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Alice James

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Alice James · Naomi Wolf

*Her tragic health was the only practical
solution for the problem of life.*

— Henry James

I

I am a white rabbit in a hutch
fed by two giants:
their names are William and Henry.
Their great eyes peer at me
indulgently, through the wire.
They stuff me with bruised hearts
of lettuce, and chuckle
when I bite down on their fingers
with all my strength.

When I'm sick and my eyes are rhinestones
backed with tarnishing tin
they stroke the hot fur
on my fluttering belly.
But when I'm well they hold me
by my tender ears
and watch my paws drowning in the air.

When I go in the house
they all pretend I'm human,
trusting me with teacups and opinions.
They are proud as I preside
secure in my knowledge
that Professor Howe takes his with cream,
that I am well versed in macaroons.

"I will clothe myself in neutral tints, walk by still waters,
and possess my soul in silence."

The doctor insists that I'm fine
and his black bag clicks shut.
But I'm squirming with maggots like an old cheese.
They cling to his thick pink hands.

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A rusty crow
has thrust its beak up my throat;
each wing wraps around a lung.
Its claws clutch my liver.
It beats sometimes, and caws,
but its voice is as weak
as mine.

II

I have no veins,
they are slim wise snakes.
Each of my toes is a snail
slick, tentative, blind.
The artery of my heart
is clotted with misshapen letters.
When I lie down at night
the beasts crawl
to the four corners of my bed
and when the word "greatness"
steps into me with its winged heel
my ribs constrict around it
like a snare.

"Dear Henry,

I shall be arriving soon in Paris
to be an albatross round your neck."

They finally found that my breast held cancer
like a velvet-lined casket cradling a scarab.
I stroked it, crooning, "deliverer."
My nipple was the bud
on the apple of the Hesperides.
I slept well at last, happy,
listening to my cells' wild humming,
spreading the news.