, burning, and all for you. I built you a palace of sweets, a seraglio of butterscotch sailors and cinnamon Arabs, licorice emperors and gingerbread clowns. Candy is the great passion of all children; I made you a cosmology of sugar and fruit. But you merely sat and watched with polite interest, leaning into the wooden doll contentedly, laughing at his unheard comments on the dancers, the music, the groaning tables of glittering sweets. You saw nothing but his splendid paint, his wispy beard.

And so I danced with him. I drew a violet sleeve over my cold arm and coaxed him from the dais, wrangled his stiff limbs into a kind of tarantella, forced his creaking joints to match my fluid legs, wrapped him in my white veils until he was beautiful, even to me. And then you clapped -- oh, then, your eyes shone! But it was not for me, the light, or the sound. You exclaimed at his fine ankle, his deft steps -- and he grinned, grinned, grinned.

I wanted you to stay. I danced only for your pleasure. You were chosen out of all the others, the little Bavarian dwarf-children with their plush and bourgeois hearts. I would have put a crown of holly on your head; I would have held you in my arms and the wind would never have touched you.

But you just dragged that wooden doll behind you, gouging a wound in the snow, and spoke to it tenderly, leaning in close to its lifeless lips to hear its answer. I stood over you; I watched your eager converse. The ice refracted my face into dozens of women, ornaments swinging from the freezing sky, but you could see nothing but the doll, which remained motionless beneath the soundless snow, no matter how you exclaimed over his clever speech. you would not look at me, not even a little.

Christmas is the kingdom of the lost child. She is its capital, its prized relic, closed up in a box of scarlet and gold, ribbons tumbling like tiered waterfalls to a crystal floor -- and there she crouches like a hungry mouse, clutching her dead, unfeeling toy, rocking back and forth on the floor of her bright-carpeted hall, mumbling to it with a voice like ice breaking.

Tenth Shard—A Choice of Limbs

I.

I came to the scrim of heaven with Idun's apples
strung through my hair like clay beads.
I came to the scrim of heaven with my father's acrid wings
stinking of roasted bones.
I came to the scrim of heaven with a single red fruit
bound into my hoary jaws like a gag.

I came to the ash-pale walls of Hrimthurs the rime-giant
on silver snowshoes lashed with pine.
I came to the bronze-bolted door of Gladsheim
with my chest girded in ice.
I came to the wasted plain of Ida
and snapped the red fruit to its seedy core.

My hands were full of death and they paid me
with red-bearded laughter --
I held out my father's denuded corpse,
embalmed in a smear of apple meat
no more beautiful or fell
than a rooster plucked for feasting.

I asked for death-payment.
I asked for weregild bright and cold.
I asked for grief and long laments.
I asked for black veils and mead-songs.

But they gamboled like village fools,
heads all motley velvet and jangling bells.
They leapt around me like mummers,
leering with pumpkin-faces and lantern-eyes.
They made my father's dead limbs to dance
with shambling steps.

I cared nothing for their sport, and I expected
nothing of their gold.
I came to take from them -- it is the right
of winter to take, to make bereft, to steal away
in the night's freeze. And so, when the horse-haired one
tied himself to a goat, and all looked to me
to see me laugh like birches shaking,
I let my lips curl back

into something like a smile.
I let my orphaned throat
croak and tear,
and the sound was not unlike mirth.

These were the funeral rites of Thjazi Storm-Boar:
a blonde drunkard knotting his testicles to a goat's tail.

II.

Instead of gold they piled up gods
like logs on a steam-morned riverside.
Instead of gold they laid out husbands
one after the other, like a hundred shackles
shaped to my own wrists.
Instead of gold, they showed me men,
nothing but men, hairy and dull as wattle.

Oh, they will tell you **now** I was a silly girl --
vain as swans, eyes full of pig-lust.
They will tell you I was enthralled of
that line of stinking feet, the yellow nails
and matted hair, the calf-muscles like sacks
of beef, thighs reddened with the wind I bellow,
the winter I carry with me
like a son gnawing at my breast.
They will tell **you** my eyes were full
of those mange-ridden shepherds
scratching at their bellies.

It is true that there was one pair of feet
more beautiful than all the rest --
if beauty can be said to lie
in the brine-crusting ankles
of a fisherman dragging
his nets and cages behind him.

Surely, surely one of those cages
was the right size for me.

I put my white hand on the sand-scoured calf,
the calf which came from dunes blown with wildflowers
and barnacles warm and wet on ship-shanks --
frost crept over the coarse black hairs.

Icicles formed on the knobbed toes.
A thin drift of snow sifted onto the skin.

They cackled like a cat-chorus, clapping each other
about the shoulders, laughing again, again,
through their golden beards and décolletage --
certain I meant to chose their prettiest boy,
certain I meant to mount the square-jawed bowman
with the shadow of mistletoe greening his breast.

How unfortunate, they clucked, that the stupid milkmaid
fell in love with the whale-ribbed sea god instead!
Women are such greedy, frivolous little mice,
are they not?

I hissed like snowshoes sluicing through the tundra,
and in the daisy-spring of Asgard
I froze the beard of the sea-rat.

III.

I came to the scrim of heaven with Idun's apples
strung through my hair like clay beads.
I came to the scrim of heaven with my father's acrid wings
stinking of roasted bones.
I came to the scrim of heaven with a single red fruit
bound into my hoary jaws like a gag.

I am the berry flash-frozen in December --
I am the reindeer's tracks.
I am the storm-god's daughter --
I am the death of all apples.

With a breastplate of snow-cased branches
I stole the warm ocean-wind,
the pleasant waters salt and shallow,
the summer tidepools red and green.
I took the shipwright with his cloak of oars,
I took the brawling, bright-haired boy
who was loved well.

I set foxes on his cages and unloosed
a slough of flashing fish from his oily nets.
In the crags of Thrymheim I closed him up --

silvered those fat calves in ice.
My chaste wedding kiss
shriveled his tongue black and gangrene --
and it was then,
for the first time,
that his blue-thumbed body seemed beautiful,
and I laughed in the star-clotted mist,
in my orphaned throat.

Before his great glass stalactite
I lay my father's acrid wings,
a sacrifice still smoking.
Poor, broken things:

all those ashen feathers,
drifting in the sea-tinged air
like snowflakes.

Eleventh Shard

*She could not think. The light of Copenhagen clotted in her, its smoky cornices and yellow-washed streets. She stumbled as though drunk or dying, her well-turned heels catching in cobblestone, her blue scarves flying like the angry tongues of a banshee. In a great sheet of window she caught the unfamiliar image of herself, unrefracted by the snow-mirror, the myth-mirror that owned her reflection as surely as a plot of land. It was a woman she could not compass -- eyes a bit too blue, perhaps, hair a bit too thick and wild for civilized company, a body which gave the impression of leaping away from itself, barely contained within the usual sorts of clothes that women of a certain station wear -- but this was not the Snow Queen, this was not her own shattered face. Not *the* thing in wool and silk, not this thing with high color in its cheeks. This was a *monster*, full of blood and tea, full of skilled stitches, full of heat and ribbons.*

This thing in the window could not know, could not possibly know, what hunger was. Only the mirror knew that. The Snow Queen could feel the old silver tether that tied her to the looking-glass, the shimmer-surface that promised release, promised fullness -- but asked so much, and so many, in return. It pulled at the skin of her stomach, ropy and knotted with use, an umbilicus that she had taken on herself -- and hadn't she taken this on herself, hadn't she said yes, yes, make me like you? -- but which had suckled at the white navel of infinite ice-women since the dusk of the world. The mirror was the source, she thought, the source of desire, of starvation.

And yet, she could not bring herself to wish separation from it. Standing on cloud-washed Strøget she stared into the innocuous glass, and longed for it to be her own iron-rimmed eye, bestowing its colorless grace upon her. Her belly seemed to open within itself, to cry out for that gilt-edged girl waiting in her dainty chair, to cry out against this delay, this useless philosophizing. She ought to have stayed -- did she really need a loaf of bread, a bottle of milk, a side of sugar-crusted ham? Did she really intend to feed this child? Her belly contracted in disgust, the snow-self coiling into unyield.

The Snow Queen ducked into a nameless shop and numbly passed over her coins, taking a loaf of black bread under her arm. She did not take the time to notice, as she normally did, the almost imperceptible shudder of the baker, or the fingertips of his wife, which flushed blue when they grazed her own elegant hand. The Snow Queen saw nothing, thought of nothing, save whether or not this was the sort of bread a little girl might like to eat -- whether, perhaps, it was the sort of bread her mother might make at home, the sort that might be sliced for sandwiches for days on end.

The other one had given her bread. The one before her, who reached out with sparkling fingers and grazed her face, once, in a cavern of ice, when her cheeks were raw and red from the Lapland wind, and she could see nothing, nothing but the beautiful face of the Snow Queen, all white crags and hoarfrost hair like a tangle of birch branches. That face filled up her vision, a great moon which promised dominion over all possible nights. Now, after so many years before the mirror, which brooks no lie, the Snow Queen could say that she loved her surrogate mother, the delicate, insect-like woman who pierced her and

told her about the children, the children, while behind her sat a cairn of little skulls, piled up like peach pits. And she sat the child that this Snow Queen had been in her cold lap, and gave her wonderful things to eat: sugared berries and peppermints, gingerbread and steaming cider in cups carved from ice -- and the bread, the thick black bread that was nothing at all like her grandmother made.

She gave her the bread and moved her face very close, so that their lips nearly touched, pale to pink, and asked if she wasn't lovelier than any silly cow-spined boy.

And she was. She was.

The Snow Queen shut her eyes and leaned against a damp wall. She was drawn back to her apartment, a tendril hooking itself into her stomach like a slinking umbilicus, calling her to her own girl, the girl who no doubt had no notion of the relative beauty of her captor to boys who are primarily concerned with arithmetic and soccer. She tried to keep her steps nonchalant, cold as an ice-woman's stride should be, but her limbs ran on without her, burning with adulation, blotched red and pink by need. The compulsion slavered in her like a narcotic, black and swarming through her frozen brain.

And as she ran, it occurred to her: the old Queen had taken only boys, up until her, until her swinging braids caught her sapphire eye.

She had never hunted one, never thought to catch the scent of a boy, had only sought out the same pigtailed, fat cheeked girls for centuries, girls like her, the way she had been when she fell like an apple into a blue woman's arms.

Twelfth Shard

In her hall, cleft and sheer, stood a great Mirror. It was not a Mirror of the kind that ladies use to make certain their ribbons cross neatly from spine to nape, nor was it the simple lake-veil in which she had watched herself since time first swallowed air, but a slab of the icewall which snow had scrubbed to gleaming, bordered all around with sullen ore which had oozed from the depths of rock, something like silver, and also like iron, but which was truly neither, gnarled and bubbled around the slab of iceglass in the shapes of frozen bones: vole and otter, seal and rat, fox and rabbit.

The mountain had made this thing in its mute and dim-stoned affection for the cold which moved and breathed in its core. It did not understand this cold, anymore than a bone or a vein is understood, it only knew that it was made special by that spindle of white, it only knew that it loved it, and so pushed out knobs of metal and ice, so that the cold could see itself, and how beautiful it was in the mountain's sight. Gradually, the cold ceased to watch the slight and subtle changes of its pallor in motionless pools, and returned again and again to the bone-rimmed glass. The mountain was pleased.

She had taken to watching the progress of the children in this Mirror, watching the avian folding of her arms around them, the breathless susurrations of her lips over their consecrate-skin. But it left her with an unpleasant feeling, this self watching self watching self. It was as if there was another woman, fairer and more terrible than she, and this other woman was taking the best of her little ones, leaving her with only scraps. The other woman would not speak to her, would not share her sweetmeats, would not touch her sister in the mountain-glass.

For the first time, she was unhappy. The children wasted away like candies left in the rain, and she felt her fingers grow wax and sticky with it. The other woman ate all her joy, and she could not seem to grip that whiter throat through the sheen. It was a reflection, yes, but the act of watching herself had slowly begun to leech some vital, secret fluid from her flesh, and she no longer loved the pull of teeth on her crystalline breast.

The sound of shattering was like a yearning unspooled. She clutched a long femur in her hand—a milking girl's?—and swung it wide, crashing into the down-pale Mirror. She might have wished for a more dramatic upsweep of shards, something more like a storm, a shredded cloud. Instead it simply broke, forlorn, spidering the borders of its frame with fractures, a high soprano sliding along the silver faultlines. How like a puzzle it was, the Mirror still whole, yet utterly destroyed. The other woman was cleft into dozens, a prism of schismatic snowflakes spiraling in at each other. None of them held the power that the singular reflection had, and she felt herself flare in her returning.

And yet, she could not abandon the now-grotesque refraction of ice. It was thralling, gouging at her frozen viscera, seeking a way into her. The shards did not move, yet lived, and the mountain knew nothing of any of it.

Somewhere within her, a stone moved.

She touched the shattered surface gently, with a kind of reverence for her ruptured sister. One by one, she took the largest slivers of iceglass from their mounting, and the edges sliced into her fingers—the cuts were deep, and a kind of blood spilled from her, as clear and cold as her flesh. These she gathered into her slattern-arms, slashing her perfect flesh in terrible patterns, until she was no more whole than the Mirror. She dropped the pieces onto the floor of her hall, and knelt by them, breathing heavily, threading her colorless breath into the air. The Mirror gaped behind her, a mouth full of jagged teeth.

A child sat in the corner, limbs asplay, slumped over his knees like a sullen student—except for the grimace of rapture and wastrel-fright plucking at his features. She alighted eagerly at his calf, a sweet bird bursting with news of spring. Before his glassy eyes she laid out the shards, one by craggy one, until the lower half of the Mirror glittered, un-constructed, on the new snow.

“It is a Puzzle,” she said, and her voice was a gallows swinging with crows. “Only solve it; mend my Mirror, and I shall give [you](#) the whole world.”

The boy did not move from his blood-sludging posture. His eyes did not light themselves like little lampposts on a Christmas street.

“And a new pair of skates,” she added kindly, ruffling his hair with a lineless palm.

He stirred, and took up the first shard in his hand.

Thirteenth Shard

When I danced, when my feet blistered into waltzing blood, she stood above me, all in white, Antarctic, implacable. I could not help but think: how like me she has become. How cold, and how artful. The shoes were an especially sophisticated touch -- something, perhaps, worthy of my own best gestures in the lab, on the slab, under the scabby stare of half-a-moon. The thing of it is, the best punishments, the ones worthy of record, of song, of sigh-wresting recital, have a delicate air of irony mashed in with the malaise. Mine did.

And didn't I dance at her wedding, like a good mother should?

* * *

It was cold there, like waiting to be born from a gourd of ice. The cut of it was almost like a diamond, and I was the flaw in the crystal. Perhaps. Or the insect caught in the star-sap of the tree that bounds the world. Possibly a shaving of rose-stem pressed between slides and anchored by a microscope's prongs, crushed so as to be seen more easily by all and sundry.

I had a long time to think of metaphors for my condition. I made lists behind my eyelids:

I am a fish.

I am a table.

I am art.

I wanted to be able to tell him about it afterwards. Obviously he would be interested to know -- he came every day, braggart shank a-swaggering, and peered into the coffin, the diamond, the slide. He would want to take notes afterwards, I was certain. That's what Princes [are](#), of course, what they do: they come. Out of some unknown pit of Princedom, released by a golden dropper trimmed in ermine -- one by one into a forest, a castle, a glen. They amble aimlessly, swords jutting from hips with obvious symbolism, until they stumble over admittedly rather avant-garde installations : a glass mountain, a glass shoe, a glass coffin. All of us little silk-haired dolls, locked up in our glass cases, lined up in a fir-bordered store. All of us Amsterdam whores in our pretty windows, waiting to be bought by those epauliered tourists.

I had a long time to consider the world from a dead woman's vantage. By the time he kissed me (the only magic trick a Prince knows, and he performs it over and over, like a dog fetching his favorite ball) and the apple came hemorrhaging up, I was bodhisattva in white with a belly full of apples that tumbled out, once a month, onto the casket-linen.

Glass is an excellent conductor of sound, of light, and like a furious moon I absorbed, thrummed, became giantess, proto-lithic, gargantua, pale and secret-swollen.

He didn't notice. I was so frail and fine, he said, why, the horse barely felt my weight. He put his thumb and forefinger around my wrist and smacked his lips in approval.

Dead girls have [the](#) best bone structure.

* * *

We have always been standing here, on opposite sides of the glass -- the glass which is so much like ice, which is so like a living thing, always hungry. Cast in a young virgin and feel a shrunken crone tug at your line. Cast in a crone and drag a corpse from the silver. I am not Prince Hamlet, oh no, nor Gertrude in her heights, but this is a tragedy, and we must share the paucity of masks between us.

I had no dowry. The mirror was here when I first crept through the palace rooms, swing-veiled in dust and shod in new slippers, in the garret of the tallest topless tower, under a canvas stained with ink and the last exhalations of decrepit spiders. I pulled it off -- as any maiden would do -- and the expanse of it flared nova, catching the last light of the sun off the snow. When the light scattered, red and sharp as pages, there was only myself, whole, uncorrupted, my flesh glowing as though I was, all of me, a heart beating against the mirror, ventricles gasping, clutching against the cool, implacable glass.

I sat there, *zazen*, nun, for days upon days. I worshipped the mirror, which seemed to cup my face with freezing hands, and whisper that I was good and sweet, beautiful, and that it alone saw me true.

I know no nursery rhymes to make the mirror speak -- it was simply that one morning I looked into the mirror and saw her. My own face had been erased, obliterated, and hers alone remained, all red and black and pale, colors of pestilence, pestilence and plague and love. I was frantic -- I clawed at the mirror, trying to peel away the glass like the skin of an apple, to find the meat, the Queen, under all her brazen flush. I tried to enter her, to push into her unyielding skin, but the glass, unwilling conduit, separated me from this daughter who was not a daughter, this body which had replaced my own -- beloved body, not so hideous, still dark-eyed, widow-peaked, succubus-svelte, supplanted by meager bones and angles like wrenched doves.

She would not let me in, selfish child.

It was no crime -- the moon is still herself when the dark face gleams. The mirror told the truth of it. There was no daughter, only a fractured sliver of mirror which wheedles and connives to call itself the whole.

So I did what any mother would do. I dressed my daughter in a corset with silver stays, tight -- tight -- until her breath ceased to fog her side of the glass. I combed her hair -- such hair, blacker than birth, with a comb of diamonds, until her scalp fell away (and beneath, oh, beneath, I thought I saw a mirror-fontanel, hard and cold, and it showed no face at all).

And I fed her. I fed my little girl with my own hand; we ate of the same apple, I the white half and she the red, for her mouth is not her mouth but mine, and her throat is not her throat. She had no right to them -- we ate and she went down into the glass, into the ice, deeper than mercury.

* * *

My eyes were frozen open all the while. I watched the dwarves cluck and fret, pull their beards out at tax-time, tallying up the visitors and the foot traffic and the damage to the forest environs. I watched endless snow glitter on the bier. Particles of ice clustered on my lashes every November, weighting the strands like clocks' hands. And in the glass, in the coffin's prised lid, I saw only her, her proud face rimmed in snaking black curls, her eyes fixed on the crown of my head. The coffin would not show me my death-mask, only her gaze, her mouth like a cleft in stone.

He took me out, yes, give him that, he cracked the quartz-ground lock and snuffed out the mirror-light of the casket -- Princes have a passion for opening: briars, doors, coffins, legs. I only thought it odd for a moment that his soft, vaguely lavender-scented hand already had a ring on it, telltale plain gold. I hesitated, half-emerged, strangled moth, antennae flailing.

Oh, don't worry, he laughed. She's dead.

Up and up the hill we went from the dwarf-bier now abandoned, seven men milling about with no museum piece to show, up and up on the back of a chestnut -- or was it a dappled gray? The brittle sun went down and he remarked, with a kind of shyness, that it made my hair shine blue-on-black, like first frost over a bottomless lake. Up and up and under the gate, under the gate strung with garlands, and had I taken the time I might have wondered how long they hung there, camellia over rose over rosemary-for-remembrance, waiting for the Master to drag a corpse home grinning. He lifted me off of the horse (chestnut or gray?) and set me on the checkered floor, polished mirror-bright.

And in that light, that last light, stood a little girl, solemn of face and sweet of limb, whose lips were red as blood, whose hair was black as a window-frame, whose skin was white, white as snow.

This is my daughter, he said. He put my hand in hers. She looked up at me, her gaze unguessable, and the gate slid closed behind.

Fourteenth Shard—Sugar into Snow

Anyone could see what kind of story this is. We left the markers for you, all along the way. The vanished King, the wasting earth, the wizened crone in her hut, the innocent maiden sweet as uncut sugar. And the wicked Queen, oh yes, that should have been a dead giveaway—you see how we tried to make it plain for you, as easy as possible to pick us out of a line-up.

And so it came to pass in the most ancient of days that the Kingdom flourished, pleasant and many-colored under the soft light of the butterscotch sun. All things grew after their own fashion, and multiplied: the lollipop woods shone under the moon, dazzling shafts of light through the trees like churchlight through stained glass windows. The peppermint forest glittered red and white on its alpine slope, saplings of spearmint and wintergreen dotting their bristling rows with green. The gingerbread-plum trees were so thick with fruit that the valley seemed to be a cloud of amethyst, and the wood of those orchards was strong and dark. The fields lay out over the hilly countryside like patchwork, sheets of toffee and caramel hopscotching up the sides of the gumdrop mountains, and the villagers houses were built darling and dear, with slats of peanut brittle and peanut-shell chimneys. In the far reaches of the Kingdom, the molasses swamp burbled and glistened in the warm summers, cattails wavering in the breeze, scattering their crystalline seed on the sweet muck. Even the land of licorice was in its height, its hard black parapets stark and marvelous in the pinking dusk. The chocolate bats were numerous and merry then, chirping through the icing-stars, the sounds of their echolocation pierced the night like a knife slicing through thick, spiced cake.

And I, yes, I, too, afloat on my sea of rose and pale, navigating the icebergs studded with candied fruits and frozen cream, my blue hair waving like spun glass in the salt-taffy wind. We were happy, and there was not a more lovely land in all possible worlds than ours.

I cannot tell how long we lived thus—the seasons came and went, the sugar-snow fell, and melted in the lemonade-rains, and fell again. But it came to pass also that the castle which in that time was made chiefly of graham cracker and marzipan, and which sat high in power and place on the rock-candy mountain, vanished from its height, and the land was bereft.

At first it seemed that this was no great tragedy—in peace and plenty the presence of a King is noticed less than a fly droning its tale of insect-grief in the ear. But then the troll-guardian of the gingerbread-plum trees began to eat, and eat, and his once trim and gummy belly grew fat and swollen, a hard knot of rotten plum fermenting within him. **And** as he ate he wept, his tears pooling in the fruit, spilling from the purple like juice, and **the** salt of those tears threatened to drown the denuded forest. Yet on and on he ate, and wept, and ate again.

The keeper of the peppermint forest shook his head in sorrow at the great mound of peppermint-picolos—they would not sound the right notes, and the red had begun to

leech from the mint. He sat on the snow, staring into his own wintergreen hands, confounded, stricken.

The gumdrop mountains ceased to shine, dull as grass in the distance. The brittle houses became stiff and crumbled in the smallest breeze—and the villagers shivered, wandering through their withering fields newly beggared.

The lollipop woods, too, lost all color, and stood as a blasted waste, pierced over and over with empty sticks like needles, jutting at all the wrong angles, and the wind howled through.

The molasses swamp dried up and became a desert, cracks spidering through the brown swamp-bed, and the monstrous watcher of those murky shallows froze in his ablutions like a fossil buried in tar.

And the licorice castle glowed and glowered, its turrets bending towards one another, folding itself into the [shape](#) of a black heart, beating slowly on its own blasted hill.

I, on my sea of rose and pale, saw this, and watched the blushing waters recede in waves like milk splashing—but I was unmoved, untouched. My crown, my scepter, my gown of ice remained frost-lovely and delicate as snow. I watched the earth falter and waste, but I said nothing. It did not concern me. I am not a troll made of sugar, or a flute-maker whose limbs are no different than the sweet lumber he tends. I am flesh; I cannot be eaten, I cannot be dissolved by sudden rain. I float, I freeze, I witness.

And the land became blighted, the very soil, cinnamon-strong, cried out in peril.

Into this desolation you came, ruddy-cheeked and smiling, little cannibals hungry for everything, for our meat and bones, for our hair, for our marrow, slurp-sweet on your tongue. Monsters from the first, you traipsed through the ruin, delighting in the broken scaffold, the splintered tree.

It was the Grandmother you crept upon first, huddled in the shell of her peanut-house, letting dusty shells fall through her crone-hands. You feasted on her, sucking the sugar from her bonnet, her apron, her brittle-skin, and all the while you ate she whispered: “I would have fed you gladly, if you had only asked.”

Then the Maiden of the lollipop woods, terrified and lost in her maze of stark sticks—how you exclaimed over the flavors of her curls, her aristocratic ankles! Why, her heels are raspberry, and her toes key lime—such variety! And all the while you ate she whispered:

“The King will save me, the King will save me.”

And then you came to me, and thirsted for the foam of my sea, for the crags of my icebergs studded with candied fruits and frozen cream, and these you gobbled, gulped,

toasted with handfuls of roseate brine. But me you could not eat—you poked and pressed at my turquoise skin, tried your teeth on my glassy hair, and came away but frostbitten, frost-hung, shivering and alone.

But I could not stop you. Not for long. The laws of this pink and pleasant country forbid me raise any hand but this which holds my snowflake-scepter, and that only in parades. Long, long before you came this was decided, after the Juju-Wars, the great battles of Grenadine Lake, when chocolate trebuchets were ranged against troll and maid alike. It was after that red-run war that the King took his crown, and banished me to the outer reaches of the sea, for he would have no Queen on the Jujubee Throne. And now if honeycomb siege engines are rolled out, if boiling butter rum is poured in my name, it is the molasses monster and the licorice-lord who must do it, for I am bound, forever, on these icebergs—a Queen broken and fractured, barely able to move from my pristine pose, beautiful in the sight of the King, my features obscured by frost. I float, I freeze, I witness—I recall the quality of light on that golden scaffolding, the gleam of scarlet on the lake of pomegranate, the day I lost the world.

I suppose you did whatever it is children do to win. I saw it first in the gumdrop mountains, how they flushed violet and green again. I saw it in the swamp which ran thick as phlegm again, with baleful eyes watching, deep in the mud. I saw the guardian of the gingerbread-plum trees cease his weeping and tuck his napkin away. I saw the villagers begin to build their houses again, patching the walls with dusty peanut shells. I saw the lollipops swell again in their bright bouquet. And the castle, finally, I saw the castle rise up on the rock-candy mountain, reborn, resplendent—and if I note that its walls are sugar-cones, its cupolas scoops of iceberg studded with candied fruits, perhaps I shall be forgiven ungenerous thoughts.

The King had returned to the land and the land rejoiced.

It should have been so clear that you wandered through the waste land, that you sought the grail in an ice-cream cone, and the lance in a stick of peppermint. But all you saw was candy, candy everywhere, all that you could eat, and only the blue waist of Queen Frostine, adrift on the Ice Cream Sea, turned your teeth to ice.

Fifteenth Shard

I.

Father, forgive me,

I was so hungry.

I opened my eyes—one at a time,
as each lid came free of mother
like a pair of rough pearls pulled
from a closed fist.

It was all I could do not to chew the sinews
from her thigh as was drawn out by dry, flat hands.
It was so thick with meat and fat,
the smell of tallow and sealskin.

Her milk fell through me;

mother-swollen, I starved.

It began with the basket—

I only meant to suckle the furs
to soothe my breast-chafed gums,
I swear it, but the musk of their bristles,
and the salt-pelt!

I swallowed it all,

and a wet, black stain
spread out beneath me
stinking of shame.

It was the ice-house, then, and the caribou-bone slats
arching up towards the smoke-hole,
and the lichen (rich as crisped fishtail!),
the grated hearth, smoky and coarse—
my mouth unlatched to take it all,
quietly, quietly, so that I would not wake
mother and father, whose breath rattled.
the white floors and the clumping snow,
thick splinters of chair and bed-post.
But these too fell through my ribs,
like ice-shavings through a bone-sieve.

House-bloated, I starved.

Father, forgive me

I was so hungry.

I watched you as you slept, muscles shining
in the moon, rubbed with seal-oil,

hard and bright. I could smell the salt of your body,
and my mouth wept for you.

And arm, I thought, could not be too much
for a daughter to ask—
no father would deny it, not when his girl's
belly howled so,
a waste of tundra under her navel.

I am sorry, I am sorry,
but it was so sweet,
like blood-broth boiling.

II.

Please.

Please. Let me up.

I will not do it again. I will be a good girl.
I will make you a new arm of moss and wolfbone.

(The canoe rocked in **the** dark water,
and I clutched uselessly at the leather rim,
my wet, black hair streaming over the sea,
and gooseflesh rose on my skin,
ocean-sodden, shivering,
under your impassive stare.)

It is cold down here, Father.
Let me back up, let me into the boat.
I know you did not mean it,
the current was so rough,
and I must have fallen—
I must have fallen.

(I will remember this, years hence, in the dark.
The flick-flash of a stone knife—)

No, Daddy, you're hurting me—

(your pursed lips as
you sawed through skin, knuckle, marrow—)
Oh, please, I want to go home—
(the little splash
as my fingers tumbled off, one by one,

into the black sea—)
I'm sorry, I'm sorry,
I'll be good,
I'm afraid, please—
 (the thumbs last,
scrabbling at the edge of the canoe, difficult
to cut through—)
Daddy, Daddy, I can't hold on,
help me, help—

(so white, so white in the water,
like dead things, like snow, and your face
rising away.

You did not cry at all.)

III.

I fell a long way. All around,
my fingers floated like severed tusks,
their whiteness a comfort.

But these too left me, becoming
unmasked,
walrus, sea-lion, whale,
fingernails stretching into narwhal.
My own flesh swam slowly away from me,
afraid, too, of my yawning throat.

Which of us did that, Father? Which of us
should be called leviathan-god?

I watched them go.

You have rebuilt the house by now,
but I am not invited;
I am still hungry, you argue,
and mother treasures her new hearth,
the basket-pelts, her ice-throne.

Besides, my stump-hands embarrass
the new children.

The seafloor is a frozen waste,
and I starve there, wrath-blue,
under the glacier-ceiling,

my wet, black hair spreading out from me
like stones growing. It is
cold in Adlivun,
where you buried me,
and I cannot tell the souls from kelp,
the chum you spill overboard each night,
that drift down to me like thumbs,
like snow.

Sixteenth Shard

*The Snow Queen shut the door behind her and closed her eyes. It was always like this, returning to the drafty apartment, the familiar cold on her face, both affectionate and resigned. The **mirror** glowered in its corner, a black hoop reflecting nothing. The girl, half-visible in the **mute glass**, was still there. Of course she was, at her little table, and her fingers were violet, nearly black with frostbite. Soon the gangrene would begin, filling the rooms with sickly sweet vapors. But now, at this stage, The Snow Queen found that display of bruised and frozen colors beautiful.*

She always did.

The girl held a jagged shard of ice in each hand, her head cocked, considering whether or not she might cheat by sucking the edges smooth and forcing the pieces together. Her cheeks were bloodless, sunken, her eyes huge and dark. The silver chain had left red welts on her ankles, but this was the only color left—she was becoming ice, a child-shaped shard under the black-framed window.

The Snow Queen glanced at the small cairn of ice-slivers on the linen-draped table. She was surprised—the girl had made progress, an alarming amount of progress. Was it possible that she would finish the puzzle, finish before her own nature overtook her and dragged the child into the roof-crèche where no one would find her? The possibility had not occurred to her.

Without speaking to her charge, the Snow Queen set down the bread and climbed—skirting the room so that she would not encounter herself in the gape-mirror—through her window, into the blighted roof-garden, straining to breathe through a glut of want. She turned her face to the cool disk of the winter sun, her throat thick. She did not want to look—yet it always calmed her, settled her blood. The Snow Queen knelt as pulled aside a tangle of blackened roses, crawling behind them into a hollow in the wall, a crevice wormed out of the stucco by years upon years of faulty gutters.

There, startlingly white, was a small pyramid of bones, piled up like a gravemarker over some long-dead pygmy priest.

The Snow Queen touched them with reverence, with purchased familiarity. Their smoothness washed over her, and her heart stilled like a rung bell. These were the trophies she had earned, the treasure any Queen accumulates, relics from little saints, sacred to her as any shroud. She lifted one—a sternum—and held it to her cheek, an almost Victorian gesture, her lip trembling. She felt herself waxing towards her frozen self, a great moon growing in its moon-ness until it cannot be mistaken for other than itself. It was a cycle, not unlike a warmer woman's, and she knew it would soon erase her in its rush.

Replacing the breastbone tenderly, the Snow Queen stepped calmly into her rooms. She removed a silver vase and the ruins of her morning coffee and drew the thick

cloth from the kitchen table. Glancing towards the child, she draped it over the mirror, covering its shattered eye. She crossed the room in two long strides and knelt at the little girl's side, like a penitent woman taking her first confession, and for only a moment did her gaze stray to the nearly-finished puzzle. She took the girl's hand in hers, and spoke with kindness, a mother's kindness:

"My dear, do you know who I am?"

Seventeenth Shard

For the first time since frost shivered over her virgin lip, she felt a silvern tremor of *new*. In a well-worn hollow of the ice palace, a child sat—this in itself was nothing unusual, the ice was smoothed by the *zazen* of countless cadavering limbs—and her hair was the color of mourning.

In each of her snow-stalk hands she held a shard of ice, and before her, a sheet of glassine freeze lay, with two neat gaps in its implacable surface.

Something new. She pursed her bloodless lips, unsure of what was expected. *It* had become an accepted ritual: the children always died long before now, long before they could fashion what, in truth, was the simplest of solutions. Yet here was this girl-miasma, this black slash across the perfect white of her home, and she was not dead at all. Suddenly there was two of everything: two women, two gazes knotting themselves across the half-mist, and two Mirrors, one jutting at a broken angle, the mountain's rib, and one almost whole, pooled on the floor like a waste of tears. The world split along a seam unseen, a terrible mitosis of ice and wind.

She did not know whether or not to be proud of the child, or perhaps, frightened of a thing that did not simply melt into bones at her whim. Before she could decide, the child slid the last pieces into place, and made her circle: perfect, light-eating, eternity sharp as sighs. Their eyes met in the glass, and there was a surfeit of darkness there, a twinship unguessed at.

For a long time, neither moved.

Finally, the tall woman rose, hoping, by now, that the child was dead and could be interred, put out of mind, that the shards could be broken again and scattered—death, death to reset the game. She knelt like a confessor before the motionless frame—the angles of her hips, her elbows, her knees, all folded starkly together like some arctic insect. She leaned in close, sniffing lightly for the humors of blood or bile.

But the girl breathed still, and did not falter: her black eyes seized the other woman's like a nun grasping a bell-rope. Air passed between their lips.

“My dear,” the pale lady whispered, “do you know who I am?”

The child nodded imperceptibly. “You are the snowflake I saw at the center of the swarm. You are the queen of snow, snow and ice, and the wind *shows* your shape. My brothers told me not to look, they told me that you were bad, *only* I could not help it. I watched the white storm, even when cold slivers fell into my eyes and stung. It was beautiful, and the snowflake got bigger and bigger, until it was you, and you were beautiful, too.”

The Snow Queen said nothing. She raised her ashen hand, and brushed a long strand of black hair from the girl's face.

Eighteenth Shard

Sing.

To rot in Niflheim is difficult—ice preserves so well, you know. But I manage, in my gnarled mermaid-state, half gone to gangrene and mushrooms, lap peeling moon-white and livid, sending up steam and stench like a peat bog. There are scales, yes, like a fish, flakes of once-flushed flesh gone wet and cold, rimmed in blue where their pustules have drooped into frozen stalactites. Blackened by frostbite my feet that feel nothing of these cold stones, ice-callouses thick and glassy.

But my face is lovely, always, rime-knotted, crag and crèche, hair like clouds lowing. One half of a monster is always beautiful—that is what makes her grotesque. Vast as barley-fields, piebald, frozen away in patches, yes, but lovely enough, I think, enough for a golden boy to touch in the darkness. I admit my delight in him—why should I call it shame? He is my favorite doll—and such blue eyes!

Sing for him, as you would sing for a supper in my hall.

The worm-brother and the wolf-brother chew in their slaver, and the splinters of ash-tree catch in my maid-wounds, and I do not mourn, I do not mourn, why should I weep when I have light caught in my hoary fist, when I have the summer-son lain out beside me on a stone slab? Call him the heart of the world, and curse the mistletoe—but I will wrap myself in the green like a stole, and smile, for the heart of the world is deep in the ice, and I watch his beauty move in the frost like an eel sliding black and silver; my bones rattle and are pleased. I did not bring him here, I did not claw him down, but I will take him in, no cousin would do less. He is radiant among the wastrel souls, the bent cripples and fat hoarders who stumble the streets of Niflheim like opium addicts, askance in the hip, searching out the ivory in alleys without lamps. He is radiant; he is mine.

Sing for him, as you would sing for a penny from my hand.

Here, I am the moon, the only light, my body in the columns and the arcades of the city, rotten, vein-mottled. I am marble; I am clay. Corpselit the closes and doorwells, the death-market silent and still, brown and mealy apples on its petrified stands, vinegar-wine in caskets like boulders, maggot-ridden meat hanging in murky windows. My lower half paves these avenues, piles knuckle upon knee into tenements, thatches roofs with nacreous toenail-tiles. Snow spatters the well-rims, and all things are white, but black beneath. My upper half walks the colonnades with Baldr the beautiful, bustle sweet and jaunty, parasol a-swinging all the way, leaking moths like a sieve. Waif-souls sputter by like smoke-rings, clutching at weevil-chewed bread--precious loaf!—scrabbling in iron barrels for a scrap of fire. How they stare! Are we not a fashionable couple, sweethearts of the season, dancing in under a bridge clotted with shrouds, strung glittering with garlands of tooth and bone? And if he is pale, if he swoons, I will catch him, and hold

him to my breast like a little lost bird. It is not so dreadful in the city of ice and flesh—you have never seen stars like these.

Sing for him, as you would for a cake from my table.

I want to hear the elegiac heavens, the keening cry of walrus and sturgeon in a flat and faceless sea. Sing me a dirge, O stones, O moss, fill up my ears, O bee, O beetle, with honey and myrrh. He is no less beautiful now, in my arms—tear **your** hair, peasant woman with your gravid lap full-heavy of hay; rend **your own sweet face**, cup-bearer with your hair full of opals. This time the mistletoe will not keep its peace, and green it will carol! I would hear the lament of the frog-chorus, the pounding of crocus upon the breast of earth. Cry out *he is dead*, trill the tongues of wheat and ore, show me the poplars keening.

He is dead, he is dead, and the world-tree groans.

What funereal chant could be more dear, more wretched? It ought to be the finest cantata of loam and leech, a hound-bayed requiem in the shadow of a flaming beachhead. It ought to be a virtuoso mass for two and four hands. Sing kyrie, sing *glissand*, sing O, O, O, for the passing of the light!

The echoes of it will drift down to him, I promise, drip into his perfect ears like dark water swollen on the roof of a rimy cistern.

And I will stroke his golden hair and whisper:

“You see how they love you? Even the worms weep.”

But I will not let him go.

Nineteenth Shard--Marzanna

*Carry me down to the water, Oh,
Carry me down to the sea
Dowse my skirts in the water, Oh,
And cut the sun from me.*

Carry me away, away, my boys, for I stole the world in a cup of darkness. I wrapped up the sun in my apron like a baby, or a ball of bramble. Judged guilty, yes, guilty as a bandit with two pistols. Crown me bright with wattle and twig, and carry me down to the water's edge. Careful now, the streets are slick, the melt-runnels slashing past in gutters full of corn cobs and cigarettes. Hoist me up on your shoulders, boys: the winter's shoveling has done you good.

It was I came dashing-dagger into the *chatka słońca*, and otter-fur trimmed my skirts—flash, flash, flash and twirl! He was afraid; never doubt it, huddled at his little writing desk, his spectacles askew, and the inkpots all upended! The little man stuttered and spat, cheeks a-puff like startled fish, trying to hide behind his milk-jugs and flour-barrels a slap of red hair showing above the clay rims—a dwarf on fire, burning like a forgotten Sunday roast, lighting the flour like salt peter—but I keep my dates exact, and my pocket-watch showed the *słońce*'s death at every hour.

*Wrap me up in flax and wool
Wrap me up in white
Take me down to the water, Oh,
When the day has bled to night.*

In I swept—just as you say—and with my hazel-broom I battered the *słońce* from wall to wall, and the mouse-holes in the boards whistled a wedding song. *Sweep, thwack* went the broom; *scuttle, crash* went the sun, and I caught him in the corner with his red jacket torn.

You always run, I laugh.

Wouldn't you? Whispered he.

Such a scene, [repeated endlessly](#).

Up, then, into the apron, and he smudges my lap with char. Seven knots with seven strings and I'll carry him all winter long like a baby dropped into birth-pose, nine months in and oh, my back! Oh, my feet! I've got to eat to feed us both: wheat and apples and pumpkins and barley, beer and parsnips and acorns and leeks, cabbage and fennel and mushrooms and potatoes, blackberries and milk and soft orange squash.

It's not our fault there's nothing left for you, boys. You haven't got a *gwiazda* to feed, wrapped up in your linen and skin.

*Give me my sickle and broom, Oh,
And tie my hands to the stake,
Sally me down to the river, Oh,
And take what you're eager to take.*

So wrap me up in all the white you can find—my calves in your kerchiefs, my wrists in your collars. Bind up my shoulders in patches and veils, strangle my neck in unspun wool, bandage my belly in gauze from the doctor's house, tie up my ribs in your sister's blood-cloths. Make me a mummy, you pretty young farmers, you bankers and butchers and tailors and thieves, stop up my mouth with cotton and chalk. Braid up my hair—willow and corn!—in your daughters' pale ribbons; make me beautiful for the parade. I'm happy to give up the star from my stomach—my hips hurt so from the weight. The method is crude; you might just put my legs up, rub my shoulders and let me count my breaths, but this, this too will do.

*Drown me down in the cold tide, Oh,
Hold back my hair from the waves,
And when I breathe my last, Oh,
Bless my bones in their sea-hollowed grave.*

Toss me in boys, and don't forget the broom to follow after, and the sickle round my throat like a necklace. Hold my face in the water, and nevermind the struggle I give—it's all an act, don't you know? The bubble and froth from my lips, the jerk and shudder of my spine under your strong, brown hands—push hard, now, don't let go—and finally, the little *pop* of the fat-cheeked *stońce* bursting from my apron into the salt sea, bobbing like a toy in the bath.

Don't you worry, my boys, about a Christian burial—leave me where I lie, so the mussels can burrow in my arms. The earthy-sweet corpse-smell of wet grass knotted through hazel branches will follow you home, home to your thin soup and straw-strewn floor, your wide-faced wife—eight months along now!—and leaking roof.

But don't be fooled, *chłopcy*, the thrust-splay of my knees in the silt is a shadow-play, and so is your procession to the sea—the *stońce* shivers in his dusty old shack, and sets his watch for winter.

*Carry me down to the water, Oh,
Carry me down to the sea
Dowse my skirts in the water, Oh,
And cut the red sun from me.*

Eighteenth Shard

In the corner, there are the **broken** skeletons of a hundred boys, frozen into art, crystalline and shimmering under their crust of ice.

They make a complicated architecture.

The little skulls glitter coldly like a pilgrim's progress, each smooth lump of bone paler than perfection, ascending towards the light. Ribs arch like drawn bows, pelvises smile, open as communion plates—they do not compete for pride of place, they do not clatter when the wind scours through the hall. They are peaceful, content, complete. And they are silent, as all children should be. They are my opus, my silver sons gleaming with the shell of their afterbirth, the scabrous ice of my body, trailing out of me like a leak of diamonds.

Did you think you were special?

You did, poor, precious thing! You thought you were the only beautiful boy ever to be nestled into my sled, to feel the illicit brush of my nakedness under the white furs, to be marked with the snow-brand of my kiss. They all do, they all want me to be a virgin beneath them, to see my skin break open like a sea choked with sparkling floes, and the black ocean bubble up over their narrow hips. They take my kisses reverently, their tongues quivering as though waiting for the wafer, the transfiguration of bread to woman. And a sweet cake is such a small thing to give, the frosted grace of my lips on their hungry mouths.

It takes the cold away, and my house can be so cold.

The wetness of it froze on your brow, a star of belonging. It is pleasant to recall such things here, under blue rafters and a tight-woven thatch of ice. It was not so very long ago that you climbed into my lap and touched my dazzling cheek with wonder. And even when you have seen the bone-cairn with all those opaline teeth dashed out on the floor, you tilt your head towards mine for another kiss.

There, there, I do love you after all. I love all my sons equally.

You wanted for a mother—that was plain to see. Pawing in your flowerbox with a sallow-braided milkmaid—she was nothing but a doll, a ceramic-faced fetish easily dashed on the surface of a January lake. And no one to look after you but an old, senile hag drooling on her pillow. You were a pretty thing, but you wanted for a mother, for eyes like spinning well-pulleys to draw you out of the tenements, out of geraniums and weak tea, out of dull slashes of rain against filthy windows. It would have been cruel to leave you there, to turn my back on you and tell you that no, I would not show you marvels, not even one.

For you stood on that baroque little balcony with its wrought-iron lilies and turned your face to the silver sun, the shaded disk behind a sheet of clouds—so like the shade of my flesh!—and you wished to be a man, for that honey-stuck girl-child to look at you and admire, to be suddenly broad and tall **as a** soldier with his bayonet glinting. I heard your voice like the peal of bells at mass, begging for your eyes to be changed, to see through a mirror of ice, to be mothered by light. You did not know I was so near, so near! I floated

through the snow like white bees swarming, I swelled among them like a queen gorged on jelly, I saw the radiance of your bones like rods of fire within you.

And I was happy to do this for you, to be terrifying—for all proper men dwell in a terror of women. To be forbidden for you, so that the taking of my favors would be sweet as cider. To be the snow-covered forest in which you could lose your way, to be the shadow-curtained bedchamber where you could lose your innocence. I only do as I am asked, after all. It pleased me to be your mother, to make you afraid of me, of the punishments I would visit on your savory flesh, your pale flesh that shows the brilliant shades of bruises, frostbite, and gangrene so well. I was happy to pull you to my breast, to suckle you on the sugar-plum spice of my icy milk, to fold you in my cloak of reindeer pelts and arctic furs, and trace skate-patterns on your pretty neck with my icicle-tongue.

It is what you wanted, is it not?

I put my moon-silver into your eye like a monocle and gave you my body to eat, my steaming blood to drink. In a dozen places I have opened my skin to you, tiny throats flooding sweetness into your mouth like a mother pelican. I am an open font, your fingers twisted in my silver-spangled hair like an infant. You put your tiny hands on my sapphire breasts and forgot Denmark, forgot Gerda with her plump pink cheeks, forgot jam and sugar on Sunday morning, forgot the smell of butter melting in a black pot. What were those things but death and death and death; rotting fruit and stale bread, fat sizzling in a smelted pan, flesh speeding toward putrefaction since the hour of its birth. I am life, I am winter, tunnel into me and I will shelter you, ice frozen over ice.

Is it not better here, in my hall of snow-drifts, my towers of spiraling crystal, my altars of antlers and icicles? The breathless light comes fractured through the walls—there is no dawn or meek twilight. See how prettily the water has frozen into buttresses and turrets? Even flags to tip the towers, brazen and clear. For these wonders, would you not trade the heat of your blood? To lie down in a bridal chamber of glass, under a coverlet of netted snowflakes, and close your mouth over my belly? What are fat apples and salted dough, Parliament, bicycles and leather-stitched shoes in comparison?

A boy must be loyal to his mother; he must love her best of all.

Into your hands, still sticky with my milk and kisses, I put these shards of ice and **bone**. With both hands I give them, toys for my youngest child. Like pearls for a wife, I put these faceted slivers into your pale and purpling hands. They are special, they are secret. Only do as I ask, and I shall give you the whole world, and a new pair of skates. Only do this, and I will score your back with the whips of my white hounds, I will burn your thighs with ropes of ice, and hush the welts with my lips--and I shall do it whenever you wish.

It is a puzzle, my love, a riddle for clever children. Here is a femur, here, a coccyx. Take them, take sternum and collarbone, finger and rib. Take the shards of all my other boys, all my pretty ones, my family, and fit them together to spell a word: *eternity*.

In Danish, naturally. *Evighed, evighed*. A single word, so fragile—yet the world was born from a word. Only do this and I will silence you into art with the rest of them, I will build you into my cathedral, into the catacombs, into the sacred places where holly berries grow. I have made them princes and patriarchs, every one. I have buried them in

glacial coffins in sealskin regalia, I have oiled their feet and placed coins on their eyes. I have given them all the proper rights—a mother can do no less.

And I have wakened them again into artifice, into seraphim, free of flesh, marrow-saints arching their wings towards heaven.

Gerda can only offer you her bourgeois womb, squirming with a dozen other Gerdas, and call that the solution to all puzzles of ice and snow. I am eternity, my womb knows the secret tongues, it knows the taste of all my sons, it knows the salt your tears and your frozen limbs. Show her your proud markings, where I have opened you like a porcelain box. Show her how I have taught your little body to be hard, to be cruel, to be strong. Show her that you are the last shard, and lay yourself into the ice-puzzle, your perfect whiteness gleaming like a revelation. I shall give you the whole world, the heights and the deeps, and the black sea will bubble around you as you sink, as you fall. I will give you the world within me, and let you cut into my stomach with your bright silver skates, let you tattoo my shoulders with your teeth.

Lay yourself into the letters, lay yourself into my snows, my dead trees, my spider-lattice of pure ice. Let Gerda come, let her sing her little song. What can she sing that I have not whispered to you in the night? Let her fish-mouth gape.

Be a good boy. Do as mother says.

Twenty-First Shard—The Snows of Mauna Kea

Poliahu at the Lucky Tiger party: dressed, unsurprisingly, in white. A scrap of snowy nothing that clings like wet leaves to her hip and breast, clasped on her bone-chic shoulder with a jade and citrine pin. The bar-lights fall into her hair and die there, in the narrow scroll of shadow that shoots past her waist like scripture unfurled. She stirs her saketini-with-cucumber-twist with a desultory finger, and the colorless liquid frosts over in its glass. Bored, she flicks the half-frozen droplets at the mica-spattered floor and scans the usual Saturday crowd.

Behind her, Honolulu spreads itself out, bioluminescence on a lightless sea.

I take a fabulous photograph, don't I? Always have. And the bars of Honolulu are places for posing, galleries of *ki'i*, feathers and offertory jewels draped over frames as stark and strange-elbowed as any *akua*. It is not so different from the slopes of Hamakua, when the sleds of palm and pigskin leapt through the grass, and I too played *holua* with boys brown of thigh and shoulder. All those boys are here, discussing vodka brands and the abominable house music, and their sleds smell less of pork and coconut than they did. But they are the same boys, and they crow the same rooster-orisons at me when I sweep through their games.

I see her, sometimes, through the throng. It is hard to miss a volcano dancing—those little pricks of fire on tips of her fingers, her burning torso all slinked up in red, always red, and the gloss of that perfect hair reflecting the stuttering light: yellow, orange, white. We are the island, come to join along a stitch of green and gold, the dry side and the wet—but she ignores me. I am not worth her gaze, and my presence dulls those precious golden licks of flame that light up her skin just so. You know how it is with sisters. Pele never had any patience for me.

When we were children, she burned all my dolls, and laughed.

This is how it is now. *Akua* in the shadows, solid and still as icons, watching, never blinking, choosing our lovers as we always have—who is to say why the curve of one neck, the step of one dancer, calls to us? We have never understood it. How much better to have found comfort among our own kind, but we always come down from the mountains, sooner or later. We come down, and we drink libations of **your** own devising—and these they are; a bartender never knows why the tiki-faced creature should drink for free, only that he wishes her to—without tasting the sugar or lime. We are bored with it, oh, we are tired, but we do not know how to do anything else. We hardly speak to each other, but when Lono passes me in the smoke, when Ku and Kanaloa brush my hand in the crush of flesh, I smile, only a little, into the dark.

There have been times, I do not deny, when the old excitement flares up, hard and bright—but these days I notice that I only feel it, the tightening of skin, the frost needling my spine, when she is there. There was a boy, once, a dancer, and his sternum seemed to me an instrument, a secret place full of song. She saw him too—Aiwohikupua,

whose eyes were lava-glass—and we watched each other over his head, the red and the white, fire moving behind a sheet of ice. In my belly, and in hers, mountains ground against each other, and the poor boy knew nothing of us. The pound of the music reverberated between us, and the air among sisters bent the song, contortionist-tight, into our own chant, a *kumulipo* full of drums and the wailing of frogs. She put her fire to me, and the glass in my hand flared red, liquid like blood sliding around the translucent cucumber.

I smiled at her, and her hair went white.

She crossed to the bar, avoiding dancers, keeping Aiwohikupua at the tip of our strange-sided triangle. Her eyes are so black, you know. She put her hand on my pale waist, and it charred the bones of my hip, like a doll's face flaming.

I put my finger to her lips, and her teeth chilled to icicles.

And she stepped into my arms; she put her head on my breast, and I burned, and she froze.

Oh, my sister. How I miss the old days.

She moved away from me, and Pele, the Living Flame, was white and thin, her skin crystal-shocked, her fingers leaking wet, blue smoke. She made a little girl's curtsy, and strode back towards the dance-floor, her body flushing red again, her hair shivering once more into black.

I finished my drink, clear again, well-crusted with sparkling ice. And I went, swinging my hips as a woman will, to Aiwohikupua, whose sweat glittered on his throat. I took his hand—and he did not know why he wanted to follow me, only that he did—drawing him out of the 39 Hotel, onto the darkened streets of Honolulu, a darkness only broken by streetlamps and the shape, far behind us, of the mountains, tearing a black strip out of the stars.

We walked together, my prize and I, and as our steps echoed, snow began, slowly, to fall through the warm, damp air.

Twenty-Second Shard--Hine Hukatere

Is it not beautiful? Could we not live up here together?

Just a little further, my love.

Look at all I can show you. Not the crest of Aorangi, no, one sees nothing from the peak but the belly of the sky. The crevices, the ice-caves, the wrinkles of stone. What is a green valley next to these? The *puriri* tree, the yellow *kowhai*, the lemonwood—the snow scours all of them from the heart, does it not? The rough grasses of Aotearoa wear their gaudy colors like a crown of feathers. Here there is holiness, sleek, austere. These are the rocky wombs that gave me birth, among the shaggy rams and rabbits. The clouds fed me from their rain-soaked teats, and the moon wrung out her hair to wet my lips.

Don't worry, my love, the cold passes. Breathe into your hands.

The day I first saw you I could see it, how you would love these heights, how the thin air would make your lungs pure, quartz and lime, how the alpine flowers would rub their cheeks against your ankles like wild cats. You were so perfect to me that day, Wawe, and you laughed when my hands turned your canoe to ice, you laughed when my tears of shame became diamonds that froze the roots of the cabbage tree. Even then I knew I could never hurt you, I could never put the smallest blemish on that dark and golden face.

But you put your hands to me under the lights of the Matariki, and my stomach melted into water. You gripped my spine like a branch and gasped: *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. You shook me, and no fruit fell, but my ribs and my lungs splashed into the soil. I closed and opened my hands, wet with myself, and you were sorry, yes, sorry, but still you put your lips to the wreckage of my navel, you put your lips to me, grinning, and drank—but only a little, only a little.

And when your lips pulled away, and your hands drew back, I was myself again, whole, and more slender, by a shave of skin, than before.

Is it not beautiful? Could we not live up here together?

On these [fractured](#) slopes, though, here you can put your hands to me and I will not melt, the winds of Aorangi keep me sweet and white, thick and cold. The crags shield me from your heat, the blood of your veins that would wash me away. Here, we can lie under a thatch of snow, and our limbs will tell such stories.

Stop shivering—you'll be fine once we reach the upper caves. It's really hardly cold at all.

Just a little higher, my love. It's not far now.

I know I said we would lay out offerings here, that we would ask Aorangi to give me the flesh of a woman—for I do love you, Wawe, above all the men I have known, and all the men who have known the mountain at my side—to make my calves pink and my toes red. But the patterns on the ice! The moonlight rolling through the glassy snow-streams, the howl of wolves echoing in the chasms—could this not be our bridal bower? I do not need warm blood, you can put your mouth to my throat here and I will remain. We could be happy here. The Matariki will turn our bodies to silver and light.

Wawe, darling, your lips are blue. Why do you tremble so? It is quite warm. Take this foothold, lift yourself up—you are strong, you can climb further yet.

Speak to me, my love. Your skin is so cold. Speak to me.

If you do not cling to the rock you will fall, and all the snowflakes of my body will not cushion you. Please, please—I am sorry, we can go back now, into the valley where the lemonwood grows, **by** the river and the reeds, and we will lie under the cabbage tree again. I will shut my eyes and bear the old **disassembly**, and you can drink, if you must, you can drink the melt.

Speak to me. Is it not beautiful? Could we not live up here together? Could we not be happy?

I do not understand how you can have gone so cold. Please, my love, speak to me.

The shape of your body falling was like the wings of some terrible, beautiful bird, and the snow, the sloughing snow tumbled after in silence.

Twenty-Third Shard

Swish, thwack,

The birch broom in the snow,
and the dull knock of the **hunger**-pestle,
punting through moonless drifts
along whalebone spine of the new railroad,
towards Vladivostok, and the sea.

Swish, thwack,

and only the tubercular engines follow,
dragging their black lungs along the steppe,
wheezing whistle-shrill.

The dining car **is** shut against me
by superstitious mothers,
their hair stuffed under kerchiefs
that smell of lye soap.

The curtains are battened and bolted—
but they hear it,
the thumping mortar leaving pie-pan imprints
empty of meat and raspberry
crushed into the ice,
and the silver broom,
swish, thwack,
polishing the floor of the plain.

The house comes with me, loyal dog,
spinning, screeching its slaughter-cry,
rooster-feet clutching at the winter weeds,
and the skulls on the fence rattle,
teeth on bone,
old gourds shaking.

It's theatrical, yes,
the haunted house snuffling in black roots
as if for mushrooms, skittering on the ice
like a newborn reindeer.
It scurries behind its mistress,
and pants for a morsel of child—
or hero. It has learned not to be dainty.

But we are nothing if not our reputations.

The train hacks its blood and phlegm into the air,

its coal-fire white with consumption.
The metal sheets expand and contract,
physician-wrangled respirators
clanging and scraping towards the shoreline.

Swish, thwack,
this old woman's stringy hair streaking backwards,
spiraling in the engine-smoke,
keeping carriage-pace
with the ease of a coxswain.

In midwinter, the snow smells of skin.

There are no lights in the interior,
only the wood with roots like worms,
wriggling through the earth,
seeking flesh, any flesh,
for the nesting. In the train,

it is only black,
not even a blur.

From a meal of beef burgundy,
creamed potatoes, boiled parsnip,
and beets like bleeding tongues,
a grandchild with the chubby face
of a distiller's wife
pulls the blue-and-yellow chintz aside,
and peers into the dark. Her breath
fogs the glass.

Swish, thwack,
and the pestle-barge
gains speed.

Twenty-Fourth Shard

“You’re the lady from the board game,” the little girl replied, never taking her eyes from the last shards, clutched in each hand like ice cream cones.

The Snow Queen laughed, and the sound was brittle, friable. “I suppose so,” she answered. “You’re very good at puzzles.”

“My mother says I’m the clever, for a girl, anyhow. I can do sums faster than anyone in my year. Subtraction, too.”

The Snow Queen frowned, and touched, very gingerly, the edge of the nearly-finished puzzle. Her slender hand hovered just above it, floating, like a memory. She sighed, slowly, her breath fogging the ice.

“Did you ever hear a story, perhaps when you were very little, about a boy named Kay who got a piece of glass caught in his eye?”

“Oh yes!” said the girl, too weak to exclaim or cry out properly, but a little color came into her cheeks. “The Snow Queen took him away to her Palace and gave him a great load of kisses that froze him up.”

*“Yes, that’s very good. And do you remember how the glass made him see everything strangely? It was not that he thought things were ugly, but that he saw them as they were in **truth**—he looked at the roses in his grandmother’s rooftop garden, and saw withered, blackened flowers gone to seed. He looked at his grandmother and saw a skeleton with dirt in its mouth. And he looked at his very dear friend Gerda and saw a grandmother, with a hunch in her back and no food to eat. But Gerda couldn’t see; she didn’t have a sliver of glass of her own. So when Kay called her name and went away into the snow, she went after him, because she loved him. And she went through Finland and Lapland—do **you** know where those places are?—she saw reindeer and white foxes and grey rabbits **and** cormorants floating on frozen rivers. She met a little girl, just your age, who slept with two beautiful pistols and had a fur coat, and an old woman in a house with a marvelous garden, that had every flower you can think of, except roses. And she almost stayed with the old woman, because after all Gerda was a very lonely child and Kay was her only friend. But in the end she couldn’t forget him, or the roses they used to plant on that rickety old rooftop. She liked the little girl with the guns, too, and would have liked to stay with the gypsy-family, where she would not have been lonely at all, but she left them, too, because of Kay, and how much she imagined he must be suffering. Finally, she came to the Snow Queen’s palace, which was a frightening place, all of glass and ice, and when she walked through the great snowflake-gate—even though she was terribly scared—she saw her Kay, kneeling in the snow, and he was trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle, though it didn’t seem he was doing a good job of it.”*

“The puzzle spelled ‘Eternity’ didn’t it? My auntie used to read me this story,” nodded the child.

“Yes, but Kay was never very good at puzzles. Even though the Snow Queen stood over him, with her long white hair brushing his cheeks, and gave him hints, he could not solve it. But then a strange thing happened—and this is the part left out of the story your auntie read you. The Snow Queen looked up, and saw Gerda, who was only a little girl, only a child, who didn’t know anything at all. And the Snow Queen crossed the hall to her, almost as if she were floating. She touched one of the girl’s braids, and smiled. Gerda blushed, suddenly shy, for it had occurred to her all in a rush that the Queen was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.”

The Snow Queen swallowed hard, her throat working like a cork stuck in a bottle of colorless wine.

“She took Gerda’s hand, and led her to the puzzle, which Kay had tossed aside in frustration. He would not look at his friend, for he still saw her as a knotted old hag. But the Snow Queen showed her how the pieces worked, and asked if she wouldn’t like to try for herself, now that she had come all this way. Gerda was like you, good at puzzles, and figures, and the shards of ice were fascinating, the way they glittered, like broken stars. In a moment, she had quite forgotten Kay.”

She closed her eyes, as if reciting poetry.

“Days might have passed, and Kay might have died on the stairs of the palace, trying to suckle the railing for water. Gerda saw only the puzzle, the puzzle and the Queen. You’re right, of course, the puzzle spelled ‘eternity,’ only Gerda was Danish, and so the puzzle was in Danish, too, and spelled ‘evighed’ instead. In the end, it did not take so long to solve it, and the Snow Queen was pleased,” she choked on her words, cold tears springing to her eyes, “so pleased. She said that only the best girls could do such excellent work, and that she would give me the whole world, the whole world, and a new pair of skates. She kissed her then—not the way she had kissed Kay, but kissed Gerda’s lips, and something passed between them, like an eel wriggling between ocean-currents. The thing passed, and the Snow Queen was just a woman, with blue eyes and high color in her cheeks. She touched her braid again, with such tenderness, and left Gerda all alone in the huge, empty palace.”

As she finished her story, the little girl fit the last shard into place with a quiet click. She tucked her pale hair behind a pink ear. “Only the best girls,” the child whispered.

“Yes, only the best.”

The Snow Queen reached down and unfastened the silver chain, rubbing her ankle a little where the metal had chafed. The girl did not leap up or run, but watched the older woman calmly. They were still for a long while, as though cradling some poor, half-dead bird between them, trying to decide what ought to be done, what a good lady might do to help the wretched creature. Finally, the Snow Queen looked up into the

delicate face of her charge, her eyes full of the same cold tears. Taking the child's face in her freezing hands, she kissed her, gently, almost with fear. Her lower lip trembled against the girl's, and the girl trembled. When she drew away, they said nothing to each other. The child was full of light as if she had drunk it, and left her chair for the first time in weeks. She crossed the room to [the great mirror](#), and, with practiced hands, pulled a little shard from its surface without cutting her fingers. Her back turned to the empty fireplace, the puzzle, the other woman, she began to [eat](#) a bit of stale tea-cake, and almost absent-mindedly dropped the glass into a cup of half-curdled coffee which sat near the sink, and she sipped the mirror-coffee with an inscrutable expression.

Softly, air rising in her breast like dawn, Gerda slipped out the door, scarlet climbing her cheeks like roses.

Twenty-Fifth Shard

The creature which until a moment ago had been a child looked curiously at the body which lay prostrate in front of her.

She felt sorry for it.

She had not meant to hurt her new mother, but the hunger, the instinct, had been so strong, opening dark and light in her, like a second mouth. She had climbed onto the black-eyed woman—who did not seem surprised, now that she thought of it—and fixed her mouth on those slowly warming lips. The frozen women had looked at **each other** over their joined faces for a long time.

But now there was this thing, quickly stiffening, a body of snow and glass.

The creature which was quickly forgetting that she had ever been a child stared at it. It had bones like a fish that swam in unspeakable seas, clear as boiled diamonds. It was beautiful, she decided, and even in the glacial wilds, custom must be observed.

Tenderly, as if it were her own child, she lifted the body and placed it on the cairn of glittering bones, arranging its hair just so, as **the snow** sifted down from a ceiling arched like a chapel. The blue-white **remains** smelled of branches and still water.

She returned to the puzzle, and after contemplating the wavy, unbroken surface for a long moment, began to break it apart again.

*Only solve this
and I will give you
the whole world
and a new pair of skates.*

Evighed

*There is nothing but this:
the snow and the night-time breathing,
living things, and hungry.
You are the child
and now,
you are the monster;
you are the shard and the shape.
The mirror is mute glass—
it shows only your own face,
repeated endlessly, broken as a bone.
This is your face,
fractured by assembly.
Hunger is the only truth:
you and the mirror eat each other.*

But the snow remains.

*Only solve this,
and I shall give you the whole world,
and a new pair of skates.*