

Fragile

Jess Richards

I've agreed to this curse of seven years of silence.
And until those years are over, my six brothers remain swans.
I don't have to seal up my lips with the strands of hair they left in their combs.
But all the same.
Seven years.
I might crack like some glass-made thing.
Spilling screams and curses of my own.
What if my mind

breaks?

After all, aren't all sisters fragile? Or is that only what brothers think? My skin is still warm.
My lips still part to breathe. And I am full of hope. Tonight my heart sings with unspoken stories. I weave my hands through this cold northern wind. I kiss the sky as my swan-brothers sleep indoors; snake-necks tucked into white duvet-wings. Breathing and gasping and sighing all this moonlight into myself. My hands pick thistledown from the edges of the road. What is it like, to fly? As an aeroplane passes over, my mouth blows the thistledown away. The swans go out all day and come home at night. Seaweed-scented, as if they've spent hours flying over salted oceans. They nudge the frying pans with their wingtips, jerk their heads in the directions of the cooker and microwave. They jump on the table, spread their wings, pretend to be tablecloths. I don't like the sounds they make. They hiss like anger and there's no rhythm in stamping. They want me to serve feasts as if they still had the hunger of boys.

Out in the fields, it's spring. A coil, a season, a jump? I laugh about all the wrong words for things and wonder where mine will go to, now. I clunk chipped plates on the table and dish up our meal. Boat-shaped birds are clumsy at mounting chairs but once they're up, they don't tip. Tonight, we eat flowers. Tomorrow, we'll have moss. The next day, leaf mulch or puddle-water. Everything tastes vivid now I can no longer describe it; I could eat the world whole. My swan-brothers slide stamens and leaves and bulbs into their bills, wetly swallowing. Their kohl-lined eyes watch my red-painted lips as we taste petal flavours: yellow, white. I'm stronger, now no words are forced. Strong as a swan.

For a long time, silence brings peace. But after a while, I see my brothers' eyes are constantly damp with expectation. If I examine their eyes for long enough, I can see their thoughts about flight. Like being told stories, with pictures instead of words. Landscapes

of patchwork maps and clouds made of frozen breath. Falling is fear, and fear is grey mist. These thoughts are beautiful, but they are not peaceful. I wish I could tell my brothers that my agreement to be silent means I love them beyond thought. Beyond ideas of companionship and touch. Beyond the fear of falling, beyond fear. But to be clever enough to rescue them, I need to understand precisely what I am rescuing them from. I am jealous of their flights.

On cold nights, we all share the bed, and in the mornings I wake into a dream of warm feathered bodies. Sometimes I sleep among them naked, to feel their feathers against my skin. To imagine touch, tenderness or lust, which I've never felt. While gathering wild garlic from the roadside verge, there's the sound of a horse. On the horse, there's a man. He's tall, wears a red hunting jacket and is much older than me. His eyes are oddly hungry as he asks, 'Will you come with me?' Shaking my head, gathering up the garlic, I rush away down the road. Though he spits foul words after me, I don't look back. Silence is a mute safety – I can't say the wrong thing and curse this stranger without meaning to.

Silence feels like my most natural state, and though I'm lonely at times, I'm grateful that silence is not a fearful thing at all. It's more like living in a parallel world – a calm and curious place. But aren't curses meant to be difficult? There must be more I have to do, to break the curse and transform my brothers back into their human forms. The problem is, curses don't come with definite instructions. There are clues, but they require interpretation. There are symbols and objects, sounds and smells. There are ambiguous clues: hints of chance and prediction, sensings of fate and coincidence, premonitions. There are transformations within the stormiest of weather and on some nights there are strange shadows across the moon. But these things can't be talked about, so the nonsense or sense of them is all tangled. The most persistent clues are found inside our home:

An empty wardrobe with a door which creaks open no matter how often I firmly close it. A sewing machine that unthreads itself whenever I run cotton thread through its machinery. A large glass bottle in the bathroom – brim-full of yellow antiseptic. What I interpret from these objects is that to break the curse, I have to hurt and heal myself, and clothe my brothers in the kind of threads which will force a sewing machine to grit its metal teeth, hold firm.

Searching the fields for what will cause me pain, I strip bramble vines from the hedges, and attempt to make a crown fit for a swan. But as the thorns twist and the vines split, my hands become crimson. Cuts slice through cuts. I make one small crown from the coiled vines and place the crown on my youngest swan-brother's head. Through tears he gazes at

Jess Richards,
'Overprinting', short
story / drawing printed
on bird book pages.
paper, threads (2019).



me and I gaze back. Even without language, without words, we feel this together. The crown hurts us both. As I soak my hands in antiseptic, I consider other materials, other cloths, other kinds of pain.

As summer arrives, I harvest nettles from the nearby woods. I hang them to dry in bunches from all the ceilings in our home. All autumn I strip them down into strands and spin them to threads. All winter and spring, I weave nettle threads into warping-wefting cloth. Through another summer I cut the cloth and sew edges and seams. And throughout all the stretching, hunching, pulling and stripping, fixing and cutting and unpicking and sewing, the nettles sting my bare hands. A nettle's sting doesn't die when the plant is torn from the earth. It doesn't die when the plant is stripped and transformed into cloth. The sting stays alive, intensifies. My hands are dry, red-raw, splitting. I dream of the softest pair of gloves. Earth-linen? Sky-silk? Could I breathe my request to the clouds, and receive the softest fabric in return for breath? I fill the bath with dock leaves. Their green juice makes the sting subside. Lying in the leaf-filled bathtub, rubbing the pain from my hands and wrists, I stare out of the open window. I watch for my brothers flying home through the clouds. I only see five of them: the ones without crowns. My youngest brother must fly off alone. Perhaps he's found himself a mate. Green juice soothes and softens my envious skin.



Jess Richards, 'Fragile', detail from 'Ghostwriting' installation. Short stories overprinted on cut-up vintage book pages, paper, ink, threads (2020).

Finally, six nettle shirts, woven and stitched, are ready. But ready for what? I light a candle in the bedroom to create a sense of ritual. I lay the shirts on the bed. Each shirt is unique because there is something wrong – a missing button, an absent sleeve, a skewwhiff seam. Pain rejects all notions of perfection. Beckoning my brothers upstairs, I show them the shirts. They look at them unblinkingly, and I wait, expecting them to want me to clothe and transform them. But they just look at me, and look at each other; and look at the shirts again. I think they're noticing the imperfections, but I'm not quite sure what they're thinking. After a while, they go back downstairs. Feeling rejected, I remove six empty coat hangers from the wardrobe. As I'm hanging the nettle shirt with the missing sleeve, my youngest swan brother comes back into the bedroom. He looks at me with sad yellow eyes. Frowning at him, I shake my head and put the shirt back in the wardrobe. I wish I could tell him they're ready and finished and imperfectly perfect. I wish I could tell him that he and his brothers need to help me know what to do next. He extends a wing and tilts his head, as if trying to alert me to something. I examine his body more closely. He only has one wing. Where the other should be is a lumpy mound of uneven feathers. As he sees the realisation in my face, he dips his head and won't meet my eyes. Turning from me, he walks out of the bedroom and thuds his way down the stairs.

The next time my swan brothers fly, I watch for them and again count only five. Where does my youngest brother go, when the others take to the sky? I imagine him flying elsewhere, alone in his own circling directions. But my heart tells me he's hiding or sulking and has never flown at all.

One night five of my swan brothers are asleep in the bedroom, but the youngest is by the fireside with me, his soft-feathered cheek resting against my lap. Touching the bramble vine crown on his head, I shift it slightly. There is a little blood in his white feathers. I move the crown a little more, and he glares at me. But as I stroke his neck, he looks up at me with bliss in his eyes.

Without thinking, I whisper to him,
'You've always been my favourite.'
His hand covers my mouth.
His human hand.
His man's hand.

He's a swan with the arm of a man, but he's been keeping it secret all this time. Tentatively, I kiss his fingers, and they flex away from my mouth. Touch. How I've longed to know it. The touch of his fingertips to my lips is like streams of words which communicate love or hate or comfort or pain. Touch is another silence, another noise. Touch is another language, a conversation. I close my eyes. His fingertips against my lips taste of earth and lavender. I whisper again, 'You've always been my favourite. Especially now you're covered in white feathers. And because I've spoken, you'll always be a swan.' His hand moves away from my lips. He grips my wrist. He places one fingertip against my pulse. I wet my lips with my tongue and sigh, hoping to feel his beautiful hand reading my heartbeat like Braille. Hoping to forget this beautiful swan was ever my brother; hoping to feel his language as touch, and his touch as language. But he is not reading my pulse.

He is writing.

His fingertip moves carefully against the delicate skin of my wrist.

He makes the shake of a letter, 'y' and 'o' and 'u'.

In a gasp of broken words, I whisper, 'What about me?'

He spells out the words:

'a' 'r' 'e' 'c' 'u' 'r' 's' 'e' 'd' 't' 'o' 'b' 'e' 's' 'i' 'l' 'e' 'n' 't' 'f' 'o' 'r' 'e' 'v' 'e' 'r'

These are the last words I ever

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Jess Richards