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Queen Charming

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Queen Charming · *Pamela White Hadas*

for Alice

A woman writing thinks back through her mothers.
— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Dear Godmother, Another year and the annual
ball rolls round again; there's my pumpkin
taxi tick-tocking through its axle-turns for all
it's worth . . . the Pegasused rodents and the footmen

you ordered up from your sense of fittingness. . . .
They roll round in thought I mean. So it's time
for the anniversary letter. Not that I'm ever mindless
of the continued gift. My other given name

still flutters in the dark, repeating like a heart,
metering each costly mime. The royal pseudonym
meanwhile feathers me out of the grubby hearth
as pumpkin takes to the air. Then midnight: I'm

dumped back into the ashbucket, rags and all . . .
of course, you know. And the clock's recoil takes care
of your being there, as then, giving your soft call
from the garden's edge; it's unexpected as ever.

Again I fetch the pumpkin and find my sooty dress
transformed right down to the transparent shoe,
watch mice evolve to power as you put the harness
on their hack identities. Everything you do

momentarily to make me over, makes me more
or less myself. But which? Could I endure my wishes
made actual without the punctual nightmare?
Salt-watering the hazel, sorting piles of ashes

from lentils, fighting the rituals of narcissism
rejection demands, cindering the nest — can all this be
dropped for more than the briefest moratorium
of masquerade? Is it possible to unforesee

the midnight deshabile? Despite a number of years
between satin sheets, the rescue is as windfall as sun-
rise always is, drawn by phantom horsepowers
out of their mousy hearts, metronome-drawn.

All this rolls by in half-light, just before the King
knocks at my door with the breakfast tray.

My feet, still sheathed in solid tears, are kicking
free for the now daily dance, prosaic in its way,

like the shining tea poured out. I doubt my vision
still. Am I this or that? I stare into my cup.
Minute dark leavings — mice? A ghost's breath on
the glimmered surface — mother? I look up.

There is more than a ghost in the gilt-laden
mirror, of a chance. My rash weird sisters cut
off their toes and heels for this. Why am I chosen
who did nothing but comfort myself, poisoning my feet

over my mother's bones? The lucky doves
in the hazel tree took care of me pretty well,
seeing I was such a mess. Everybody loves
a self-effacer. Say, does your whole clientele

keep coming back this way, after you've sent them out
feet first into the fitting rooms? Do they come clean,
change in time, toss out the frowzy petticoat,
keep ashes out of the soup for good and dream

too deeply to remember? I suspect the pangs
of separation last. Today we hold an audience,
the King and I, for all our subjects — hopes, harangues,
funny stories, grievances; and then the dance.

Are you sending someone to dance with my grown son?
Grant me the grace to be kind, to be more than a mirror
with its black side hidden. May she be a vision
enacted by you and see how you put it all together

for us outside of us. I will tell her “nothing
is promised,” and she will think me unpromising until
she sees the whole design. A charming title’s nothing,
given life. It’s for the vision I am grateful.