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## Myth Protagonist X

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Myth Protagonist X

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing  
Poetry

by

Jennifer Hanks

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## **I Will Not Flee My Own Secrets: A Preface**

As my girlfriend and I made our way through the Atchafalaya in the mid-dark, my furniture rattling in the back of the U-Haul, the radio preacher reminded us that in the end-days our intestines will be ripped from our bodies by righteous crows. The radio programming in rural Louisiana included: pay-for-prayers call-in shows raising \$25,000 in less than an hour, a Catholic Station intoning the rosary like 60s mind control, and Christian rock sung by wheezing tenors. Even the most cheerful Christian DJs were selling doomsday scenarios, and the sheer scope of this attempted inculcation had me rapt.

When I chose William Blake as my mentor poet in Carolyn Hembree's workshop, I was writing a series of poems addressing the doomsday scenarios I'd absorbed from these radio sermons almost a year prior. Revisiting Blake's mythos, which I had first encountered as an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence, occurred to me as a way to "seed" my own epic vision. After all, Blake's "Milton" and "The Four Zoas" made me first consider the potential of the epic. It was Blake who brought me to *Paradise Lost*, to Dante's *Inferno*. Later, it was Blake, that deft melder of verse and prose, who helped me find kinships with hybrid writers like Anne Carson and Joyelle McSweeney.

Unfortunately, Blake situates his epics within inherently misogynist parameters. His female characters embody the pernicious Natural World, a world that seeks to rob men of their superior spiritual vision. These characters, the dangerous ambassadors of "female will," attempt to lure men back into the womb and stifle their communion with the divine. In a detailed explanation for his illustration "A Vision of the Last Judgment," Blake writes: "In Eternity Woman is the Emanation of Man she has no Will of her own There is no such thing in Eternity

as Female Will.” Therefore, Blake’s male protagonists can resist the influence of “female will” only by literally absorbing these women to neutralize their energy. Although Blake sees this as a joyful marriage, the absorbed women become vestigial to the male protagonists; free of the earthly conflicts the women represent, these men receive the divine vision Blake sees as their birthright. While Blake’s poetry continues to inspire me, I won’t forget that in his straight, male-centric utopia, I—a queer poet—would cease to exist.

“Lead me to my grave plot and I will listen to my voice speak back at me as if loosed from a conch broken at its shell-spine—I will not flee my own secrets,” I wrote in a letter to Blake as part of the aforementioned mentor project. The quote refers to Blake’s poem “The Book of Thel,” where Thel, a young girl from the “vales of Har,” leaves her home to search for the land of experience. While traveling through this sinister land, she encounters her own grave plot. As she peers into the open grave, she hears a disembodied voice speaking so frankly of unfettered desire that she runs screaming back to Har.

I can identify with Thel’s unwillingness to face her desires head-on. For years, I obscured my queerness in my writing. Like Elizabeth Bishop, I wanted to be regarded as a Poet, period—not as a female poet or, even more niche, a queer one. After coming out as a lesbian at twenty-four, what I initially took as Bishop’s commitment to her art I began to regard with disappointment. Reading Eileen Myles’ *Inferno* for the first time, I was struck by her willingness to straightforwardly interrogate her queer desire. I remember sitting in an oversized armchair in an Austin coffee shop reading Myles’s description of sleeping with a woman for the first time and realizing: I can write this moment. I can write “she showed me how girls slept together” and embody it in a way I never could when writing about my hypothetical crushes on men (Myles 231). Like Myles, I could imagine myself writing for a queer audience first and foremost.

In her recent memoir *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson refers to Sara Ahmed's observation that, "the moment of queer pride is a refusal to be shamed by witnessing the other as being ashamed by you" (Nelson 18). This refusal to be shamed has become essential to my poetics, especially as I've navigated a second coming out as a person situated outside of the female / male binary. The word "genderqueer" fits me well, but I have found it anything but comfortable to erase the woman others once assumed me to be. It is harder still to come out without shame, without the sense that I am abandoning my community of women writers, the very writers who have provided me safe haven. As Nelson writes, "Some people find pleasure in aligning themselves with an identity...but there can also be a horror in doing so, not to mention an impossibility" (15). I came out to my friends and partner less than two months ago, scarcely time to move past the "horror" or discomfort of declaring myself "neither." However, I now recognize this tendency toward gender ambiguity in many poems in *Myth Protagonist X*, specifically in Part II pieces such as "Ghost Skin" (where the speaker contends with the difficulty of inhabiting both "girl" and "gentleman") and the sexually charged "Tell Me It Happens" (where the speaker refers to herself as a "stud").

Although crafting stand-alone poems like "Tell Me It Happens" has been crucial to my development of a personal lyric "I," my commitment to creating spaces where queerness is a given, not an aberration, has steered me toward writing series. Like several of the contemporary poets I admire most—Traci Brimhall, Anne Carson, Feng Sun Chen—I see lyric series as vehicles not only for telling emotionally complex stories, but for building worlds. A collection like Feng Sun Chen's *The 8<sup>th</sup> House* appeals to me in part because its mythos—grounded in the sex, death, upheaval, and transformation associated with the astrology's Scorpio-ruled House of Sex—connects to a tradition larger than the book itself.

The poems in *Wren Speaks*, Part I of this collection, reflect my interest in the contemporary queer epic. Primarily told through the voice of Wren, a gay teenage boy with an absentee mother and indeterminate number of dogs, these pieces chart the beginning of a warped biblical apocalypse in the American South. As Blake's complicated relationship with Christianity provided raw material for his epic poems, I cannot escape twelve years of Catholic education and a personal identification with the Virgin Mary that stems from childhood. Consequently, Catholic imagery features prominently in this sequence. However, as Catholics do not believe in a literal "end of days," I also draw from the Southern Baptist tradition which, as evidenced by the "feast of birds" radio broadcast, takes the second coming quite seriously. This marriage both represents the two religious "pillars" of my own extended family and an effort on my part to confront two strands of Christianity particularly hostile to queer identity—as that hostility fueled the shame I felt about my own sexual orientation as a teenager.

Crafting poems from Wren's perspective continues to excite me because, as a seventeen-year-old, he is so furiously in the moment. In addition, writing in male persona has allowed me to mine my own gender murkiness, a process at once comfortable and terrifying. By far, the trickiest part of getting in Wren's head has been figuring out *how* he should speak. I could not complete the poem "Nothing The Boys Can See" without accepting that Wren would say "suck my cock" and "Follow me, boys" instead of the demure poet phrases I had initially written for him. I did not possess Wren's sexual awareness as a teenager. He does not grapple with his sexuality or express shame about his relationships with other men. Instead, I present his sexuality matter-of-factly, in a way I hope resonates with queer readers who cannot be so forthright in their own lives.

As Blake's vision of the biblical epic inspires *Wren Speaks*, Part III capitalizes on the elasticity of commonly known fairytales. The *gar child* poems, influenced by Anne Sexton's masterful *Transformations* and the fabulist stories of Aimee Bender, stitch together a grab bag of fairytales tropes. The title character is a mermaid trapped much like Rapunzel by a witch who is equal parts Hansel-fattener and Baba Yaga. Even the characters' names serve as shorthand: "gar child," "the Witch," and "Jill" of nursery rhyme fame.

In *Transformations*, Anne Sexton's retellings of fairytales from the Brothers Grimm emphasize the bitterness of female characters who lose their youth and beauty. For example, in Sexton's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," the aging Queen must pit herself against the "unsoiled" Snow White to maintain her status (Sexton 225). Similarly, in Hans Christian Anderson fairytales such as "The Little Mermaid" and "Cinderella," the heroines must assimilate (conform to traditional standards of beauty and conduct) to win their handsome princes. The Little Mermaid, human from the waist up, begs the sea witch to cut off her "ugly" tail and replace it with legs. Cinderella need only brush the soot off her face and acquire a snow-white robe with a diamond hem. Unlike these women, *gar child*, a girl with the unsightly scales and sharp teeth of a spotted gar, could never pass as "normal."

The *gar child* poems are heavily inspired by Joyelle McSweeney's story "The Warm Mouth," a retelling of the Brothers Grimm fairytale "The Bremen Town Musicians." Formatted like a stage play, in McSweeney's version a giant translucent mouth creates a makeshift family out of roadkill, a murdered girl, and other dead individuals she encounters by allowing them to seek shelter inside her "warm mouth." A chorus / verse structure propels this bizarre narrative, and the characters occasionally break into rhyming verse: "Sink hole / Whack a mole / Bitch and moan / All roll home."

Like “The Warm Mouth,” I consider the *gar child* poems to be unified by language, a poetic vernacular, as much as by persona or motif. I wrote these poems with my grandmother’s highly alliterative, southeast Texas phrasing in mind as well as her tendency to use my full name when she referred to me. The sequence’s opener, “gar child was born,” primes the reader for this alliteration with phrases like “spotted and small,” “thrice-chewed taffy,” and “sawtooth scales.” However, “The Warm Mouth” resolves into a surprisingly uplifting story of queer kinship. In contrast, the *gar child* poems investigate the types of trauma that prevent queer women from finding love and acceptance. The *gar child* poems linger on wounds that refuse to heal.

In “Bloodhound (Jill Tells It),” the sequence’s closing poem, Jill differentiates between the life she deserves to live—the one that belongs to her—and the story she’s been ensnared in by gar child. “You don’t know what it is to have a story / wrapped around you so tight,” Jill says, while “you smell your own life green like a field / that’s bleaching every day.” Although the poem doesn’t tell us whether Jill escapes, the piece hinges on her ability to separate her own desires from an imposed narrative, her determination to self-define.

In “Oracle,” the collection’s final poem, the speaker also resists the mantle thrust upon her because she knows it will only lead, as is the case for Blake’s female deities, to absorption or submission to the “corset of scales” her lover imagines encasing her ribs. This collection, shaped by the sprawling mythos of William Blake and the forthrightness of queer memorists like Maggie Nelson, presents characters who resist definition even as their worlds attempt to close tightly around them. I hope *Myth Protagonist X* emphasizes that I am a poet with the potential to forge my own mythologies as well as excavate the particulars of queer desire. Comfortable with ambiguity, resisting easy classification, I will not flee my own secrets.

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*for Jeanne*

## **I. Wren Speaks**

## The First Voice Wren Hears

So I trip often. My jeans are long. Walking to the library, I skin my palms and there's a voice, not in my head like it's supposed to be, but vibrating right in front of my face. *Wren, I know you*, the voice says, *I know you*. I smell the sea, like a fillet gone bad, but there's no breeze and I walk until the traffic becomes loud, where the street birds are eating garbage and one's missing a foot, dragging its stump leg toward a KFC bin. Upset, I'm always upset, only this time there's a voice ahead, behind, a diamond refracting—*Wren*.

## Nothing The Boys Can See

At home the TV glows like a hothouse lamp  
In high school halls: *pull down my hood*  
*there's nothing to see*

Yellow eyes appear on my bedroom walls  
coarse hairs on the pillow not my own  
*pull on my jeans there's nothing to see*

The boys I need smell like waffle cones  
& this one says *take me home*  
*Follow me, boy* He is stale but sweet

With the ones I like I'm a pack of dogs  
four heads snarling against their stomachs

I'll write his paper and he'll suck my cock  
*pull off my jeans* He'll kiss my neck  
then I'll dream of wolf *nothing he can see*

How she'll lick my palms with her sunspot tongue  
And I'll never I'll never burn

## **Wren's Dream**

*I stick my whole head inside my wolf's mouth She waits for me to take it out Dried spit and the milky way above us I fall asleep cradled in her jaws I sleep in our dream I sleep in our dream clutching fur*

## What Home Was

Let's say my mother went out  
in a slime-colored raincoat at eleven p.m.

Let's say I heard her leave over the video game  
where I'm 007, rapid firing at the TV screen.

Let's say the store lights called to her  
the beasts in the meat packages like new children.

Let's say she thought she could start over  
a nursery      cows growing back their limbs.

*Hide it she thought Under your rain slicker*

Let's say she didn't come home  
for three days.

Dry cereal and weed for breakfast,  
my dogs snacking on sugary crumbs.

I'd walk to the beach then sink  
into the dirty sand.

The waves would kick up fish  
The waves would kick up fish

I'd find them still breathing  
half-dried their gills red as grapefruit

cut in half so you could pour  
sugar on top.

*Where were you?* I ask her.

She hands me an empty milk carton  
    smells like meat spoiling,  
    like she's coated her clothes with  
    worms of ground beef.

*Look she says unzipping the rain slicker What our home can be*

## **Second Life (Wren Dreams of an Undead Horse)**

As the horse runs her layers fall to her sides: muscles needle-shine on the asphalt. I jump on when she's only a jigsaw of bones—her star-stitched mane hits my face, sucking breath out of my mouth.

//

In dream two I make her a whole horse again. I peel the varnish from her ribs, watch as tendons connect to her dusty skeleton, her hide stretching dappled over her frame. She stands, kicks the tar until she's sticky with herself. One green breath out of her nostrils and she's gone—tar pool on the ground, white scar against trampled bluebonnets left of a sky.

## Sacred Heart Wren

The first time Mary appears she drips cold water onto my floor; she's soaked from the waist down but pulls an ice cube from her pocket.

She hands it to me, it's warm in my palm—a tiny flame coursing through the center only we can see.

(A boy once put an ice cube in his mouth then held it to my neck. He called me *Sacred Heart Wren* when I dripped wax from a prayer candle onto his stomach.)

Her chest glows through her shirt and her black hair glows too; fireflies crawl down her face as she lifts her chin to speak.

At her first word my dogs fall down on their forest paws, the pads crusted with Cheetos.

My mouth crusted with Cheetos—hickeys under my shirt, hickeys hugging my ribs; beach maps and soft porn, those selfies where I'm curled up like a dragon egg, all the photo paper crumpled together on the bed edges.

She drips a circle around herself; she does not leave it; the floorboards shine with wet.

She takes a brass pendant from the neck of her army fatigues, passes it from palm to palm.

*That sacred heart of yours belongs to me.*

Blood drips from my temples, the secret hickeys. My shirt fills while the dogs pant solemn at her feet.

I run the ice cube over my wounds like it might stop the blood or burn the skin beneath it clean.

## **What the Animals Become**

All day the twitterbot condenses my thoughts to the finest point—the needle our message can pass through. Skull bright & dissolving at will. Mary, you have turned my brain to confectioner's fog.

The dogs whine, their pupils molten, their tongues hang out the sides of their mouths like cuts of meat.

I order vials of holy water off ebay and pour it into their bowls; my brain is a sugar hive; your voice echoes.

My mother molds, sinking further into the couch under layers of paper towels. Sucks macaroni powder from her knuckles. Dozens of coffee cups, filled with holy water and topped with milk, form a barrier around her feet.

The dogs stop eating. They drink only the water but their fur shines like stag beetles.

My brain is a sack of spilled sugar; blow me in their eyes. The dogs are scared or they are something else.

They whine, spit their molars all over the carpet. Blood colors their water bowls. Puppies again, they gnash their swollen gums.

Mary, where are you as they pace in their loose skins? I run my hand along their spines, pull it away before it sinks into their fur.

## Small Enough

Mary made me take five toothbrushes and pack the dogs, their bones in a trunk, in a suitcase on wheels.

She did not make me pack the dogs—she told me no one else could see them. If I put my hands on their spines, I would fade from view: a bee digging into pollen.

I left my mother. She had almost taken root in the couch, but she fought me when I cleaned out the freezer. She picked up the dog skins, draping them over the couch.

She smeared the blood on her face like makeup; she made blood vines on her arms, drawing intricate leaves. She didn't fight.

She smeared the blood on her face like makeup. *My mother molds.* I could not leave her. I poured holy water down her shoulders and she shrank small enough to fit in the trunk. She sloshed around in there like a sea monkey.

I called the high school and withdrew. I didn't call the school. I fucked a friend instead— in his parents' poolhouse, kneading his shoulders. Ash filled my eyes; they went silver like a gum wrapper, they went dark like an oily sea.

I bit his shoulder hard. I left my mother, shrunken on our living room couch. She put her whole face in a mug of coffee. She smiled up at me with her miniature features. She died and I saw her soul rising, pink and gold, crackling like a bottled electrical storm.

**Prophet Fever**  
(for two voices)

I rocked to sleep after drinking a 40

Go fill the world you told me  
with news of its own end

I spray-painted the bridge near my house

THE REIGN OF MERCY ENDS

I drew you Mary as I remember you

scratched your outline in black paint  
high as I could reach

I should have licked your heels

Don't worry Mary I'll make them

after pressing the bottle to your cheek

Nightglow in your mind amen

Sing it to your bones Wren  
HEED NOT THE APOLOGISTS

crushing the trash photos at your feet

larvae glowed in my wet hair

You should have

*I'll guard you as my property, my possession*

Soon we'll be everywhere

## Doomsday Circuit Tour (Sermon 1)

We're in Georgia. We're in Tennessee. My heart is lonely but my face looks willing.

I'm in a church, I'm in a greasy spoon.

My voice louder than it ought to be,  
hatching out of my throat like a bird being born.

Cue the dogs walking through open doors, eyes constellation white / heels crushing a fry.

Mary says through my mouth:

*Listen, sinners, there are some things  
you need to know.*

The dogs sit down at my feet, every motion the creak of cellar stairs in the night.

I'm in front of the altar, I'm standing on the counter.

I might as well put my hand in a deep fryer,

thus we say:

*Watch the dogs step out of their split hides*

*letting in gloaming  
eyes dried up like extinct ferns*

*curled in on themselves  
bones white as paper fortune tellers*

*bones still pink with blood  
all night they dream in plural flames*

*the masks beneath human skin*

*Cuddle me sinners*

*Take me into your flabby arms*

*The diner chrome's polished*

*See yourself in every slippery surface*

*I feed you nightshades*

*wait for you to itch*

*is that blood you taste*

*at the edge of your fry*

*you splatter on diner walls / the booths*

*where your children hide*

*beneath the tables*

## Doomsday Circuit Tour (Sermon 2)

We're in a leather bar

where the men slip their arms around my waist.

I slough them off      ride the train of bubbles

coming up my esophagus.

I'm spitting sea

calling a leviathan butchered, salted   long wrapped up tight   beneath the organ pedals.

He's pulling himself together.

*You hear me, boys.*

Mary's nowhere to be found   nowhere and everyone.

*Turn your face to mine      pale as a conch*

*I can be the last thing you see*

## The Salted Serpent Speaks

What you call a sculpture is my spine,  
my vertebrae bored for candlesticks,  
filed into the handles of kitchen knives.

I am long dead, my hundreds of ribs  
coated with honey,  
packed in chests between layers  
of sheep skin.

Meat buried unwrapped  
so far beneath the earth,  
piecemeal so I couldn't  
find my way back together.

Yet.

Mary holds my head  
in her girlfriend's room.  
The light whipping against  
my beautiful eyeholes.

Fish once lost their minds swimming  
in front of these eyes,  
but Mary puts her hands  
inside my skull, asks how I became  
the size of a common lizard.

Mary scrapes the salt off my preserved flesh.

I am buried underground in two hundred pieces  
inching their way toward common dirt.

Mary scrapes the salt  
off my preserved flesh—

every piece of me can feel it.

## Detour with B

The bar lights eat us *Follow me*

*No me*

Shaving welts on his neck Good cologne All the men at the bar turn to stare at me

All the men turn to stare at me because  
I'm so shiny now

Sex swing in the corner of the room

B straps me in  
licks my stomach as its false moon flares in his eye

*What's real anymore?*

I ask but he's already turned me around

\*\*\*

I wake up before I want to, carry back egg & cheese on rolls from the deli. It's complicated getting in B's door. I can't shake the feeling he's not there, that he's been raptured, sitting at a bar where wine pours from marble fountains, rose-gold tips on everyone's pointy shoes—they're tapping to some music too fine for me to hear. B's not singing, of course not, but he has a whip across his lap and his lipstick is smashed berry, silver, like a mood ring reflecting someone who thinks in the cool tones of post-survival. But when I walk in he's asleep, greasy like me, the summer cooking him even with the air-conditioning on. *He's post-survival*, I think, it's what gets me back out the door, hood pulled over my face, arms covered as if I'll flake like a burnt skillet.

## Myth Protagonist X

I carry my suitcase up the steps to the Q train. Egg dried on my shirt, coffee sugar under my nails. I'm standing too close to the white line and a woman touches my shoulder to motion me back.

I can feel the molecules leaving my hands. I can feel myself feathering out.

*This case is weightless*, I mouth back to her while the dogs shift in their vinyl darkness.

*This case is weightless*, I mouth as we board the train—myth protagonist x, my head a sizzling star, slipping through the automatic doors.

**II.**

## Ghost Skin (excerpts)

1.

The ghosts bear wood chips and plants, dangling roots. They smell like hops cooking down in wort. They smell like pumpkin guts. *Go find her*, I whisper, *the one who is hurting worse. Go find her*. But the ghosts stay with me, pulling the ragged quilt over our knees. We play checkers, but they don't let me win. We play chess and they neigh like wild horses when I capture their knights. They turn soft all over, knowing I am sharp as a hummingbird beak. I try to pierce them with my fingers, but they give.

2.

The ghosts drape themselves across my shoulders like fur collars. When I fight, the ghosts are impressed: by the noise, by the steam my breath makes in the cold loft. When I fight, they're striped finches hiding eggs in my clothes. I am no good at fights; the ghosts can see this. When I sulk, they join me in the bathtub as freshwater eels, catching bubbles with their teeth. They hold me like a tailored suit when my body wants to be invisible.

3.

Once I dated a man who loved my chivalry. How I'd fade into the lights, something solid in the background. Isn't that what a gentleman does: fade almost out of sight. Love the animals of the world without teeth. Isn't that what a gentleman does: kiss your man when he tastes like veal. Wear dresses that trap shadows on your breasts. Freeze in gauze tights, feel goosebumps rise on your legs. Isn't that what a gentleman is: a collection of tightly packed snow. Beer frosting your throat.

Try on a men's button-down and admire yourself in the full-length mirror.

*God, the ghosts say, you almost look like you exist.*

## **Tell Me It Happens**

You can push my knees down into the mud,  
    put your fingers around my neck so tight  
but I'd much prefer to be the stud.

I'll bite the sides of your breasts until you come.  
    Wrists in restraints, your lips stained with wine.  
You can push my knees down into the mud.

Put your fingers around my neck so tight,  
    position me on the bed like a chalk outline.  
(But I'd much prefer to be the stud).

Wrists in restraints, your lips turn white.  
    I taste pine needles on your thighs.  
Should've pushed my knees down into the mud.

I taste your outline, needle your thighs.  
    If I tighten the clamps on your breasts  
will you hold my hand and call me stud?

I know what you need so tell me it happens:  
    locked limbs, pulled hair in pit of dirt.  
If we're both down on our knees in the mud,  
    sewn together then who's the stud?

## When I Don't Write About Your Body

is it because I just want it for *mine* the way you look when you climb out of the bath water drops on your razor-burned breasts. *Mine* you never take your earrings out, the holes are getting long your ears weighed down by models of the planets. *Mine* the wart on your index finger I feel when you stick your hand inside me. *Mine* the grass digging into the backs of our knees near the Hudson River the confessions *I am soldered from secret materials*. *Mine* not your body drawn and quartered a map red as the blood running through our eyelids. *Mine* you on stage in a karaoke bar singing *run for the shadows*. *Mine* the songs that become ours, the range of your voice.

## **I tell Jeanne**

*We found wild mushrooms  
and left their caps on white paper  
to see what impression the spores made.*

*When we fell asleep outside,  
waiting for the sunrise,  
my head on your shoulder,  
you woke up running your fingers  
along my jaw,  
whispering death cap, death cap.*

### **III. gar child**

## **gar child was born**

spotted and small / translucent with lips like thrice-chewed taffy // who knows how the skeleton  
made its concessions / so she was barely fish / only her legs covered with sawtooth scales / only  
her ankles blessed with fins // gar child was held / at arm's length / curdled / in her attic cradle //  
who hears / who hears like a witch / in the unstitched night

## **The Witch Sets a Trap**

The birds must have taken your bread away  
and you are all mouth / your knees open wounds,  
your cheeks imprinted with thistles.

The birds must have taken your bread away  
and lips crack open your elbows,  
all your sockets / coming undone.

The birds must have taken your bread away  
and hunger cuts you like scales / your mouth  
pools water & tar.

It's lonely in the forest. It's lonely in your rum-shined stomach. I'm coming for you, gar child, to  
pull out those extra teeth. Those bird heads like puppets on my thumbs.

Your chunks of bread safe  
underneath my split lips / the hole in my breast  
filled with gunpowder.

Your chunks of bread safe  
to stash in the waist of your tights / between those  
multiplying fins.

Your chunks of bread safe  
in my powdered hands.  
Stick out your chin / go ahead,

pull the locket off my neck. You've pouted in this lonely forest, but I'll feed your steel-trap  
mouth.

Don't cower, gar child, from all this plenty.

## **The Witch Provides a Past and Future**

Once gar child asked her mother for the oral history but got no answers, just hands burned on the stove top. Jeers from her sisters in their (so-nice) dresses.

Once gar child touched the gill slits that formed, almost, but they were useless flaps of skin. Like she'd tried to cut her throat with a pine branch (and she did).

gar child ran one night, red-wing crows lifting food from her open knapsack. Now she calls to me and I'm bubbling, my kettle spilling onto the earth-packed floor.

gar child taps on the counter as I kill a bird, pull its organs (shine) from its skin and read her fortune.

## **The Witch Gathers Materials**

gar child sleeps in the attic, the light buttering her fish form. When she blows out the candles at night, gar child makes a fish shadow, spine curved like a gator's.

gar child sweats a layer of marsh salt into her sheets. I sweep it from her blackened feet, save the web of fin she's cut from her ankles.

gar child leaves blood clots in her shoes but I shake them out in the river. Soon I'll pierce her ears with the jaw of a frog.

gar child seems afraid to sink into the tub, afraid the water will open her gills. I'm afraid, maybe, it won't.

## The Witch Witnesses gar child's Growing Pains

gar child with my bread box

Crust falling off her lip and I've  
got a paste made of marsh sweat

her smashed cells. She's onto the rye            the pumpernickel  
disappearing into her girlfish mouth.

gar child turns inward

like she's her own wardrobe            her own shelf of precious twigs.

She's breaking herself in her half-sleep  
a moon remembering its phases.

Unzip yourself gar child

while cherry juice dribbles  
from your wheat-wet mouth.

Suffer in transformation            then possess your new bones.

### **So Many Mouths (gar child tells it)**

1.

I am let out, lock & key on the witch's neck.

2.

I gather bread from the trails girls have made in the forest. Twice I've found these girls dead, their stomachs opened by bears.

3.

The baker's son stuck his hand up me once, grateful not to find teeth. That's the story we're supposed to tell, but we just napped under the trees and I thought about him licking icing off the butcher's daughter.

As it got darker, I put myself in his place—red velvet in my own mouth.

4.

When I find Jill her hair is spider web dew. Her eyes are coal mid-burn. Her mouth is all the good things.

5.

So many mouths.

6.

So alone.

7.

The witch says I will grow up. Safe. Mother far away, sisters who spill pots of boiling water onto their husbands' outstretched arms when they think of my face.

8.

I feel the pulse point on Jill's neck. I put my face in the dirt like I am making a mask.

9.

I carry Jill into the tower then soak her foot in the stained barrel. I set her broken leg.

10.

She stares up at me, batting her stumpy lashes. I bring her a jar of tadpoles; the glass distorts them—as if they're growing before our eyes.

## Fairytale Protagonist X

I ate the bread ~~the room grew before my eyes~~  
I ate the bread ~~pricked my finger on the wheel~~  
I ate the bread ~~the trees harbored~~  
I ate the bread ~~my mouths harbored~~  
I ate the bread ~~before my eyes~~  
I ate the bread ~~birds~~  
I ate the bread ~~fell from my mouth~~  
I ate ~~the bread~~

## **Bloodhound (Jill Tells It)**

I went looking for my life  
in the woods like a bloodhound  
you don't know what is to have a story  
wrapped around you so tight

a ribbon cutting into  
your waist mine's on my wrist  
right where the veins meet

you're a doll sopping in the river  
but the story's a pewter bracelet  
you can't slip off your wrist

like a bloodhound  
you smell your own life green like a field  
that's bleaching every day

## IV.

## Oracle

Somehow each wolf skull on your desk  
    smells like licorice when  
it's in my hands. I am trying  
    to be patient, but Canidae  
is the family of your heart,  
    Canid, the object of your envy:  
you want jowls and inches  
    of red fur but I am a coil of river weeds.

Make me a pillow of milk snakes  
    then I will lie down. Let  
their tongues flick my ear cavities.  
    I am trying to be patient,  
but you've dipped my fingertips  
    in milk, you've asked me  
to write messages to your god  
    on the canvas of your stomach.

You say you love the silt  
    I am covered in; I am trying  
to be patient but I am  
    no river's mouth. Do not  
make me your oracle. Hand me  
    a bowl of rainwater and I will sip it  
but no eggs will spill  
    from my lips. I am no mother  
of wishing fish.

I've tried sex silent, your hands  
    clawing my back,  
your mind in permafrost,  
    my tongue a stone.  
I am trying to be patient  
    but what saint  
would regrind your bones?  
    What potion of mine  
would give you sharper teeth?

You imagine for me  
    a corset of scales,  
mistake the scar on my back  
    for a sliver of fin.

## Vita

Jennifer Hanks is the author of *Prophet Fever* (Hyacinth Girl Press). They were a finalist for Heavy Feather Review's Double Take Poetry Prize, judged by Dorothea Lasky, and are a 2016 Lambda Emerging Writers Fellow. Their poetry and nonfiction have appeared in journals such as *Arcadia*, *Bone Bouquet*, and *[PANK]*, and they have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. They have two additional chapbooks, *gar child* (Tree Light Books) and *Ghost Skin* (Porkbelly Press), forthcoming in 2016. An associate editor for Sundress Publications, they live in New Orleans with their fiancée, two difficult cats, and a collection of sea ephemera.