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A watercolor illustration of a figure in white robes standing on a balcony or ledge. The figure is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the frame. The background is a deep, dark blue and purple sky with a large, soft, pinkish-purple cloud or light source in the upper left. The overall style is ethereal and artistic.

vol. 1
NEW BEGINNINGS

Have you heard the screaming woman in the woods?

by Kim Rooney

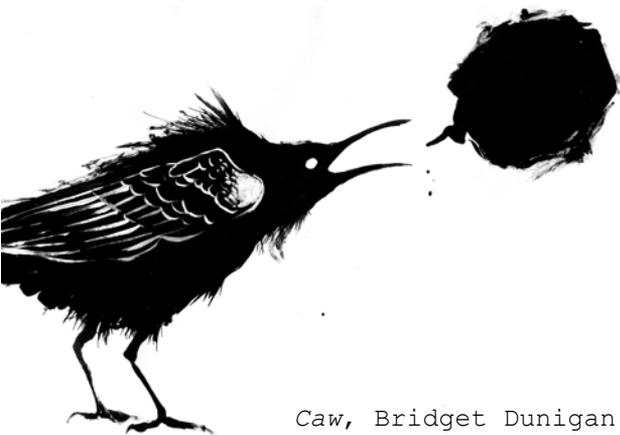
My mother told me this story, and I think I believe it. It began in early May as the evenings stretched and dusk lingered warm on bare skin. My mother says her sister prepared for weeks. She practiced for hours: exhaling deep, holding, and inhaling deeper. Her throat changed in those weeks, her lungs expanding and diaphragm strengthening until she could suck the air from a room in one, slow breath. She sat in her room for weeks—back straight, chest open, shoulders back—opening her mouth taller and taller, the corners of her lips stretching slowly, never cracking.

Her friends told her it was great that she was getting into meditation and breathing exercises. One friend said he was an expert on meditation and could help her focus her energy to really get the most out of it if she was interested. She nodded until he was finished talking, and after her silence became a response of its own, he shrugged and changed the subject. She remained wordless, saving her sound, and they parted ways. My mother was thrilled that her sister had found a new hobby. She had jumped from duck hunting to dirt polishing to playing a bamboo flute in the year prior, and my mother was relieved she seemed committed at last. My grandmother was less pleased, as she stopped speaking at family functions, and it reflected

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very poorly on my grandmother to have a daughter who did not speak. My grandfather worried that a con artist had gotten to my sister, that this was a new scam to extort his family.

When my mother's sister was ready, she left her room preserved, trash emptied and fresh laundry folded at the foot of the bed. My mother, concerned about the growing rift between her sister and their mother, had planned a surprise visit for that morning. Instead, she says she watched her sister walk east towards the sun, feet bare, until she reached the edge of the woods. She says the grass was damp with morning dew, and as her sister passed the first row of trees, her feet became muddy. My mother chased her, but stopped before her shoes could become dirty. When her sister walked into the woods, her jaw unhinged, and she began to scream. When the evening wind blew, she harmonized with the whistle through the trees. Her hair grew until the tips began dragging in the footprints she left behind. It



Caw, Bridget Dunigan

clung like Spanish moss to her scalp, catching leaves and insects who didn't care about the difference. My mother says the strands that fell from her head still held her screams, and as she walked through the woods, they de-

composed behind her, leaving nothing but sound.

My grandfather tried to bring her back, but when he went into the woods he heard nothing, and after four days camping he forgot why he was there. His youngest daugh-

ter faded from his memory, but he avoided the woods until his dying day. My grandmother was certain she would come back after a week, a month, a year, and she waited for the rest of her life. When her business brought her near the woods, she wondered why the wind sounded familiar. My mother packed up the apartment left behind. Her sister had left an envelope for my mother with the remainder of the rent, although my mother had to cover the rest of her utilities when the cable company didn't accept disappearing into the woods as a valid reason to end service. While my mother was on hold with the cable company, she tucked away her sisters' trinkets and clothing in a trunk she thought she would pass onto her daughter.

When I turned one, my mother took one of her sister's necklaces from this trunk and laid it out on a table, placing it between my mother's favorite book and my grandmother's sewing scissors for my zhuazhou ceremony. My grandfather contributed his pocket calculator and the coin he'd chosen at his ceremony. My grandmother says I crawled towards the necklace, grabbing the chain with my chubby fingers and pulling the pendant to my lips like a pacifier. Before I could put my lips around it, my mother yanked it away, and I began to wail. My mother tried to comfort me, but the only thing that would silence me was my aunt's necklace. When I fell asleep after the ceremony, my mother locked the necklace away again. My grandmother says I became a relentless crier as soon as the key turned in the lock.

When I reached adolescence, I asked about the woman who stood beside her mother in old photos, and my mother told me of the untraceable footprints and echoing screams in the forest. She told me not to go into the forest, lest the screams of her sister call to me too strongly. She watched my breathing, pressing her palm to my diaphragm and commanding me to breathe, as though it would reveal

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clandestine exercises to stretch my lungs. She snuck downstairs at night and checked my shoes for mud or leaves, grounding me after every rainstorm.

I don't tell her about the tickles in my lungs, the way breathing pushes against the limits of my chest cavity until my sternum cracks. My friends' parents speak about my mother's sister when they think I cannot hear. Some say I will walk into the woods and become another screaming shadow moving among the trees. Some say I will search and search and find nothing, and they use it as proof that there cannot be a woman who screams in the woods. Some know the woman still walks, jaw unhinged and hair like moss, through the woods that have learned to scream with her.

One day, they will call her a grey lady or red lady or white lady, but a single color will never be enough to embody a voice, and it will never explain why the woods grow louder every year. One day, every branch will stir, and deep below the dirt, the roots will vibrate. One day, when my mother's sister lies down, she will seep into the earth, and it will crack open with sound.