

Cinderflame

by Kelly Ann Jacobson

Mother

*The end draws close, she says, her breath against
your ear, her hair a pillow for your tears,
Be good, and save your soul.*

But she is good.

The servants draw her bath
and wash her hair, her sheets, her teeth, and pray
the shadow woman on the bed might breathe.

The First Day

The house is like a tomb you sealed yourself.
The air grows stale, and how you hate to breathe.
The dust you eat sits heavy on your chest.
You sleep dark shutters over what remains.

Father

He smells of jasmine, cumin, salt,
the earthy spice of footed road,
his horse, and pages dusty gray
he carries in his sack for you.

He feels like velvet cloak, the strain
of skin against the button vest
made tighter by the meals he ate
with someone else—

How fare thee?

Arrival

The carriage door is shut
and you would wish it closed
for all of time, as they,
lined on the walk, who still
call out her name when they
forget, approach the steps
and raise their hands for her.

Bird Mother

With hair
a loaf of reddish
brown,
and lips pecked red, and common eyes
made rare by blue horizons. Chin
an angry cliff. The goose's wave.
A bed of feathered silk.
And worst,
the crane's
intent to
roost.

Ducklings

How horrible.
Quite dreadful, yes.
And dirty, too.
I fear to sit.
What must they eat?
Watch for your dress.
And her, so plain.
What, her?
Fear yes.

Wooden Shoes

They shoe you like a nag
in clogs that once stood tall
beneath a willow's mane,

and as you walk the halls
the clatter of your steps
betrays a fury

that can only tap the
floors where once your mother's
slippers sung the morning.

The Old Gray Kirtle

No slip beneath, just smock
that leaves you curveless as
a child, one who skips
through fields and palms a stone—

—not one who's known the way
a dress can be a shroud—

and how you laugh to think
they curse you with the past,
a life stood still, when back
is all you want to go.

Days

Flame.

Stir.

Wash.

Flame.

Stir.

Wash.

Flame,
Stir.
Wash.

Wait.

Peas and Lentils

Among the ash, the peas and lentils
wait like treasure scattered to the sea.

Set on a path to pick them, you must
bend your mast into the waves without

a break, so that once you have dredged the
spoon through hearth and fingered out their food

you might again aright your ship and
raise the sails that carry you to dream.

Cinderella

Their names might stain
like wine or ink
but names can also shield.

To cinder you
implies a flame
that names cannot reveal.

Request

He brings not clothes, nor jewels, but single twig for which you asked while daughters laughed at such a simple chore. *It struck my hat*, he says, and that's perhaps how he remembered, for he thinks not much of you when he is gone. A hazel-twig, with smooth gray bark, which planted by

your mother's grave grows leaves with velvet hairs and nuts in leafy husks that fall aground around you as you weep.

White Bird

Among the hazel leaves
a fowl resides.

*Request me what you wish,
the white bird chirps.*

*I wish for nothing you
can bring to life.*

You stare down at the grave,
where ashen hands

have pressed their kisses long
onto her name.

*A gown, perhaps, so you
might meet a prince?*

*I love no prince, nor man,
and never will.*

*Two slippers made of gold,
fit to your size?*

*My wooden clogs serve well
my simple life.*

*I know! she said, A name
that fits you well!*

*What need I of a name
that none will speak?*

*You have not heard my call,
the white bird said.
For Cinderflame is what
I'd next suggest.*

*Why Cinderflame, when I
am none but ash?*

*Not yet, she said, and left
the tree ablaze.*