

SMALL MERCIES

HONORS THESIS

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by

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SMALL MERCIES

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## **Abstract**

*Small Mercies* is a collection of poetry that examines the stories and characters of popular mythology that remain in the collective conscious of today. As the first and third sections deconstruct classic Greek and Roman myths, the second section recreates this form of storytelling in original myths. While this collection deals with themes of motherhood, love, and aging, it focuses on comparing the human to the inhuman. By exploring humanity's relationships with beasts, sirens, and the elements, *Small Mercies* ultimately asks the reader to consider what humanity truly is.

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## Small Mercies

Small mercies  
*are not mercies*  
at all,  
*but the myths*  
borne of bone,  
*reared by flesh,*  
laced together  
*by hands that*  
*we call human.*

Mercies are  
the wells of purpose  
we find  
etched in the dried veins  
of bark and root,  
furrowed in the coverlets  
on the sleeve,  
drawn in breaths  
to feed  
vacant lungs.

**C** *One*



To Be a Mother-Wolf to Infant Sons, Romulus and Remus

If I did hold incisors suspended around your ankles—crushing air instead of cartilage with every click of the jaw—you would not speak my name, and never crave that shape of clicking tongue for the lands you could raise. So I swaddled your palms in fur and feather, hesitating to stretch muzzle and jaw across joint and sinew—always succumbing to a child's coo.

Murmur here, within my reach.

Hold fast the haunches that carry you.

You will be sightless to such subtlety—your countries, far beyond.

## Romulus Upon Remus' Birth

We live in the eyes of dogs,  
waiting for the hunt of flesh on flesh on dirt;  
and dirt—being dirt—keeps us in the grips of those who bite backs:  
how will we hide our footprints? Backs—being backs—cannot watch themselves.  
Obscure our footprints by irises until they are pawprints, huddled together in the winter  
months.  
Winter months until there are no months at all.  
At all until no more.

## Remus at Mother-Wolf's Death

Those ones that walk with padded feet  
do tread too carefully on this land.  
With that side-eyed glance,  
I fall through cracks of leathered paw,  
and wonder, meekly,  
if they fear more because they cannot speak.

Can those baleful eyes see  
that time falls unevenly on them,  
though their wrinkles are not  
the folds of senility?

They stand coiled, yet hold us gently,  
and it is in that juncture of flesh  
that I squander my breath  
to say the name I give them,  
in a tongue their mouths cannot maneuver: *Mother*.

Persephone Writes to Mothers

There is a dissonance each time a woman bites into the pomegranate—it cries out

*wherever you go, do not eat. Eat only from the hands of women.*

Discord suckled in seeds will not make the grains grow—

hold stem to skin and wash away bitter roots.

Keep sweetness cradled in the cheeks of even sweeter children:

feed eager mouths only by the palm of your hand.

Persephone Writes to Telemachus

Lost was too strong a word                    *at first—*

overbearing in the gentlest of ways.

What is it to be                                *taken*

in the crowd                                    *of time*

before it loses our attention?

Where do we go                                *from here*

after we are caught                            *too young*

in the disorder of someone else?

*Adrift,*

I will learn                                    *again*

the secrets women teach                    *themselves*

when children,                                *too old,*

do leave their mothers.

Penelope, Speaking Across the Sea

You say *it's not the water, it's not the water*

*that hides us so*

but keeps us laced in currents

*until they weigh us down, until they weigh us down.*

I say *hold your breath, hold your breath*

if Circe has poisoned the sea.

Feign mermaid if you can.

You say *trace the scales, trace the scales*

across breast and backbone

in cascades to keep the water out.

Penelope, Biding Time

She wrote upon his back in opaque ink,  
tracing arcs of backward letters

with the edge of her gentlest finger  
along the trail of spinal column,

the only script he could not solve.  
She kept her crystalline tact even after

the ink had smeared into water droplets:  
fading hues into lace intricacies,

never stopping to embroider  
smooth edges.

Will the ink age with husbands—  
will it fold into itself?

Shuttling pigment instead of moonbeams,  
memories of ink are closer than husbands,

swelling before they drop into the skin.

$\mathcal{O}_{Two}$



[You are a collector of the agéd bones]

You are a collector of the agéd bones,  
prowling for the crescents of history held in calcium,  
where the years cradle us with tenderness and sediment.

You found my spine in the crumbles of some cherubic statue,  
and backed away without brushing off the dust of the years so fixated on me,  
fearing it was the bone of God himself, too sacred to be touched by waxen fingerprints.  
I rested in that statue until it became the dew clinging to your spring windows.

Eight years later, you found my ribcage—upright—  
carrying the steel framework of the building across from the house where you grew up.  
You wondered then if I had seen when you fell off your bike, and turned away, secretly  
whimpering in the alcove of an oak tree.  
You dared yourself to graze the splintered fractures of the smallest rib, and feared the lesions  
that could have been.

The year before you died, you found the rest of me—scattered, waiting—at the bottom of a  
pond.  
You traveled the farthest for this discovery, and lamented that you had no connection to me  
there—  
as if I had left you, ignored you, as time ignored all wishes.  
You contemplated not bringing me back, but relented—swearing that I would be your last  
collection.

When you pieced me together you called me  
a muse,  
a sentinel,  
a warning.

[What few sentinels we had]

What few sentinels we had

have left us

to fields of amaranthine wheat

where the ire of femininity grows

unchecked.

It is here where primitive axioms

are conceived,

unnamed,

that we divine the coming fires

and adolescence retreats.

[This is flying the precipice]

This is flying the precipice

where the albatross birds fluttered

even after you plucked their wings.

Where they *descend, descend*

into a charmed gravity

where they never quite graze

crescents of the spiraled canyon.

Where we wore feathers on our skin

and dreamt they would let us float—

where the air crosses through gaps

in gasps hurried by helixes—

where we *descend, descend*

into a place where childhood plucks our wings instead.

[Dusk falls in diagonals now]

Dusk falls in diagonals

now that beauty has shaped me

into fine geometry:

angles

declare themselves in the mirror,

so I pause

to look into the only light

unshaded by contours.

So I cut my teeth

like I trim my hair:

in measured undulations of the palm—

the only curvatures in

my angular control.

[There is a beauty here]

There is a beauty here below the knee where women keep their knives. Where there is beauty, there is blade: met, met by covered skin. Lift fringes there: made, made by lacéd sleeve. Find sullen metals in place of *jagged hemlines*. *Do the figure well*. Hemline shaped by metal shaped by skin. Shaped, shaped to fit the arch. Of the by-and-by. Keep hope, keep hope, that I will shape the metal too. To solder, to meld, to alloy lace.

[the apertures always leak light]

The apertures always leak light—

letting in the drifts of powder

you brush

across your collarbones.

In watching the haze of powder flutter down,

I wonder if my hands will be

as still as yours

when holding the brush

that dresses pointed bone

in blushing trim.

I hold my hand to the aperture next to the mirror,

where flurries of white powder

charm us,

and weigh on bones

an iridescent albatross.

$\mathcal{O}$  *Three*

## On the Meadowlands

There was this rushing  
on the meadowlands  
where the fields met the river in a  
coupled arch,  
much like the wingspan of cranes,  
circling about with their necks bent in earnest  
over the reeds.

There was this whistling  
on the current,  
escaping the foam that feathered the surface:  
sung low from the girdle  
where there is only the pinching  
of muscle on lung on breath.

There was this siren  
floating on the foam circlets  
of currents moving too slowly  
for the eye to trace—  
the cranes sensed the movement  
only by flying in circles  
above the siren's whistle.



## Siren's Song

It is not the blinding that sways men so, but the dulcet breaths of song that grab hold.

There is a pitch that cannot be heard, but is felt rippling down the spine,

tying itself to nerve and tendon—

here in the meadowlands, there is no softer spider's silk.

There is no choice

but to go, but to reach for the pitch, but to take a siren's hands:

soft too, sharpened by femininity and even softer yet.

It seems the pitch comes from this hand, somewhere between the webbing of each finger.

The mouth is closed: sharp too, and even sharper yet.

The meadowlands always shift when the sirens sing.

There is a swaying: the gentle glistening of spider's silk

in the wake of

a pitch unheard.

To See a Siren and Not Be Called

What kind of glow

is it

that so easily draws men

to the ocean's salt?

Perhaps it is

an alkaline glow:

a current of energies

passing so smoothly

it lulls men.

Or the glow

of an irritated wound,

eyes covered in a gentle film

but always burning.

To lose a husband

is to wonder

if his eyes

will glow too.

## Young Woman to Her People

1.

I dreamt that I took off the moon and felt too naked,  
but I did not want to carry it with me anymore.

2.

The titans would come back for it if it remained too long.

Too long is too heavy.

Too heavy for moonbeams now.

3.

Let the titans carry their moon now.

Leave it ajar if they must.

Leave it emptied of all our exposed marrow.

## People to Their Titans

If it were not for your constellations,  
we would have left you long ago

in cavern and hollow  
to corrode

as so many elements do.

There is no way

to secede from  
the very skin of the earth,

but there is this shifting of the water  
on your surface

that calls you home.

## When Titans Do Not Belong

There is that word again,       *sifting*,  
a grain against my surface, the shard of sand that is ever stuck where it should not be.  
Where there are constellations, there is rain, *sifting*—       *sifting* bolts from astral skin.  
What is *sifting* without salt?  
Salt of earth,       salt of bread,       salt dripping down the skin.  
What farewell is in *sifting*—  
what *sifting* is worth saying?

## When Titans Sleep

I withdrew to mineral and ore,  
trusting it would tell me

where it was safe to sleep:  
nothing possessed me more

than the astral company  
of meteorites

that gathered my senses  
into waves

of molten belonging.

### About the Author

Katherine Marie Stingley is a poet from San Antonio, Texas, currently earning her Bachelor of Arts in English and Theatre from Texas State University-San Marcos. She will continue her study of creative writing there as a graduate student, beginning in the fall of 2015.