

# Forbidden Fruit Picker

—*after Wangechi Mutu*

## HOW TO STAB ONESELF IN THE BACK

In a recurring dream, I knock over the musician's instrument and blame his kittens. He burns their mother's milk as punishment, forbids them from the balcony. There is sadness in each hand, but in the third hand I am holding his instrument, and singing like he taught me. The kittens are breaking everything in the kitchen, eating leaves of glass to spite him. I sing wrong as he nurses them, picking shards from their lips like a lover. But something between them has ended. He sits back beside me—blood like milk around each eye. Now where were we? He was about to tell me something. He is saying I have taught him everything about love; because I am flawless but he could not love me. My third hand, blue with sharp silver nails, is now holding a bulbous pink fruit instead. I don't want to sing anymore. Starved, the kittens leave him and follow me home. It is always like this. But I have no milk for them; I have no mother cat, and I never have food in the kitchen.

## FORBIDDEN FRUIT PICKER

March 7, '21: Dreamed you left me and married a flower instead, gave her the old diamonds. I am in so much pain in the dream I am shocked and grieving. You call me when she's at work; serve me cottage cheese on the balcony. You are always naked in my dreams. This is a house with two balconies. I don't know this house. The furniture is gorgeous; I'm jealous and anxious. Time means everything in this dream. I must leave before she comes back.

## RIDING DEATH IN MY SLEEP

I'm tired of dreaming of creatures I neglect to feed. And my sister's face, bruised like summer fruit, and me without my hands, waiting all night outside the wrong house—the house with two balconies. I have a habit of keeping sugar by the bed—I wake up and shove it past my teeth like milk. Hungry cats somersault in my head. When I return to the dream, it's too late. The beginning looks nothing like the end. One of the cats, white with an orange cloud in the center, hurls herself off the balcony. She falls soft as a kite, her mouth open, screaming in my sister's voice.

## SECOND BORN

March 6, '21: Dreamed of an orange and white cat. She was standing on the ledge at Dad's. I couldn't save her. And someone hurt Dina. And the cat fell and screamed.

## PRETTY DOUBLE-HEADED

Jan. 12, '21: I dreamed of two kittens. I panic as I realize I forgot to feed them. One of them grows an abscess so large it becomes it. Black in the center. The other, a velvety gray, is gorgeous in the sun.

## THE BRIDE WHO MARRIED A CAMEL'S HEAD

Once, a man convinced me to walk with him every morning in November to feed stray cats. He'd bring a few boiled yolks (he did not like the yolks) in a plastic bag, which hissed as he told stories about the cat family down the street. There was the one in an apricot coat, Misho, who wanted to see Vienna but could never get a visa; their mother Jehan, who conversed with birds—but never with crows—and Amar, who loved to sing. I was terrified of cats then. Even Vito, who could've fit between my shoulder and my neck. The man could smell the fear on me like sulfur—maybe that's why we never made it past November. Every morning the

cats circled him like carpenter ants circle summer. But the yolks were never enough. One night I texted him I dreamed of a wedding in a church. The man wore an apricot coat and the bride wore a stiff black dress. Even her veil was hemmed with black jewels sharp as crow beaks, like she was in a cage. He liked the word cage. Now I make yolk necklaces, and visit the family alone.

#### I NEVER ASKED YOU TO LISTEN

A woman who cures clay in the sun and reads dreams tells me all the creatures I forget to feed are myself. *You are concerned about taking care of yourself.* I disagree. They need something from me.

#### THAT'S MY DEATH MASK YOU'RE WEARING

April 10, '19: I dreamed I was pregnant but finding no food in me, the baby died before it was born.

#### THE END OF EATING EVERYTHING\*

Two snakes—no, one snake with two heads, reaches for the fruit my long silver thumbnail almost scrapes. My biggest fear is they'll get to it first. I guess I was shocked when you married the flower because I thought the naked dreams meant you belonged to me. Now I see you waiting by a purple tree, mouth open, and you don't look at me. The fruit between us hangs low. It is almost the size of my head. The snake has sprayed its pink and orange skin with red venom as eternal as oil. We ache. The seeds sing inside the belly of this need. This need. This need.

\*Note: The subheadings in this poem are the names of artworks by Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu.