



 **dreams of rabbits**  @therabbitdies

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THE RABBIT DIED PART EIGHTEEN

The Rabbit Died is an NSFW horror fantasy CYOA about pregnancy, the effects of trauma, dreams, and meat. Shit's weird, my friends.

You can read past installments here: tinyurl.com/rabbitdoc

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Content Warning: Ableism, abuse, (mental, physical & reproductive), body horror, cannibalism, CSA (mentioned only), death, gender dysphoria, gore, incest, pregnancy, racist microaggressions, rape (mentioned only), sexual assault, torture, & vomit.

PRIMROSE

Robert Hedgenettle prowls the length of the hall. Bent forward at the hips and with his hands clasped behind his back, he inspects the nooks and crannies. He scrutinizes the cobwebs, muttering, "I smelled her, I swear." Louder, he repeats: "I smelled her, I swear."

The identity of this particular her is left open. Her as in that Rabbit Tsukiko enlisted or Tsukiko herself? You thread your needle with a strand of your silver hair. You smell both Tsukiko and her kitten in green. Their fragrances had accompanied Emile into your warren.

"Are you ignoring me?"

One could say Robert Hedgenettle is a handsome man. He is tall in stature and broad in the shoulders, and his hazel eyes glint with a grandfather's playful charm. His smile, however, undermines him with its nastiness.

"I think you're ignoring me."

"She's not," says the boy Robert calls Vervain. He sits on the arm of your sofa, his stocking feet resting on the cushions. He plays with a glove. He winks at you. "She's just focusing."

"Just focusing." Hedgenettle - you refuse to call him Woundwort - touches the black antlers hanging above your fireplace. You snip the fur clean off the head of his costume. Indeed, you are focused on the work. That is why you are ignoring him.

Robert Hedgenettle lumbers up to you and, much like a cat, bunts your neck with his head. He smears his chin down the slope of your shoulder, where he places a rough bite. "I'll let you work," he says before kissing you. His tongue probes deep enough to lick your vocal cords.

"Should have been a son." He flicks the black antlers on his way to your bedroom. Off to hunt the source of the scent, you assume. Or to take a nap. Or masturbate on your sheets. "Be good to her, boys."

You spit out his taste the moment the door shuts and massage your wound. Your disgust is greater than your pain.

"Your neck was bulging," Vervain says. "I've seen that happen before online but not in real life, and it's usually from a dick. Did you like that?"

"Get off my furniture."

Vervain twists and flips off of the sofa. His body bends in an unnatural way even for a child's. Children are made of rubber, Nan told you once. You tested this by knocking Blackavar on his bottom to see if he bounced. He didn't.

He spent the rest of the day explaining to you metaphors and similies.

"I don't get why you let him do that." Vervain slaps the glove against his palm. He mulls over the antlers. "You seem pretty strong."

The cartilage base of the costume's head crumbles in places. Dry. Old. Making a new one from scratch would make more sense than restoring this ruin. A new head means a new costume to accompany it.

But you are not sewing him a new suit. You fetch cartilage from your kitchen cupboards, along with ligaments and tendons. You take small amounts. Enough to patch and graft only. You reach far into the shelves, touching over stoppers and lids until you find the last item.

The stories of poisoned dresses you heard are fiction. You know this. This, however, is the Dream and you, dear Primrose, are fiction, and Robert Hedgenettle insists upon being fiction...

You stroke the icy vial in your hand, cold iron filaments. These should do.

You sit down to work with the vial tucked in your sleeve. Vervain glances at you and then glances away, whistling. His eyes sparkle. "Are these your antlers?"

"They were my baby's," you say.

"Rabbits can have those?"

"We can."

"Then why do they do all that other stuff?" Vervain, now that you have a good, clear

look at him by the silver glow of the fire, has the posture of a trained hound. Richard's father kept hunting dogs, beagles. They always watched

you, their bodies vibrating with anticipation, waiting for the command, a whistle, or a shout. They saw who and what you are and they desired permission to strike. To chase you down until your legs and lungs give and snap. Vervain is one of those beagles.

You tap your foot.

"Is it a fruit thing?" Vervain asks, hands in his pockets. "I heard that they don't plant new trees from seeds in orchards, they cut off pieces from the good fruit trees and graft them onto rootstock." He picks his teeth. "It's to make sure the fruit tastes the same."

Being compared to fruit, that isn't new. Richard and Robert both described your body in edible ways, fresh apples, fresh cream. Hips like a pear. Breasts like firm mangos. Though, you sneak a glance at your bosom, they are more like melons now.

Judging from the smirk on Vervain's face, he thinks something similar. "My mom breeds pugs," he says, "or she did. She's probably dead now, but who fucking cares, she was a bitch. Dad said I'm messed up because she didn't let me suck her titties. Did you nurse your baby?"

tw/misgendering

"Don't be vulgar," you say.

"Don't be vulgar," he mocks. "You sound like the lesbian's sister."

"The lesbian?"

"Strawberry, she's a lesbian."

You trim a patch of cartilage. "Emile," you say with a threatening snip, snip of your scissors. Vervain pales. You smile. "What about his sister?"

"Lola, she's a know-it-all bitch that thinks she's great because she's smart and she's got these huge, fat slutty tits. Like yours."

From Vervain's tone, you surmise the animosity is mutual between him and Lola. You spread paste on the underside of the patch. "I see."

"She's a bitch." Vervain slaps the glove against the mantle in an absentminded way. "I wanted to eat her but she was out of town."

He is distracted by his hate, now would be as good a time as any. You sprinkle the iron onto the glue before affixing the patch to the mask's skinned frame. You do this with the next patch and the next, creating pockets of poison that will circulate into the suit with time.

You prick your thumb with your teeth and squeeze drops of sweet blood onto your work. Perfume to mask the scent of iron. Here's to Hedgenettle choking on your scent as he rends his burning skin, roaring in agony as he flays himself alive. He may not die, but he will wish for it.

"You paying attention to me?" Vervain asks. "You're quiet."

"I'm working," you say.

"Is it because I said I wanted to eat Lola?" He bites and tugs at the fingers of the glove, the pup. He frets. "Or called her a bitch? Is that why you're quiet? I didn't mean it, any of it."

What an awful liar. Hedgenettle taught this one well. This feigned insecurity, this display of doggish shame, fills you with the urge to slap the boy. He snickers, caught, "Okay, maybe I meant most of it." He slips on the damaged glove. "I don't like silence, though."

"I'm quiet when I'm focused," you say.

Vervain growls. Does the fragile boy feel slighted? Mocked? Has his time with Hedgenettle thinned his skin or was he already this volatile? Unable to help but sigh, you rest your hands on your lap. "Would you like me to start your gloves?"

He regards you with suspicion. "Yeah, you can." He picks a length of magenta cloth from your collection and dumps it on the coffee table. The pins, needles, and scissors all jump and rattle. "I want this color."

You blow a lock of hair from your face. What an interesting, unexpected choice.

"Is it a bad color?" Vervain asks. "Think it's gay? It's fucking gay, isn't it?"

"I can work with this," you say.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"Then make them."

You grab Vervain's wrists with a lunge. He screeches louder than you expect. His eyes and mouth stretch as he screams; three black pits, hollowed by terror. And you have yet to do anything.

"What's that racket?" Hedgenettle stumbles from your room, his hair mussed. In his hand, he holds one of your brassieres. His fly is undone. "Why are you yelling?" he asks Vervain.

You tug, you snap. The skin and muscle separate from Vervain's hands. You pull it free from his bones, leaving him bare and dripping. Vervain drops to the floor in a dead faint, his eyes rolled back, his lids twitching.

Hedgenettle wags a finger at you. "Naughty bunny."

"He wanted gloves." You toss the skins into the fire and listen to them sizzle in the silver flames. Hedgenettle leans on the mantle, zips his pants, and adjusts the fit. He hovers near until you meet his gaze. "So I'm making gloves," you say.

Cupping your cheek, he smiles and rolls your lip down with a flick of his thumb. He caresses your overbite. Your teeth cut him. "You're still the sharpest knife." He paints your mouth with his blood before he bends to his knee to kiss you. "Go make my boy some gloves."

When the iron scalds Hedgenettle with cold, when it freezes him to the marrow, you hope it breaks him of his delusions. You want him aware of his death. You want him to know that his happy ending will never come and that he, in spite of his attempts, is real. And real things die.

Hedgenettle drags Vervain to the table for you and slaps him down like one would a slab of meat. You drape Vervain's naked muscles in magenta fabric. You trace and cut around his fingers. Dip, curve, snip, snip, your scissors cruise along the pattern's path. Hedgenettle

massages the nape of your neck and inhales the scent of your hair. His musk, green grass, milk, and masculine arousal, permeates the space. You count to four to hold your gorge in check as you sew.

"You know I still love you?" Hedgenettle asks. "Out of all the Rabbits I've had over the years, you're one of my favorites." He glances at the black antlers. "You and our Hrairoo."

"She goes by Inlé now," you say.

He massages his brow. A vein bulges under the thin skin of his temple. "Don't you dare utter that nonsense to me again," he wheezes, pained. "It makes you sound ignorant."

"But that's her name, Inlé."

Vervain stirs. You pat the boy's forehead with a scrap of cloth. Hedgenettle forces you to face him. "That will never be her name," he says. "I reject it. With every inch of my being, I reject it. My daughter isn't the grim reaper, she's a sweet, empty-headed bunny."

"That's so sad." You titter behind the back of your hand. "She is who she is, you have no control over that. If she wants to be Death, she can be Death."

Hedgenettle bends your wrist until the joint gives and tendons tear. In spite of the agony, you giggle. You feel things stronger than any human, be it pain or pleasure, and he knows it. He knows you with such intimacy. "How dare you lie like that?" he whines. "Think of the cost."

"My darling Robert," you rotate your arm in his grip, shattering bone until it breaks skin all so you can slip your wrist free, "I've nothing to fear of the truth, unlike you."

"You want me to hurt you? To make you really smart? Right here in front of my boys?"

Vervain sits up, groggy. He rubs his cheek with his new, freshly gloved hand. The magenta brings out the rosy tint of his lips and the tip of his nose. He gasps a curse at the state of your arm.

At the door, the rest of Hedgenettle's troop gathers. Their pale, dirty-smudged bodies pack the frame shoulder to shoulder. Hedgenettle blocks them from your vision. His massive face presses to yours, forehead to forehead, nose to nose, as he sneers, "Want them to join?"

"You'd force children to ravish me?" You call the bluff. That is all you can do other than cower before him, and you, Primrose, refuse to tremble further for this man. "My, my, how pathetic and sad."

He snatches the front of your sweater.

"She finished your uniform!"

You and Hedgenettle look to Vervain, who stares back, panting. He hides his mouth as if he, too, is surprised he spoke. Then, inspecting his gloves, he says, "She finished your uniform."

"He's right." You lay your good hand on top of Hedgenettle's. "The work is finished. You can leave now."

Fury simmers beneath Hedgenettle's skin. The features of his looming face jump like the lid of a boiling pot. He wheezes from the corners of his mouth.

Vervain rises. "We should go," he says, "We gotta find Mama, right? Save her from that fucker that took her and my brother."

"Mama." Hedgenettle withdraws into himself and starts to rock, holding his head. You jump off the sofa and cradle your broken arm. "Oh, Mama," he moans. "I'll find you! You poor thing, you stupid, poor thing, I need to find you."

You tap Vervain's elbow. "Get his costume."

Vervain scrambles to do as you instruct. The other boys join him in gathering their general's uniform. One boy spit polishes his shoes. Together, they present Hedgenettle his costume in a neat, folded pile, the head stacked on top.

He hugs his clothes to his broad chest. "You perfumed it," he whispers, awestruck. The change in his personality sickens you more than frightens you. "Your honeyed blood. Hyzenthlay, you spoil me. You spoil my boys."

You heal your arm with a whipcrack, the breaks snapping together, one after the other, click, click, click. You whimper from the pain, hitch, and breath with a sob. You

lick away a tear. Stiff upper lip, love. Be strong.

You point towards the door. Taking the cue, the boys file out, taking great, bouncing steps. They nip and shove at each other and laugh. Hedgenettle sets the mask upon his head as he follows his pack. The hunter and his hounds, off to terrorize the fields.

Vervain dawdles behind. The cuffs of his gloves undulate, alive. He rubs his fingers together. "I didn't--" He purses his lips. "Nevermind, thank you for the gloves."

He leaves without further word.

Alone, you sink to your knees before the fireplace. Survived again, Prim. Just barely. You undress, tossing your clothes and skin into the fire, burning all traces of Hedgenettle's touch. You take down the black antlers from their place above the mantel.

You smile.

HOLLY

You might be in love with Inlé.

Is that bad?

You adjust your seat in the upright position and secure the tray table. Blackavar performs a rambling version of airline safety protocols at the front of the cabin. Lori, in a huff, corrects him whenever he makes a mistake. He chuckles each time.

"Don't laugh at me, I used to do this for a living!" Lori says when she has enough.

"Then why aren't you doing it?" Blackavar asks.

"Fine, sit down." Lori bumps Blackavar aside with her hip. He sulks over to the seat in front of you and sits.

Things flow from there, Lori gives the best, and loudest, safety presentation you have ever experienced. Made even sweeter by Blackavar's dejected sighs.

You need to apologize to Lori, you have not been the nicest guy around.

Inlé feels along the seam of the shut tray table. When at rest, her face sets in a pout. You reach across the aisle to reassure her the table is locked. "Don't touch this until Kehaar says we can." You tap the latch. "Got it?"

"She's got it," Clover says from beside Inlé. She wears the same pout, but she is not at rest. She steals away Inlé's hands and holds them, fingers interlocked. Inlé's nose and eyes crinkle in amusement. You about die at the sight. Arrow right to the heart.

You might be in love with Inlé, and there is nothing bad about that.

What about your kids? Your girls? George. They were out of Warren when things went to hell. Cecily is on Twitter whenever she has free time and Anaïs has a phone full of news apps, they must know what has happened to the city. The milk plague.

You could have called them from the motel or from the Birds' house. There were phones available. Emile called his family, why not you? Telling Inlé about your kids came easy - easy as slitting your throat - so why did calling them not occur to you until now?

Somehow, the titanic load of guilt you suddenly carry does not impede lift-off. The plane rises high into the stop-light red sky. The ground sinks under the clouds. But not before you notice the lack of cars on the road and the barren parking lots.

Your father, back when he tolerated you enough to speak to you, complained about your obsessive attention to detail. "This is a crime scene, not a film set, Matt," he'd bark. "No one fucking cares."

You cared. Once upon a time in the west, Mateo Velasco-Holly cared.

You feel your pants for your badge. Gone - you left it in the trash back in the motel. What you do have in your pockets is your wallet. You take it out to look at the picture of your kids.

"Don't leave me!" Clover whines.

Inlé crawls over your lap to get to the empty window seat beside you. You fold your hands on the top of your head until she settles. "I don't remember if I've ever been on a plane before," she says, "I want to cloud watch."

"But with him?"

"With my eyes."

A cagey dodge from Inlé. You shrug your brows at Clover. "I hate you," she hisses.

Blackavar peers at the three of you. Inlé frowns and, without warning, locks her lips with yours.

"There were no cars on the road," you say once your excitement settles. Inlé brings your knuckles to her mouth and gives you the tiniest of love bites. You blank.

Blackavar knocks on your head. "No what on the what?"

"No cars on the road," Emile pipes in. He pops up from over his seat like a kid brother that just heard you open a snack and wants a piece. "I noticed that, too. It was weird."

"I didn't see any cars drive by the motel, neither." You fail to ignore Inlé playing with the vein decorating your bicep. "Honey," you mutter. She kisses your wrist and holds your hand on her lap to poke at your fingers. "Honey, you're killing me."

"There were cars by Kehaar's house," Blackavar says.

"So what's going on?"

Your vision from earlier stalks around the cabin. Smoke oozes from its maw. Should have called your girls while you had the chance, here comes the end of the world.

"You said things weren't fleshy," you say to Inlé. "We'd know if we were in the Dream if things were fleshy."

Inlé screams, and then Clover. None of you are prepared for the agony - it drills down to the lizard part of your brain. Turbulence rocks the cabin sideways, and Inlé falls across your legs. Tears of milk streak her face.

And as soon as the screaming started, it stops and both Rabbits slump, unconscious.

"I don't know what happened back there, but y'all better have your seatbelts buckled," Kehaar says over the intercom. "We are in the shit."

"There's something wrong with the Rabbits!" Rachel shouts.

Lori leaves her seat to rattle Clover. She begs her to wake up to no avail. "What is even happening? This whole thing keeps going like a damn nightmare." She secures Clover, who flops about, empty-eyed, in her seat and buckles up beside her. "I wish I knew what to do."

You wish for the chance to apologize to Lori for how you have been, and another chance to call your kids, and a chance to tell Inlé you love her, even if it is too soon for that. You lift Inlé, pat her cheek, and plead, "Wake up."

Emile squeaks, and your gut screams protect, must protect, like you a trained guard dog. He holds up crumbling hands. Blackavar strangles out a cry of recognition: "Prim?" Then his own fingers shred apart. His eyes burst.

You look over to Clover in time to see her head roll off her shoulders, severed at the neck, right on the scar. Lori apologizes, fists clenched in prayer, as the rest of Clover melts from her jade bones. She becomes milk.

Inlé dissolves in your arms, running through your grip like sticky cream. The smell is sweet.

"Wake up, honey," you whisper.

Your limbs grow brittle. The vein in your bicep snaps and you break your teeth holding back the pain. They fall out as you call to Inlé, "Wake up!"

Her head tips back. The scar on her throat stretches like the string cheese George loves. Your daughters, a hundred miles away, must be peeling sticks of it for him right now as they wait for word from you. You wanted to introduce Inlé to them. They would have loved her.

You tuck her face to your chest and kiss her where her antlers should be. She grows ever lighter. Breakable. She might break in your embrace. "C'mon," you slur with what remains of your tongue. "I love you, wake up!"

A small, four-fingered hand yanks your ear. You yelp, the pain acute, and whip back your head. Inlé glares up at you. "You just met me!"

You laugh in relief.

She leaves you in the seat, hand on her scar to hold her neck together. "It's not funny."

You follow her into the aisle, legs aflame. The back of the seat tears as you grab it for leverage and peels away in a strip. Lori screams. Pearls of fat strung together with multicolored veins cling to the underside of the length of tissue. You drop it.

When the strip lands on the floor, it turns back into fabric.

"What the hell is happening?" New teeth break through your gums as you wrap an arm around Inlé's waist. Her scent fills your nose. Your form solidifies. Being close to her strengthens you.

"I wish I knew," she says.

Together, you inch down the aisle. Rachel moves seats to help Emile. His exposed bones sprout all manner of things, leather, cloth, skin, rotating through emerald, jade, and flesh tone. Blackavar's hands molt in shades of silver. His eyes bloom black.

"Oh, Clover!" Inlé lets go of her throat in shock. You brace her wobbling head as she takes in what has happened to her kin. "No, no, that's not fair."

"We'll figure something out." You rip the hem off your shirt and wrap it around her neck. Her blood dyes it red. "It ain't over 'til the credits roll, mija."

"I don't really know what that means," she says.

This girl is beautiful.

"Don't look at me like that." Inlé tugs at you. "Help me get to Kehaar."

Do as she says, doggy.

Cycling through multiple states of matter, solid, liquid, gas, plasma, you support Inlé to the cockpit. The floor softens and hardens. You freeze and ionize. From the left of you, the prophecy whispers in your ex-wife's voice: doggy, doggy, you're going to die.

Together, you and Inlé tear open the cockpit door. A rush of clear gel spills forth and, without warning, without cause, you change. You are eleven years old, watching an eye being slit with a razor. Your ex-wife, your babysitter, giggles at your disgusted shock. She is sixteen.

// 🚫 CSA WARNING 🚫

She leans in as you gag, her teeth grazing your ear as she requests, sweet as sugar, don't tell your parents about me letting you watch freaky movies. Her hand crawls up your thigh. Or about any of the other things we do. Okay, Matt? Okay?

You then age, middle school, high school, the academy, and the force, solid, liquid, gas, and plasma, and she sits behind a pane of safety glass, receiver to her ear. I told you not to fucking tell, Matt. You knew what I was when you married me, why did you rat me out?

Your skin itches with a fresh crop of thick hair - you stopped waxing and shaving once she was booked. You rub your beard against the receiver to shove this fact in her face.

You look like a mutt now, she says. An ugly old mongrel.

Doggy, doggy, you're going to die.

"Breathe, Mr. Bird! Breathe!" Inlé helps Kehaar clear his lungs by knocking him on the back. He sits bent in the pilot's seat, hacking up dead, jellied butterflies. Flashing eyes and pustules have replaced the controls down to the last button.

"This is like my dream," Kehaar grabs Inlé's hand, "look, there's the woods from it, and the rest of the batshit."

Pine trees, endless and thickly grown, carpet the landscape below, their limbs carded together. Snow dusts their peaks. Inlé links her hand with yours. "Maine!"

"There's nowhere to land," you say.

Kehaar laughs, "Landing nothing, we're gonna crash."

Inlé's head droops. You hold her face up by the jaw. "There has to be a way to land," she says. "I refuse to accept any further failures."

"Then crash the plane," you say.

Inlé forces you to turn her face towards you, while Kehaar, mouth bedazzled with butterfly crumbs, asks: "Are you high?" You shake your head to which he responds, "You're tweaking on all levels, metaphorical and literal. Crash the goddamn plane."

"Crash the plane, it's falling apart around us anyway."

"We could die, Officer Holly."

"It's Mateo--and we hopped on board this bird knowing that. The end of the world. Remember?"

Emile squeezes his way into the cockpit, his hands now solid, if a bit drippy. He sneezes a goldfish and watches it, agog, as it swims breezily through the air and then through the windshield to sail the calamitous sky. The sun starts to bleed. Acid green butterflies appear.

"End of the world," Kehaar says.

"Crash the plane," orders Inlé.

"On it."

Emile dashes out, alerting the others that Kehaar has lost it, he is crashing the plane. And your stomach plummets as the craft takes a nosedive, for what else is there to do? Fly on and hope reality settles in long enough to give you a runway?

Inlé tugs at your collar for your attention and once she has it, she taps her lips. Kiss, she signs. "Kiss," she speaks. You bend down at her command, glad as any dog can be to follow orders, and as the plane shakes apart, you kiss her.

PRIM

You don a new skin and a change of clothes before heading out to sit with your cows. The black antlers hang from your belt. You want them near. Your body, ever aware, begs you to hold them safe for her, your daughter. Your Black Rabbit of Inlé.

Choosing to kill your daughter years ago, when you existed in the Real World, was not easy. You drowned her in milk while she was a figment in your Dream and a clot of cells growing in your Awake womb. You choked her hard enough to burst her jugular.

White was streaked red, and you cried. It was the right thing to do, and you cried.

You passed a stillborn child into the waiting hands of Hedgenettle and Lucy Driscoll, miserable in your triumph. They wanted your daughter and instead, they got meat, useless, dead meat. No soul for them to feed upon.

But they won in the end, did they not? They found the perfect womb with which to copy your poor daughter. You lean back against a bull and lay the antlers crossed over your lap. They brought her back.

"Curse you all," you whisper.

So what now?

You spin a cigarette from the grass and soil - a transmutation you mastered fast as a kitten - and light it up. The taste lacks in comparison to the ones you used to steal straight from Richard's lips. If he smokes around Inlé, she best swipe one for your sake.

So what now?

You poisoned Hedgenettle's suit, you gave the boys gloves, you tolerated Tsukiko Rey's presence, and--what? What? What is there to do now? Exist in this Dream and wait? It's bloody unfair.

Your cows explode, one right after another, with a dazzling burst of silver flame. Mist rolls over the field. And pain! Such pain! A chain reaction starts from your womb and outwards, devastating your hips and thighs and the secret places you were never able to protect.

A jet roars overhead and the sky roars with it as the clouds visit upon you a blizzard. Pines rise from nothing and then sink back to nothing.

You scream and it all goes away.

What was that? You tug the strings binding your existence together and lace them tight. It felt for a minute as if you were back in the other world, wide awake, but that how could that be possible? You died.

The Dream spasms and with it, a fresh chill. Fresh aching. Exhaling big, cotton clouds of steam, you kneel in the mud, your seams unraveling. You pick up a needle and thread from your pockets and set to stitching your body. Your neck first and then your ankles.

Rain drenches you-- amniotic fluid, urine, perineal bleeding, and, from the stench, feces. Body smells. Then, back to snow with flakes the size and shape of fine lace doilies. Nan showed you how to make doilies. You gifted a set to Richard's mother as a thank you.

Thank you for adopting me. Thank you for trying to save me.

Contractions, all around you and in you. Your womb wrings itself empty. What squeezes out scalds your thighs.

The Dream screams through you: "I don't want to wake up!" And then you know, you are partaking in a birth.

The forest slams down like the lid of a car boot before you. Standing in a solid row, the pines block whatever lies behind them, their dusted arms in crook with each other. You step back and wait to hear the plane again. You do.

The plane - jet, maybe? It alters, its wings pinned to its sides, its body feathering. It unfurls with a spin, cawing with its new voice. You laugh at the sight, it has become a giant black-headed gull.

It crashes into the trees.

You run back to your cottage and grab a carpetbag and stuff it full of fabric, pastes, foams, and your sewing kit. Whoever was onboard of that bird, if they survived, will need aid. There is a purpose for you still. You cloak your body in the pelt of one of your cows. Last of all

you retrieve your daughter's black antlers.

The birth disrupts your cottage, turning the fire from silver to orange and the furniture to bare frames. Real, Dream, somewhere in between, you share in your Mada's pain of giving birth and being born. The worlds are merging.

"Who did this?" you speak to no one. You clear the field and plunge through the snow-blanketed undergrowth of the forest. "And why?"

You come upon dozens of footprints, giant feet lead a herd of smaller ones.
Woundwort. His children. They must have seen the seagull crash, too.

Time to hurry.

END PART EIGHTEEN.