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Valerie Marie Arvidson

Possessions

All-kinds-of-fur



Agnes

In my father's house, at the end of the hallway on the second floor, sits a cedar chest as long as a casket. Lift the lid and hear it creak. Place the stick in the corner so the lid stays up. The trunk will appear to be dark and empty. It smells of wood and bergamot. It smells like the scent of fallen leaves. Reach your hand inside, deeper. You feel rough fur, each individual hair, coarse and stiff. It smells

like leather, like sawdust, like salt. The gray hallway light comes in to the chest but the coat, like a hibernating beast, is dark brown and mysterious. You cannot see the edges. You cannot sense its depth or fullness. Is there a body beneath the skin? You find an edge and feel the soft skin on the underside where the silk lining has torn away. No, it is not a bear. Search the fur. Run your hand over the hairs so that they lie flat under your palm; travel with the grain, the way you pet a cat or a dog. Feel the bones that might lie beneath it. The muscles that want to move. Your legs shiver. You feel more and more like a small child, a small girl. You feel like you've met a sleeping wolf, that he might warm up and come alive. You feel around. You find the collar. You find a burton. There are no ears. There is no tail. There is not a mouth, open and wet. There are no slippery sharp teeth. The fur is cool to the touch. It takes up the full length of the trunk. It would cover you from head to toe like a cape. It would make you invisible.

It might be made of long fox pelts that have been dyed dark brown. It could be made from rabbits. It could be mink or beaver. Sable, possum, or muskrat. Many beasts combined to make one.

You climb over the edge of the cedar chest. You pull the coat around you so that one side is beneath you and the other side is on top of you. It smells unexpected, like a man, like an old book. Not musty, not damp like mushrooms. It is like the smell of dry snow. It is sharp in your nose. Dry wind. It is crisp and it is clean. Your elbows and bones bump against the wooden box. You lie down. The silk inside the coat is dry and cool like shaded dirt. You rest your face against the soft collar of the coat. Your brown hair falls around you loose and shining. Your breath warms the air around you. You are inside the belly of the beast. You are inside your grandmother. They are holding you. You close your eyes and disappear within the fur. No one is coming home for a long time.

The fur belongs to your father's mother. To your father's mother's mother. The fur belongs to you.

Cold Spell

Massachusetts, 1990

Aunt Magda has always been the keeper of the family secrets. She keeps the recipes for *kanelbullar* and *pannkakor*; she keeps the old photographs, and all the strange memories that no one else seems to recall. She has all of the little family trinkets, the diaries, the letters, the unopened gifts. She has the locks and the



keys to doors that no longer exist.

Like my uncle Kerby she keeps things that most people throw away. She's a squirrel, a stasher, a hoarder. Maybe she keeps pennies in glass jars that she places around the house and maybe someday she'll count them for something she's saving up for. She has drawers full of blackened knives and thick rusted files, nails, and screws in every size. She has bottles of wine that are long past drinkable, turned to vinegar. She keeps the newspapers under couch cushions, seashells in the bathroom that still smell like the sea, buttons that might be sewn back onto their coats.

She's a taker too. But I know the urge to take things that are not yours. Only certain things are take-able. The sort of things you know you deserve, the things that you should have but you don't have. So it's only right that you take them. They become your best-loved things. Nothing compares to the love you have for your stolen goods. They become deeply yours.

Magda would take the un-takeable too. She could take my thoughts right out of my head.

...  
I remember: I am nine-years-old. Sleeping in the attic with my cousins. We are on the floor on a heap of pillows, sleeping bags, and blankets. It is Memorial Day. Family has arrived for the town parade. We are awake and the morning light is hot. We can hear Aunt Magda downstairs. She climbs the creaking stairs. I look at my cousins' blue eyes and place my finger against my lips to indicate silence. They nod in understanding. My two blond cousin-sisters. We close our eyes and cover our heads with the blankets.

Aunt Magda sighs when she reaches the top of the stairs. She fingers the children's ice skates that hang from the hook next to the window. The blades clack against each other. *Oh, look at these, she says to herself. Look AT These. My goodness. These must be mine. Yes, these are Mine. They're mine!* In her voice I can hear memories rushing back to Aunt Magda.

Hidden beneath my blanket, I am terrified that she knows we are awake. That she will stand there all morning, gasping at herself.

Her body weight shifts, the floor creaks. She moves toward us. *Beautiful, beautiful girls,* she says. And then as we stop breathing, afraid she will touch us and claim that we belong to her, too, she leaves. Lightly down the stairs, two gentle feet per step. She has become slow and terrifying in her old age.

I feel terrible for hiding.

I open my eyes to the soft cotton sheet covering my face. Warm, yellow light filters through the fabric. I pull the sheet down and look at the scuffed ivory skates hanging on the wall. They have black skid marks around the toes. They are mine. They were mine. *Those were my skates!* I tell my cousins when they rustle out of their cocoons. This confirms our suspicions about Aunt Magda. She is not to be trusted. She's the kind that walks into a room and *wants* things—she walks into a room and looks for things she can snatch.

But later that day Aunt Magda caught me alone sitting on the couch in my father's living room. I was drinking a glass of lemonade and falling into a daydream. As soon as she began talking I knew I had to listen and could not leave. It was the way she gripped you with her eyes. She never broke her gaze. She told me that her mother—my grandmother, Aggie—saw the face of her dead brother during a séance one day when she was a child living in Finland. This was just before the turn of the century, Magda said, about one-hundred years ago. 1899 was an important year; people believed the world could end, that wicked things might happen if they did not pray.

Nevertheless all of Aggie's sisters, three in total, and a few neighborhood girls, prepared to evoke the dead one wintry day, Magda said. While huddling in an ice-fishing house atop the frozen lake called Langosundet, they did a séance in order to see what spirits might come to them. The lake was a mile from the center of their village in Geta: the northernmost part of the Åland archipelago between Sweden and Finland. In the middle of the ice-fishing house, someone had made a hole, perfectly round and perfectly blue (the color of nightfall). Magda's eyes widened: it was like a doorway to another world.





During the séance my grandmother's sister, Sanna, had licked her finger, lifted it behind Aggie's head, and touched the curled rim of Aggie's ear. Aggie hissed with fear and curses and brought her mittens to her face to cover her eyes. Aggie's brother was what the Fins called a *pokoiniekkä*: a person not yet married into the fellowship of the dead. A séance, Magda explained, allowed the living to bring the dead back to our world. Let me explain where this all comes from, she said. Your ancestors believed in other worlds and that humans were animals, too, made from the same stuff in the earth and the sky as other creatures.

Magda explained to me: long ago your fingers were webbed together. Long ago you could breathe easily. All of us could, naturally.

Long ago, Aunt Magda said, the sun and the moon were freed from the belly of a fish. Two red eggs spilled forth, rolled along the bottom of the sea, and collected light. Meanwhile, the world was made from eggshells. From fragments on the bed of an eagle's nest. The cloudy lining of the placenta fluttering in the sun's new light attached to the inner shell. But what had punctured the egg and eaten the fetus, leaving behind the pieces? Magda said: our world is made from something fragile. Just look at the palms of your hands, at the blue insides of your wrists, if you ever doubt it.

When you die, said Magda, in order to die properly you must cross the water and if you cannot get across that stream of arctic water that flows from the glaciers in the far north and if you froze in the middle, like a rock, you would never get to death's iron gate. This is like what happened to the boy, Aggie's brother.

The gate is on the other side of a terrible waterfall, which turns everything upside down. If you cannot get there, you would remain forever right-side-up, in the world of humans. But you would be able to see the other side of everything, the living and the dying sides of everything.

You could see all the other invisible worlds embedded in our human world. You could see the dwellers in the land of birds, short, large-headed things with feathers on the tops of their hands, fishing for eggs at the feet of people: people who were just in conversation or drinking coffee on their breaks from work. People who did not know these beings were picking at their feet silently. So, when Aggie saw what she saw she thought she had died. She thought she could see *both sides* of things. But it was the other side reflecting her: like a strange mirror.

This is how it happened. The girls huddled in the ice-fishing house, rocking on their ice-blades in the middle of the day. Their ankles were numb and purple with cold despite the wool socks they wore to warm their feet.

The girls called for the dead and began to sing an old Swedish chant.

*Dig går vår längtan till möte!  
Forngravars kummel i hängbjörkars skygd  
tälja din tusenårs saga.  
Aldrig förgäta vi fädernas bygd  
vart vi i fjärrled än draga  
vart vi i fjärrled än draga.*

As Aggie sang, a face appeared in the window.

*You, we long to meet!  
The ancient graves beneath the birches  
tell us of our past: one thousand years ago.  
We will never forget the land of our Fathers  
No matter where we go  
No matter where we go.*

The face appeared as if it always existed in the window of the ice-fishing house. It was part of the window and part of the sky outside at the same time. The face was sheer white like the face of a day-lit moon and looked engraved, as if on a coin.

The face was as sheer and yet as hard as a fingernail. The ghost face grew out from somewhere hidden. Like this, Magda said, holding my hand and pressing on my fingernail. Like the other half of a fingernail: the other end is tucked neatly beneath the bed of your skin, connected to cartilage, connected to bone, connected to teeth-like knuckles that would one day become beads on a string, rattling songs, in the land of the dead.

The longer Aggie looked at the face the more it looked like it was her own face, metallic almost, like an image made on a silver-coated plate; like the face on a coin. Aggie stared and the longer she stared the more alive the face became. It gained color. Mercury-red veins appeared around its eyes and cheeks. She could see its eyes moving, looking for something.

Stop, someone said. And there wasn't any screaming, there was just wild



motion. Aggie pushed open the wooden door of the house and lunged across the ice, her skates slicing and carving the frozen surface, producing scruffs of snow like trails of white fur curling behind her.

The loosely hinged door banged behind her, knocking things down inside the house. Aggie didn't see the ski poles slap the walls or the thermometer crack and brake against the back of the door. But her sisters shook and grabbed at the air.

Imagine, Magda said: tufts of snow fell from the sky. The snowflakes felt like scraps of paper scratching against her as Aggie move swiftly towards the shore. A cold river of wind pushed against her.

Meanwhile, the other sisters watched the thermometer break open on the fish-house floor. Beads of red mercury spiraled towards the center. The red balls rolled like marbles, dropping into the blue-black hole. They shimmered and crackled as they sank into the lake.



Magda went on: Aggie's skates broke through the ice at the edge of the lake. She sank into slushy water but pulled herself up to the hard black soil of the bank. The bank was covered with patches of snow that had settled in the shady spots like lichen. While sitting on the bank she untied and then pulled off her skates but realized too late that she had left her boots in the ice-fishing house. She could not go back. She could not face her sisters because they would not understand why she fled. They would not believe that she was the one chosen to see their brother.

Barefooted but for her socks, which soon became damp and then stiff with cold, she padded through the forest, which had been unfarmed and let go wild for hundreds of years in this part of the island. The blue juniper bushes near the rocky shore grew out of mounds of chalky yellow sand. Deeper into the woods the conifers turned the soil dark and acidic. Atop the soil were layers of brown fir needles and old snow. The needles stuck to her socks and created a soft and slippery natural shoe. Aggie traveled along what she believed was the path that could take her home.

She looked for the trees she knew: that tall golden birch with the quivering yellow leaves. The dwarf pine that was shaped like an old man's reddish arm. She thought she saw these. She went deeper into the dense green woods. She descended towards the rock caves. She ascended up into the meadows. She began to worry that this was not the same island at all. She could be on Däno, or Lokö, Hallo, or maybe Sandskär. They all connected in the winter because the ice created natural bridges. She had skated quite far with the girls and the ice-house was slightly closer to Däno than it was to home. Had she skated west instead of east? She looked up at the sky for the sun, but the sky was entirely white. A snow would come soon. Among the thousands of islands she felt she could be anywhere. But she was certainly somewhere, somewhere that had to change, that had to end, that had to lead to somewhere else that was knowable.

She might have been headed towards Eckerö, the Widow's Isle. This was farther than she could travel in a day but she knew that the water-spirits, *näck-en*, would guide you toward the most dangerous places, making you think you knew where you were until it was too late. Sometimes they'd play music to lure one into the water. She had not heard any music, so she knew she was still okay.

Magda continued: Aggie tried to remember all the spirits that could try to trick her. The *lyktgubbar* or Will o' the Wisp, spirits of people who had drowned in the lakes or marshes: they would sometimes lead a lost wanderer to a death similar to their own. But sometimes they could lead a person home. How would you know if a spirit was good or evil? She thought about her brother and what he had wanted. He showed his face to tell her something. Perhaps his face would return. He had made her run. Perhaps he would guide her somewhere. In the land between life and death, he may have wanted a friend.

The trouble with being lost is that you begin to lose trust of your own mind, said Magda, tapping on her forehead. You begin to look for signs, for signals. The trees you thought you knew turn out to be doubles. The wind begins to blow in the opposite direction. The sun seems to set in the East.

Usually islands are knowable places because they have clear boundaries. They are places that can be mapped and remembered. But no island in the archipelago of Åland is ever so simple. Åland is a maze of skerries, sandbanks, caves, and muddy paths that morph with the tides in the summer and treacherously connect with the ice in the winter months. In some sections, the Baltic Sea is calm and gentle like wash water; people swim in these safe harbors after heating their bodies in the smoke saunas. On other islands that face out to the open sea,



the Baltic lashes fiercely against the jagged red rocks.

In the spring and fall, dark rains or snows drench the island and threaten to sink the land. People stay in their houses as if the buildings were arks that appear to sail on the wind. Arks that might capsize if the rains continue. During the thaw, or on a warm winter day, the icy bridges that connect two islands may become impassable. One should never travel alone.

One can easily become disoriented even at the shore. Perhaps the open ice covers a lake, not the sea, or perhaps it just covers a marsh. The trees on the other side look familiar but so do the trees in the opposite direction.

In the deep woods, in the center of each island, glacial drop-rocks provide caves for beasts. Golden meadows open up out of nowhere, peppered with wildflowers and medicinal weeds. In the winter, the meadows turn silver and the tall grasses stiffen with frost. Some flowers still manage to live in the mild salt air, clinging to their stems, reaching their tiny blue faces toward the white sun.

And so in this land of changing places, Aggie came to a meadow and sat on the edge of the forest, the threshold of one place and another. She looked out to the silvery grasses and remembered the meadows of summer and their boldly colored flowers, the reds, yellows, and violets: the Wood Crane's bill, Red Campion, Buttercup, and Water Avens. She'd collect them in her basket and bring them home. Where the ground was drier there were Bluebells, Mountain Everlasting, and Red Clover. Maiden Pink would thrive. It was as if the snowy meadow danced in front of her, painting her colorful memories as she saw them in her mind.

In the summertime she could find her way home easily because the rocks and chalky dirt near the house would have endless amounts of Red Clover. But in the winter, the flowers could not signal for home. All the colors of the land seemed to be the same, the white sky, and grey sea, the black trees, and the rust-red of the granite rocks.

Sometimes in a winter meadow, Magda explained, you might have seen an old ewe: a sheep whose teeth had been broken off. It may be mangy and tired, rejected from the flock, trying to chew on dead grass in the meadow. It may, at first, even appear to be an old woman, withered and hunched over, wearing a fleece cape. Very often it's hard to tell. Very often there's an old woman and an old ewe in the same meadow.

The old woman, the crone, might have a shelter but usually she doesn't have the strength or know-how to build one herself, so she may live in an old wolf's den or a lynx cave. She may use the old bones to build a bed. And the old

furs to line the floors. Imagine how it would smell, Magda said. Warm and stale like unwashed hair. She'd make fires from fish-skin.

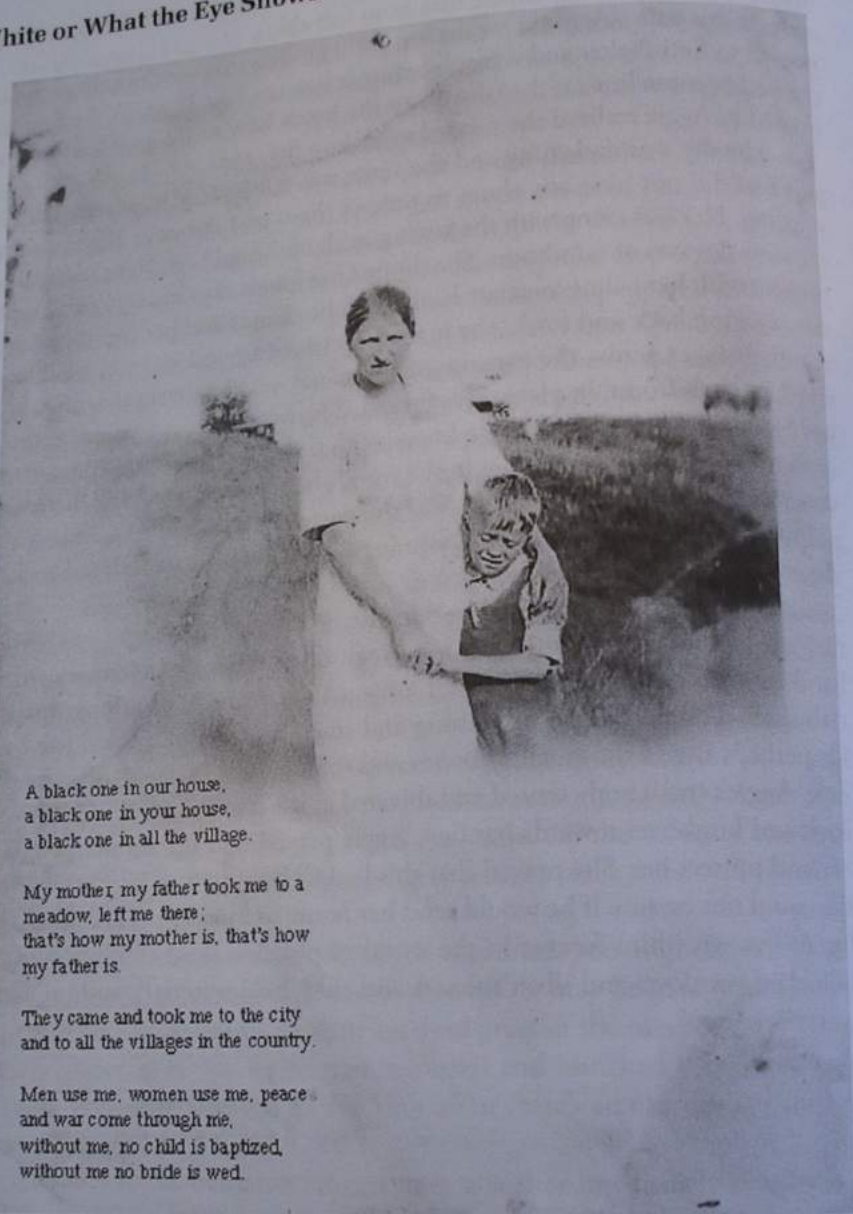
At this point, Aggie knew she was seeing things that were not there and she needed to find shelter and warmth before it was too late. It wasn't the first time she had become lost on the islands, so she knew how to fix up a lean-to if she needed it. Aggie realized she needed to make a fire, too.

The sky was darkening and the snow was falling harder, Magda said. Aggie's feet did not have any shoes to protect them and the pain of the cold was startling. Her feet stung with the sawing teeth of the cold air. Her toes went into occasional waves of numbness. She slipped her hands into her socks and rubbed her feet with her palms to create heat. With her hands and her feet together like this, rocking back and forth, she looked up to see a reindeer and a wolf staring at one another across the expanse of the meadow. They were diagonal to one another, both frozen in place, eyes locked. The reindeer was a young male. The wolf looked older, grayer. Aggie knew neither of these creatures traveled alone in the winter. There were more in the woods behind her, watching the scene, as she was. Could they see her, too? Was she part of this lock of gazes? She sat still, pulling her limbs into her body, forming herself into a camouflaged rock. She closed her eyes and thought of home.

Suddenly, an arm covered in thick fleece hooked around Aggie's body and dragged her backwards into the forest. Aggie opened her eyes and saw a wrinkled hand, grey and bone-thin, holding a jagged blade made of a long opalescent clamshell. The fleecy arm was strong and smelled of old bread and fish smoke. Or perhaps it was the smell of bones and moldy wool in the darkest parts of a cave. Aggie's small body tensed and shivered as the crone slung the child over her back and lumbered towards her den. Aggie prayed that her brother would find her and protect her. She prayed that this had all been part of his plan. Although she could not be sure if he would send her home to mother or if he would bring her to live with him forever in the world of placeless dead children, the world of locked windows and silver mirrors and cold, cold waterfalls rushing fast and white as snow.



## White or What the Eye Shows



A black one in our house,  
a black one in your house,  
a black one in all the village.

My mother, my father took me to a  
meadow, left me there;  
that's how my mother is, that's how  
my father is.

They came and took me to the city  
and to all the villages in the country.

Men use me, women use me, peace  
and war come through me,  
without me, no child is baptized,  
without me no bride is wed.



What a white sheet hides: girls' waists and the way their hips just barely touch as they both try to fit behind the sheet.

The white sheet is an unseen X-ray, a blank photograph, an overexposed idea.

An empty image and an image flooded with light look the same. Whiteness reflects everything and shows nothing.

The girls hold onto the white sheet that hides them. The white sheet is hanging from the line with wooden clothespins. They pull down on the clothesline, like children do.

They were playing when someone found them.



A mother somewhere cringes, hoping the line won't snap loose. A mother somewhere who bleached the sheet until it screamed white, a mother who hung the sheet in the hot yellow sun until it smelled dry like daytime.

These girls peak over the sheet, and the pretty one looks away. She bends her knee just so her toe points out. She knows she is pretty. The girl on the left keeps her feet close together. She pinches her eyes.

What a white sheet shows: a mirror. A window painted white. What the viewer desires, what you long for, what you wish you could see. What you want to shatter and destroy.

The white is complete. The white is empty. The completeness is empty. The mind of a young girl is empty and full of light.



As the girl ages, the aperture of her mind begins to find edges, black spots. The mind finds holes, the plaques and tangles of an old woman's brain. It becomes more difficult to understand the world. The mind opens and closes like the circular eye of a camera, spiraling inward and outward in order to focus on anything.

Later, the girls sit in front of the sheet crossing their legs or their ankles. They hold their hands in their laps. They sit in black wooden chairs. They tilt their heads down and away from the sun. They work hard to keep themselves intact. To keep themselves together. The pretty girl looks down at her hands, she turns a silver ring around and around on her finger. It is smooth and cold. She thinks about a world made of silver and chrome.



The white sheet is not a blanket. It is not a towel or a tablecloth. It lies too stiffly. The white sheet is a children's drawing drying on the line. The white sheet is a large piece of paper. It's what they want to show; it's what they want to hide. It shows a contour line drawing of the house. It shows the line drawings they made of each other's faces. It shows the signatures that they just learned how to make in cursive script. It shows a painting they made of the clouds. But you can't see what's on the piece of paper. The house is white, their faces are transparent, their signatures are thin, and the clouds are evaporated in the flowering sun.

How much light to let into the eye, to wash out the faces of the children or to wash out the drawing they've made of themselves?

Show us what you made, now show us yourselves.

Years before, or years later, the ladies, the mothers, or the girls grown backwards into time, find a shaded spot among the pine trees and the bushes. For an instant, they become majestic.





The white gown is oversized. A girl inside her mother's old dress. A mother inside a white sheet. The gown attempts to show everything and hide everything. The white hat sits atop the woman like an egg on a nest.

The girl who pinches her eyes is now a woman who knows it's silly for anyone to take a photograph of her. She wants to cluck but doesn't. Her arms hang limply by her sides, her face contorts. She closes her eyes before the flash. She keeps them closed until it's over. No one can see them rolling back and forth.

What she sees behind her eyes: shades of black, red shadows moving, bright white lines etching an image of a girl's face. Yellow bursts stuttering into pattern. Blue trees branching out. She thinks she sees her veins. She thinks she sees the electricity of her brain. She wishes the camera would show this vision from behind her face instead of her face.

When she opens her eyes: the world is a negative. Her stomach turns over. For an instant, the sky is black. The emptiness is complete.





## What Home Was Like

*Åland Islands, Finland, early 1900s*

Withindoors: a following wind, and a somber wall made of horsehair plaster. A bedroom door painted red as rowanberries. Cracks in the house made the whole thing rattle, but anyone from out-of-doors would have called it a regular gentleman's place: it was painted white with two floors and a veranda jutting out from the front like a jaw, with windows on the upper half. The more windowpanes, the finer the house, and theirs had 365: one for each day of the year.

When Aggie Källström left for school in the morning, the neighborhood boys would say, "Hur mår du?" (How are you?) with their island lilt (mostly Swedish with a Finnish rhythm) and they'd give a wink. And Aggie, who was only a young girl, would say, "Well as the bucket said when the chain broke," just a little tease her mother taught her. She'd give a little tilted smile, showing only two teeth.

Algot, her father, would be out in his boat already. Her mother, Elin, would be in the kitchen with the other children. On the range: black coffee. On the table: an approximation of food. Cold potatoes and fish and possibly porridge with blue milk at room temperature. Also, likely, perch or herring, salted down for the winter and kept in barrels. Potatoes put in dirt piles in the root cellar, if it hadn't been too wet that year.

Autumn afternoons on her walk home from the village, Aggie'd gather apples in the orchard that had fallen onto the dewy grass. Green apples. Red apples. Blue apples. She'd slip off her shoes to feel the grass clean her bare feet.

Often at night barking foxes might wake the children. Then they'd fall back to sleep, all together in their big bed stuffed with straw. The children's one big dream-head might see the dream-self falling through the ice on a sled. Their eyes would toss to-and-fro behind their eyelids. *Don't cross the strait in spring-time*, they'd say all together, in their mother's voice. *Or you'll fall through the ice on your sled, like Brother*. Dream-self looked a lot like brother.

After the summer-melt, when Aggie was old enough to have lost all her milk-teeth, the children found a human skeleton on the red granite rocks by the shore. The children screamed when they discovered these remains of the drowned. They screamed because it was twisted and small. They could not tell whether it was a man or a woman, or even if it might have been a child or some other creature. Its legs were bowed and its ribcage was warped, so as to have





made the thing barrel-chested. Its jaw seemed too narrow and pointed for a person. A white haired boy walked closer to touch the pebbled bones of its wrist. He came back glassy-eyed and mute, with nothing to report, just a shake of the head.

Later, a white coffin would be strewn with juniper wreaths and spruce boughs. She would watch them lower it into the ground and she would watch the congregation sing, and the way the people moved their mouths. And she could see the strange open mouth of the skeleton frozen in place.

Coffee and ginger cookies would be prepared for the funeral. *We gave it a proper death*, they'd say. Alder-wood would be burned in the church. She'd wear a long

the hearth. Liverwort would be garlanded around the church. She'd wear a long white dress, the same one she wore for communion, confirmation, and any burials or births. And the boys would watch her as she lifted the hem off the ground and she stepped delicately about showing off her small feet.

She turned ten years old and began to act proudly. *Shame on you*, she'd say to other children, and to men, as she mimicked her mother. Pointing her finger, and lifting her chin, she'd say, *I'm a child who's hardly lost her milk-teeth*. She'd say this, knocking her head from side-to-side and clucking. She'd say things like this more and more as she grew taller and her pale-brown hair began to curl, just so, around her face. She'd laugh in her funny way between her teeth. She noticed older boys had begun to stare at places on her body other than her face. She liked this but she ignored them and began to daydream and cloud-watch.

Even so, her mother made her find work when she was old enough to stop school. Work was determined by the season and the needs of each farm. One might go around all day not finding anyone that needed a hand. One late winter, when work was low, Aggie wanted more money to buy a gold necklace and her mother would not lend her any. So while Aggie was out alone searching for something to do she crossed the frozen channel to check for work at the neighboring village.

As she walked she danced like a ballerina while staring up at the clouds, as if they were musical. She tried to swirl as if she were a cloud. And she wondered what the dance would be for the weather that the cirrus clouds might bring. But

as she daydreamed, she tripped on a mound where the ice changed shape around a rock. She fell hard onto her shoulder, and as the tingling pain traveled along her arm, she grew angry with herself for not being more agile and for wanting that necklace. She had fallen where the ice was thin and it began to crack around her as she tried to sit up. With her other arm she tried to push herself up but she fell again and the ice gave way. She grabbed at the slush forming around her, panting and reaching for the rock, but as she moved her weight around the ice broke into chunks and the water rose up fast around her. The rock seemed to rise beyond her reach. She grabbed at the slimy black weeds and barnacles that were attached to the side of the rock. She could not grip anything with her hands or her feet and the channel was deeper than she expected at this spot as she kicked through the heavy water.

The hole expanded around her in fractures, like a star, revealing the black water below. The cold penetrated her body. Soon, she could no longer feel her booted feet (they were empty heavy things) but she felt the cold water rise and billow beneath her skirt, finding its way through her bloomers and up her back. Her body rose and fell as she kicked to keep her head above the water. She found herself saying, *good girl, good girl*, over and over inside her head, like her father used to say in Finnish, *hyvä tyttö*, and this kept her feet moving.

Meanwhile, a mile away, the Finnish postal service workers were laying down planks so they could pull their sleds over the strait. The men were bringing provisions across the way on their daily delivery. They moved swiftly across the ice, following their dogs.

One of their bowlegged dogs ran ahead towards Aggie and the rock. A paroxysm of coughing and crying had drawn the animal near. The men rushed ahead and found Aggie bobbing and white-faced, barely alive in that jagged hole of ice and water. She whined and moaned along with the excited dogs to keep herself awake and afloat as the dogs nipped at the air and jumped along the edges of the ice. She had been in the water long enough for her skin to burn with pain and her breath to become slow and shallow. She could hardly speak but her dry whispers were saying, *hyvä tyttö, hyvä tyttö*, and she reached for the dogs who used their teeth to pull at her dress sleeves and help the men lift her out of the water with a rope. Dogs' breath was hot against her neck and face. She gasped for air as the men pulled her into the winter and up, wrapping her in furs. And the strong men kept saying to the little girl, "Mitä sinulle kuuluu?" (How are you?) And it sounded like warm wind, like cooing.

As she began to warm she felt embarrassed as the men put her on their



sled. They tied her down like a package. The sled ride was bumpy and fast. She watched the dogs race alongside her with their bright blue eyes and silver coats. Her teeth chattered and she had never been so aware that her teeth were made of bone. They moved towards the nearest dwelling where an old Finnish woman fed her fresh coffee brewed on the fire.

After Aggie's return another child from her village ran off and became lost. The ice had melted by then and the search was led on boat through straits and bays; the drag-hooks swept back and forth across the bottoms but all they found was a sack of drowned kittens or an old bow-net or a waterlogged branch.

After this and after many other lost children, her family knew it was time to leave the islands. When Aggie's family left, she was just becoming old enough to think of marrying. And she knew she'd never see the island boys or the sailors again.

On the ship headed for Stockholm, then for London, and then for Boston, the harbor shore smelt strongly of pitch and oakum from the old ships still anchored there. She knew pitch was dark and sticky as night and she felt that maybe the odor was some kind of message to her. It used to always be on her father's clothes. He had worked on the ships, unraveling old ropes and soaking them in tar to seal the gaps between the planks in the hulls. Before they decided to leave he had helped make good ships that kept the water out.

As they stood on the deck of the ship, looking back out on the islands, Aggie remembered that one thing her mother had always hoped for: to get the whole cabin painted red. But all she managed to get done were the inside foyer walls. She had wanted to grow a big garden and maybe even put up a fence. The house would always remain unfinished.

The other child was still lost when they headed for Boston. Some folks spread rumors that the boy had been killed. They said that he had been an odd one and the mother hadn't been very proud of him. He had only been about seven years old but old enough to know he wasn't wanted, they said.

After Aggie's family left the islands, the sea would continue to give up the dead that were in it. And books were opened. Another book was opened. The dead were judged according to what they had done.

*Good-bye*—her mother would say, over and over again, trying her English. She'd say, it's like—*God be with you*.



AGGIE, AS SNOW QUEEN





AGGIE, AS SNOW QUEEN



The Eve of St. Agnes, January 21st

As Agnes squeezes her eyes closed and tries to sleep, the owl outside asks who it is and the white hare limps across the frozen grass of the yard and then lifts its ears and pauses. The girl pulls her cold slender fingers up to the warm breath on her lips and she prays rapidly but quietly—so as not to wake the three other sisters who sleep beside her in the large bed. Agnes knows they are too young for this divination but what if her man comes for one of them and confuses her for another? She did not know what secrets her sisters kept in their sleep, or if they awaited a vision as well. Perhaps their dreams could slip like fish through water into hers.



It was the Eve of St. Agnes, in the month of thresholds and new beginnings, and young women and girls around the village were preparing for visions of their future husbands. Girls young as eleven refused to eat their meals for the entire day. The eventual headaches and dizzy spells were promising signs that a vision would occur that night if they continued to follow the rules of the ritual. If, after fasting, when the girl or young woman went to bed she should place her hands under her head, lying on her back perfectly still, never looking behind her, then as she fell asleep her future husband would appear as if in a dream to kiss her and feast with her. In Agnes's silent stillness on this cold winter night her twelve-year-old body attempted the divination that would let her see her future. She prayed to her namesake and asked the saint to bring her a vision.

*Agnes sweet and Agnes fair,  
Hither, hither, now repair;  
Bonny Agnes, let me see  
The lad who is to marry me.*

She had secretly eaten a yolkless egg boiled and filled with salt in the cavity where the yolk had been. And now her thirst was her greatest pain, as her dry mouth and lips tried to chant, *Will you bring me water in my dream?* Perhaps the visage of the man would appear in the frosted window of Ag-

nes's bedroom or in the glow of the fireplace near the foot of the bed. Perhaps she might hear him knocking at her door or rustling in the curtains. Perhaps he would appear from beneath her bed or from within her bed, turning from a pillow into a person. Would he arrive bearing food and drink? Would his hair be long and ragged? Would he be nude or clothed? Perhaps his eyes would be wild and bright, shining in the early dawn sun gleaming through the frosted window. Perhaps he would be old like a father or young like a child. Would she recognize him or would he be a stranger?

And then when Agnes finally belonged to sleep, she saw a figure by her bedside with long golden arms and a sheer blue sheath that revealed radiant breasts that shone like two white suns in the same sky and this princess had a dark navel that was like an eye into a deep hole of black water. Agnes stared into the womb of this woman, entranced and surprised at how in love she felt with this being and then appearing in front of her were black patches like bits of earth breaking through snow and everything was without sound. A dark figure dressed in black strode across a field, as if in a memory.

The ghost of her future walks through the cemetery near the chapel that has no steeple. She knows this place, the one by the sea. He walks past the gravestones and the dead sculptures as if he is looking for something, or as if he is leaving. The water in the cemetery well rests like a stone; the earth like iron aches under the January moon. And then the cemetery is her bedroom and the floor is covered in soft snow. Her bridegroom appears through the window and tiptoes across the floorboards carrying a tray with sugarplums and brandy, almonds and tea, saffron buns, and salted meats. He creaks closer into the room toward Agnes's white face and her frozen blue eyes. She cannot move, she can only watch. She is transfixed and feels her own stomach shrinking inside of her the way a fallen wet flower petal curls into itself.

He makes her shiver in this temporary death. He feeds her and holds her. He strokes her hair and kisses her hands. His hair is long and begins to grow, its ends connecting to the ends of her hair until their mutual hair falls down across them and onto the floor like wool on a loom. He brings her back to life and she can feel her heart gulping its blood slowly. In this bliss, he makes promises and promises that she cannot understand. He pours black-red roses over her body. They turn to paper. They turn to shadows.

Agnes looks closer and closer at him. He wears a red beard and a robe of black-watch tartan; he wears boots and bear fur. And then he changes and he



wears a robe of scarlet velvet, or he wears all black. He wears all white and shimmers as if painted in gold. He smells of horses and tobacco; he smells of mud and cold; of whiskey and sweat; and now of winter flowers bathed in sun. He is a shadow; he is a light, he is large, and now he slips into the princess of this room. And he changes again and again and now he slips into the princess of this January night who leans down and kisses Agnes's golden lips and gives to her the taste of figs and pomegranates and fruits of paradise. The flavors fill her and she convulses in sudden and terrible pleasure. She hears a voice inside her head after image crawls across her eyes: shiny fish scales worn as a sleeve, a bare tree made of black stone, the veins in a man's neck pulsing under sweating skin. *Who are you? ask her fingers and toes, which reach and reach on tingling forever.*

*Is it He or is it She who hath clad me with precious stones and with jewels of gold? I will have no other spouse but Him. I will seek no other. To Him I have committed my heart; when I love Him, then am I chaste, and when I touch Him who is also Her, then am I pure and clean, and when I take Her, then am I taken only by Her. This is the love of my God. A princess inside of a prince.*

### Linnea in Furs

Her mouth opens as commanded but the mind, the high white forehead, looks at the wet puddles in the snow. The mouth. Her mind. White hands. White ears. Eyebrows high-painted: two fingers crooked and pointing. Cold teeth. White sky. Cars splash past. This is the field near the cemetery. Surrounded by stonewalls. Surrounded by stones. Coat closes, double-breasted with secret snaps. Held close by arms. The tree and the coat and the fur and the arms and the woman. Her belly, warm and breathing. Her feet, small and child-like, inside stockings inside the leather shoes, the souls wetting, becoming wet.





### Agnes in Furs

To keep warm. To hide. For protection and adornment. The black fur absorbs and reflects the winter sun. The morning sun. Casting a brown-gray shadow. Shimmering. You squint. The tree emerges, branching from your head. You hold your wrist. You keep warm. It is Sunday morning. You hide. You hide yourself in animal skin. You are photographed. An animal. Soft, yet stiff. Touchable. You attract the light. You attract the shadow. You attract the flash, the wind, like a string pulling things toward its center. You hold your wrist, like a snare, like a trap.



The baby is cold. The baby must hold still. He is crying. He is laughing. He is teething. He is gnashing.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sacrificial lamb. Agnus Dei. The lion-like lamb. Saint Agnes of chastity, of gardeners, of girls, of couples, of rape victims, of virgins.

Cover me in black lambs wool. Cover me in black. Cover my hands in leather so they will not burn when I reach into the fire.

A naked St. Agnes was dragged through the streets to a brothel. As she prayed during her escape her hair grew and covered her body. She was spared.

Martha

Grayed

January

1

Snow fall gone, ne the door

young, r again, m before n

I close a

2

Cloud on gray

on snow on unl

only a with th of gold