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2021 Vassar Miller Poetry Award, Honorable Mention

When she grows up
by Caitlin B. Miller

She wanted to be Cinderella. She said it proud,
small voice reverberating the chapel
at preschool graduation. Her parents
took up the corner pew, sun cast white from windows
over smile-anchored faces, cast white anchored-
memories overexposed in bright laughter.
But she didn't know that to become a princess
she first must know suffering—

a lifetime's worth:
time takes advantage
of its own ebb, snatches
memories and loved ones.

In the brothers Grimm version of the tale,
Cinderella asked to attend the prince's festival;
her stepmom answered:
I have scattered a bowl of lentils into the ashes.
If you can pick them out in two hours, then you may go.
Of course, she picked them out.
But even so, she couldn't go,
for like time, her stepmom was cruel.

Instead, Cinderella, as she did three times per day,
went to her mom's grave and prayed beneath the tree:
shake and quiver, little tree,
throw gold and silver down to me—
she was given a gold and silver dress the first night,
and a more splendid one the second.

Of course, Cinderella fled the festival,
fled unknown promises of happily ever after.
Had the prince not pursued, her greedy step-siblings
wouldn't have shaved off their heels,
never snipped off their toes; they
wouldn't have had their eyes gouged out
in the chapel on Cinderella's wedding day.

The preschool graduate grew up,
learned Cinderella's tale bore more red than white,
that Walt Disney offered empty promises of happily ever after,
and the brothers Grimm had it right.

But it was not a rich man's wife who died like the brothers told;
it was the rich man himself who consumed
greed in barley-gold.

She grew up
from her dad's ashes,
offer it to heathen gods
of her step-siblings—

to pick bone
to collect bone in bowls,
to cut off the heels and toes

may they fill her shoes
with their blood.

Of course, her prayer was unheard.