

On the third day the ardent hermit
Was sitting by the shore, in love,
Awaiting the enticing mermaid,
As shade was lying on the grove.
Dark ceded to the sun's emergence;
By then the monk had disappeared,
No one knew where, and only urchins,
While swimming, saw a hoary beard.

--Aleksandr Pushkin
Rusalka, 1819

I: Snail Into Shell

Rybka, you have to wake up.

At night she always called me rybka. At night, when she shook me awake in my thin bed and the dirt-smearred window was a sieve for the light of the bone-picked stars, she whispered and stroked my temples and said: rybka, rybka, wake up, you have to wake up. I would rub my eyes and with heavy limbs hunch to the edge of the greyed mattress, hang my head over the side. She would be waiting with a big copper kettle, a porcelain basin, the best and most beautiful of the few things we owned. She would be waiting, and while I looked up at the stars through a scrim of window-mud and window-ice, she would wet my hair.

She was my mother, she was kind, the water was always warm. The kettle poured its steaming stream over my scalp, that old water like sleep spreading over my long black hair. Her hands were so sure, and she wet every strand—she did not wash it, understand, only pulled and combed the slightly yellow water from our creaking faucet through my tangles.

Rybka, I'm sorry, poor darling. I'm so sorry. Go back to sleep. And she would coil my slippery hair on the pillow like loose rope on the deck of a ship, and she would sing to me until I was asleep again, and her voice was like stones falling into a deep lake:

Bayu,
bayushki bayu
Ne lozhisya na krayu
Pridet serenkiy volchok
Y ukusit za bochek

In the morning, she called me always by my name, Kseniya, and her eyes would be worry-wrinkled—and her hair would be wet, too. While she scraped a pale, translucent sliver of precious butter over rough, hard-crusted bread, I would draw a bath, filling the high-sided tub to its bright brim. We ate our breakfast slick-haired in the nearly warm water, curled into each other's bodies, snail into shell, while the bath sloshed over onto the kitchen floor, which was also the living room floor and the bathroom floor and my mother's bedroom floor—she gave me the little closet which served as a second room.

In the evening, if we had meat, she would fry it slowly and we would savor the smell together, to make the meal last. If we did not, she would tell me a story about a princess who had a bowl which was never empty of sweet, roasted chickens while I slurped a thin soup of cabbage and pulpy pumpkin and saved bathwater. Sometimes, when my mother spoke low and gentle over the green soup, it tasted like birds with browned, sizzling skin. All day, she sponged my head, the trickle ticklish as sweat. The back of my dress clung slimy to my

skin.

Before bed, she would pass my head under the faucet, the cold water splashing on my scalp like a slap. And then the waking, always the waking, and hour or two past midnight.

Rybka, I'm sorry, you have to wake up.

My childhood was a world of wetness, and I loved the smell of my mother's ever-dripping hair.

One night, she did not come to wet my hair. I woke up myself, my body wound like a clock by years of kettles and basins. The stars were salt-crystals floating in the window's mire. I crept out of my room and across the freezing floor like the surface of a winter lake. My mother lay in her bed, her back turned to the night.

Her hair was dry.

It was yellowy-brown, the color of old nut-husks—I was shocked. I had never seen it un-darkened by water. I touched it and she did not move. I turned her face to me and it did not move against my hand, or murmur to me to go back to sleep, or call me rybka—water dribbled out of her mouth and onto the blankets. Her eyes were dark and shallow.

Mama, you have to wake up.

I soaked up the water with the edge of the bedsheet. I pulled her to me; more water fell from her.

Mamochka, I'm sorry, you have to wake up.

Her head sagged against my arm. I didn't cry, but drew a bath in the dark, feeling the water for a ghost of warmth in the stream. It was hard—I was always so thin and small, then!—but I pulled my mother from her bed and got her into the tub, though the water splashed and my arms ached and she did not move, she did not move as I dragged her across the cold floor, she did not move as I pushed her over the lip of the bath. She floated there, and I pulled the water through her hair until it was black again, but her eyes did not swim up out of themselves. I peeled off my nightgown, soaked with her mouth-water, and climbed in after her, curling into her body as we always did, snail into shell. Her skin was clammy and thick against my cheek.

Ryba, wake up. It's time to wet my hair.

There was no sound but the tinkling ripple of water and the stars dripping through the window-sieve. I closed my mother's eyes and tucked my head up under her chin. I pulled her arms around me like blankets. And I sang to her, while the bath beaded on her skin, slowly blooming blue.

Bayu,
bayushki bayu
Ne lozhisya na krayu
Pridet serenkiy volchok
Y ukusit za bochek

II: The Ardent Hermit

I met Artyom at university, where I combed my hair into a tight braid so that

it would hold its moisture through anatomy lectures, pharmacopeial lectures, stitching and bone-setting demonstrations. At lunch I would wait until all the others had gone, and put my head under the spotless bathroom sink. Pristine, colorless water rushed over my brow like a comforting hand.

There were no details worth recounting: I tutored him in tumors and growths, one of the many ways I kept myself in copper kettles and cabbage soup. This is not important. How do we begin to remember? One day he was not there, the next day his laugh was a constant crow on my shoulder. One day I did not love a man named Artyom, the next day I loved him, and between the two days there is nothing but air.

Artyom ate the same thing every day: smoked fish, black bread, blueberries folded in a pale green handkerchief. He wore the spectacles of a man twice his age, and his hair was yellowy-brown. He had a thin little beard, a large nose and kept his tie very neatly. He once shared his lunch with me: I found the blueberries sour, too soft.

"When I was a girl," I said slowly, "there were no blueberries where we lived, and we would not have been able to buy them if there were. Instead I ate pumpkin, to keep parasites from chewing my belly into a honeycomb after the war. I ate pumpkin until I could not stand the sight of it, the dusty wet smell of it. I think I am too old, now, to love blueberries, and too old to see pumpkins and not think of worms."

Artyom blinked at me. His book lay open to a cross-section of the thyroid, the green wind off of the Neva rifling through the pages and the damp tail of my braid. He took back his blueberries.

When there was snow on the dome of St. Isaac's and the hooves of the Bronze Horseman were shod in ice, he lay beside me on his own thin mattress and clumsily poured out the water of his tin kettle over my hair, catching the runoff in an old iron pot.

"You have to wake me in the night, Artyom. It is important. Do you promise to remember?"

"Of course, Ksyusha, but why? This is silly, and you will get my bed all wet."

I propped myself up on one elbow, the river-waves of my hair tumbling over one bare breast, a trickle winding its way from skin to linen. "If I can trust you to do this thing for me, then I can love you. Is that not reason enough?"

"If you can trust me to do this thing, then you can trust me to know why it must be done. Does that not seem obvious?"

He was so sweet then, with his thin chest and his clean fingernails. His woolen socks and his over-sugared tea. The sharp inward curve of his hip. I told him—why should I not? Steam rose from my scalp and he stroked my calves while I told him about my mother, how she was called Vodzimira, and how when she was young she lived in a little village in the Urals before the war and loved a seminary student with thick eyebrows named Yefrem, how she crushed thirteen yellow oxlips with her body when he laid her down under the larch trees.

Mira, Mira, he said to her then, I will never forget how the light looks on your stomach in this moment, the light through the larch leaves and the birch branches. It looks like water, as though you are a little brook into which I am always falling, always falling.

And my mother put her arms around his neck and whispered his name over and over into the collar of his shirt: Yefrem, Yefrem. She watched a moth land on his black woolen coat and rub its slender brown legs together, and she winced as her body opened for the first time. She watched the moth until the pain went away, and I suppose she thought then that she would be happy enough in a house built of Yefrem and his wool and his shirts, and his larches and his light.

But when she came to his school and put her hands over her belly, when she told him under a gray sky and droning bronze bells that she was already three months along, and would he see about a priest so that her child might have a name, he just smiled thinly and told her that he did not want a house built of Vodzimira and her water and her stomach, that he wanted only a house of God and some few angels with feet of glass, and that she was not to come to his school any longer. He did not want to be suspected of interfering with local girls.

My mother was alone, and her despair walked alongside her like a little black-haired girl with gleaming shoes. She could not tell her father or her own mother, she could not tell her brothers. She could think of no one she could tell who would love her still when the telling was done. So she went into the forest again, into the larches and the birches and the moths and the light, and in a little lake which reflected bare branches, she drowned herself without another word to anyone.

I swallowed and continued hoarsely. "When my mother opened her eyes again, it was very dark, and there were stars in the sky like drops of rain, and she saw them from under the water of the little lake. She was in the lake and the lake was in her and her fingers spread out under the water until there was nothing but the water and her, spanning shore to shore, and she moved in it, in herself, like a little tide. She had me there, under the slow ripples, in the dark, and the silver fish were her midwives."

I twisted the ends of my hair. A little water seeped out onto my knuckles.

Artyom looked at me very seriously. "You're talking about rusalka."

I shrugged, not meeting his gaze. "She didn't expect it. She certainly didn't think her child would go into the lake with her. When I was born, I swam as happily as a little turtle, and breathed the water, and as if by instinct beckoned wandering men with tiny, impish fingers. But she didn't want that for me. She didn't even want it for herself—she pressed her instinct down in her viciously, like a stone crushing a bird's skull. She brought me to the city, and she worked in laundries, her hands deep in soapy water every day, so that I would have something other than a lonely lake and skeletons." I picked at the threads of the mattress, refusing to look up, to see his disbelief. "But we had to stay wet, you know. It is hard in the city, there are so many things to dry you out. Especially at night, with the cold wind blowing across your scalp, through the holes in the walls. And even in the summer, the pillow drinks up your hair."

Artyom looked at me with pale green eyes, the color of lichen in the high mountains, and I broke from his gaze. He scratched his head and laughed a little. I did not laugh.

"My mother died when I was very young, you know. I have thought about it many times, since. And I think that, after awhile, she was just so tired, so tired, and a person, even a rusalka, can only wake herself up so many times before she only wants to sleep, sleep a little while longer, before she is just so

tired that one day she forgets to wake up and her hair dries out and her little girl finds her with brown hair instead of black, and no amount of water will wake her up anymore."

My hands were pale and shaking as dead grass. I tried to pull away from him and draw my knees up to my chest—of course he did not believe me, how could I have thought he might? But Artyom took me in his arms and shushed me and stroked my head and told me to hush, of course he would remember to wake me, his poor love, he would wet my hair if I wanted him to, it was nothing, hush, now.

"Call me rybka, when you wake me," I whispered.

"You are not a rusalka, Kseniya Yefremovna."

"Nevertheless."

The frost was thick as fur on the windows when he kissed me awake in the hour-heavy dark, a steaming basin in his hands.

III: By the Shore, in Love

It took exactly seventeen nights, with Artyom constant with his kettle and basin as a nun at prayer over her pale candles, before I slept easily in his arms, deeper than waves.

On the eighteenth night my breath was quick as a darting mayfly on his cheek, and he reached for me as men will do—he reached for me and I was there, dark, new-soaked hair sticking to my breasts, rivulets of water trickling over my stomach. I smiled in the dark, and his face was so kind above me, kind and soft and needful. He closed his eyes—I could see at their edges gentle creases which would one day be a grandfather's wrinkles. When our lips parted he was shaking, his lip shuddering as though he had just touched a Madonna carved from ice, and I think of all the things I remember about Artyom, it is that little shaking that I recall most clearly, most often.

I was a virgin. Under the shadows of St. Isaac's and a moon-spattered light like blueberries strewn on the grass I moved over him with more valor than I felt—but one of us had to be brave. He guided me, but his motions were so small and afraid, as though, after all this time, he could not quite understand or believe in what was happening. I felt as though I was an old door, stuck into my frame, and some sun-beaten shoulder jarring me open, smashing against the dusty wood. It hurt, the widening of my bones, the rearrangement of my body, ascending and descending anatomies, sliding aside and aligning into a new thing. Of course it hurt. But there was no blood and I kissed his eyebrows instead of crying. My hair hung around his face like storm-drenched curtains, casting long shadows on his cheekbones.

"Ksyusha," he said to me, tender and gentle, without mockery, "Ksyusha, I will never forget how the light looks on your stomach in this moment, the light through your hair and the frozen windows. It looks like water, as though you are a little brook into which I am always falling, always falling."

The bars of the window cut my chest into quarters. He arched his back. I clamped his waist between my thighs. These things are not important—no one act of love is different much in its parts from any other, really. What is important is this: I did not know. I bent over him, meaning to kiss, only meaning to kiss—and I did not know what would happen, I swear it.

The lake came out of me, shuddering and splashing—my mouth opened like a

sluice-gate, and a flood of water came shrieking from me, more water than I had ever known, strung with weeds and the skeletons of fish and little stones like sandy jewels.

It tasted like blood.

I choked, my body seized, thrashing rapture-violent, and it gushed harder, streaming from my lips, my hair, my fingertips, my eyes, my eyes, my eyes wept a deluge onto the thin little body of Artyom. The windows caught the jets and drops froze there, hard knots of ice. I screamed and all that came from my throat was more water, more and more and more.

His legs jerked awkwardly and I clutched at him, trying to clear the water and the green stems from his mouth, but already he convulsed under me, spluttering and spitting, reaching out for me from under the growing pool that was our bed, the bubbles of his breath popping in the blue—the bed was a basin and the water steamed and I wet his hair in it, but I did not mean to, I could not close my mouth against it, I could not stop it, I could not move away from him and it came and came and his bones beneath me racked themselves in the mire, the whites of his eyes rolled, and I am sorry, Artyom, I did not know, my mother did not tell me, she told me only to live as best I could, she did not say we drag the lake with us, even into the city, drag it behind us, a drowning shadow shot with green.

I would like to remember that he called out to me, that he called out in faith that I could deliver him, and if I try, I can almost manage it, his voice in my ear like an echo:

"Ksyusha!"

But I do not think he did, I think he only gurgled and gasped and coughed and died. I think the strangling weeds just passed over his teeth.

He never tried to push me off of him, he never tried to sit up. His face became still. His lips did not shake. His skin was pale and purpled. The water rippled over his thin little beard as it slowly, slowly as spring thaw, seeped into the mattress and disappeared.

The snow murmured against the glass.

IV: Shell Into Snail

Rybka, you have to wake up.

She rubs her eyes with little pink fingers and turns away from me, towards the wall.

Rybka, I'm sorry, you have to wake up.

She yawns, stretches her legs, and wriggles sleepily towards the edge of the bed. I am waiting, kneeling on the floor with our copper kettle and a glass bowl. I am her mother, I understand the shock of waking, the water is always warm. She stares up through the window-glass at the stars like salt on the skin of a black fish as I pour it over her scalp, clear and clean. I comb it through every strand—her hair is so soft, like leaves. Afterwards, we lie together in the dark, my body curving around hers like a shell onto its snail, our wet hair curling slowly around each other. I sing her back to sleep, and my voice echoes off of the walls and windows, where there is frost and bare branches scraping:

Bayu, bayushki bayu
Ne lozhisya na krayu
Pridet serenkiy volchok
Y ukusit za bochek

Her hair is yellowy-brown under the wet, but damp enough to seem always black, like mine. Her eyes are so green it hurts, sometimes, to look at them, like looking at the sun. She swims very well for her age, and asks always to be taken to the mountains for the holidays. She is too little for coffee, but sneaks sips when I am not looking—she says it tastes like wet earth.

There is money for coffee, and kettles, and birds with browned, sizzling skin. We can see a bright silver scrap of the Neva through our windows, and the gold lights of the Liteyny Bridge. A woman who can set a bone is never hungry. I wash my hands more than anyone on my ward—twelve times a day I thrust my skin under water and breathe relief.

I taught her before she could read how to braid her hair very tightly. In the morning I will call her Sofiya and put a little red cup full of blueberries floating in cream in front of her, and she will tell me that after the kettle, she dreamed again of the man with the thin little beard and the big nose who sits on the side of a lake and shares his lunch with her. He has larch leaves in his lap, she will say, and he tells her she is pretty, and he calls her rybka, too. His beard prickles her cheek when he holds her. I will pull my coffee away from her creeping fingers and smile as well as I am able. She will eat her blueberries slowly, savoring them, removing the purple skin with her tongue before chewing the greenish fruit. I will draw us a bath.

But now, under the stars pricking the window-frost like sewing needles, I hold her against me, her wet eyelashes sticking together, her little breath quick and even. I decide I will take her to the mountains. I decide I will not.

Rybka, poor darling, I'm sorry, go back to sleep.

I wind her hair around my fingers; little drops like tears squeeze out, roll over my knuckles.

We are as happy as we may be, as happy as winters with ice on the stairs and coats which seem to always need patching and wet hair that freezes against our shoulders and the memory of still eyelids under water may leave us.

I am not tired yet.