

## Red Snow / 붉은 눈

Megan Buys

ONCE upon a time, a mother held her child in her arms. She was a newborn. Her hair was as black as the woman's who birthed her. Her skin, red from entrance, was washed clean and wrapped in the pillowcases that lay on the bed. While the woman's eyes cased themselves in tears of joy and fear, the child's eyes remained as dry and as open as the wooden floor she sat upon.

A small apartment. A concrete courtyard. A single window that looked over the mountains, and a vase of roses that yoked itself into the frame. Memories of her first home in the Northern Kingdom.

When the child was born, there was snow outside. The red that grew in the room caused this whiteness to overlap itself again and again, until all that existed in the mother's mind was red and white. On the full moon the child's father would bring the woman flowers, and on the dark moon she would empty the vase water into the snow and throw them away.

*Careful. Careful. Don't let the thorns touch your skin, Mother.*

Too late. The blood drips on the whiteness that floods the outside, and the pain of the child leaving her mother's body begins.

The child lived in this home until she was nine years old. Each morning, as her father walked the river to work, the woman and the girl would follow later to wash their cindered clothes.

In the North, it is cold. The ice feathers over the water and the bank stones frost. The child stands naked on the river side as her mother dips the grey material in the water and scrubs it hard against the rocks. The scrubbing makes a song in the girl's mind.

*But don't you dare open your mouth to sing it.*

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Standing closer to the water's edge, she is wrapped in the bedsheets once more. She peers down at her reflection. *Does it sing back?*

The clothes are rinsed, wrung, folded and placed in the bucket the girl now carries. Her mother fills a second with the ice water and they walk back to the apartment. She is told to light the fire. *Light the fire.* Together they boil the water and this time they scrub their skin.

"Sing to me, mother?" the girl asks. But the woman only kneels down onto the wet floor and looks into the child's eyes. The boiling water makes her hands shake and brand the little girl's skin as she holds her shoulders.

"Nae ttal, *my daughter*, I am not allowed."

She whispers to me. *Don't even let the birds or the mice hear you.*

In the North, it is silent. The people on the streets walk with their heads down. The televisions play only one program. The girl turns thirteen, and when she bleeds for the first time she wraps her underwear with rags because the money is needed for bread and rice.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Her thirteenth winter. The snow stops falling and the rain comes. The small family sits by the fire telling stories of their days.

“Today, in school, we recited the history of our Kingdom. We were given an apple as a prize for our attention.” *Stand up. Bow. Sit down.* There is a knock on the door. The father stands. He has been selling scrap metal illegally, so the rebels can make knives and bullets.

*Under the bed. They are under the bed.*

Two men enter the room. Their shadows on the ceiling dance the same song as her reflection in the river all those years ago. But they do not sing either. *Father?* The warm hand from her mother stamps her skin again. Over her mouth. *Be quiet. Don't move.* The men in the uniforms point the gun to her father's chest. No pity from the huntsman. The heart from the pig does not beat in the King's box this time.

*Be quiet. Don't move.*

The child kneels into her mother's lap. Waiting, waiting, but no gun shot is made. Her memories fade from this small room as the now three figures leave into the night. It has been said that the King stews the hearts of the criminals in salt and eats them at sunset: folk tales from the ancient times, when ruler's bloodlines carried on throughout the cities and fields and mountains and deserts. Where the people who bowed to the regime laid down on the dark earth for three generations. Where walls were built to keep the North in and the West out.

And the King licks his lips.

“Put out the fire,” the mother tells her child. And the child does what she is told.

A candle is lit and the mattress on the floor is pulled up. Two knives. A map. A hand-mirror wrapped in jade spirals lies underneath. The girl holds the mirror in her small hands. She turns it thrice, and the light from the candle spins in discs onto the walls and the ceiling. On the third twist she notices the delicate writing engraved into the mineral shell:

너의 탈출을 위해 — *For your escape.*

In the North, it is dark. The discs of light from the mirror land on the mother's face and the same fearful expression that lingered during the motions of labour lie within the lines of her skin. The light shakes down the black parting of hair in the centre of her forehead. Eyes closed, following the blue veins of her temples. *Follow the river.* The arch of her nose. *Over the mountain.* The dark lakes of skin under her eyes and the vastness of her cheek bones. *The desert.*

The candlelight falls and the light disc vanishes onto the floor. Darkness kneels down. Hands and knees.

“Grab hold of my hand,” the daughter says. And the mother does what she is told.

Her other hand reaches for the pillowcases and the gifts from her father are thrown inside. Drawers opened, coins taken. Cupboards emptied of what little food was left. The door closes and the two women walk into the night.

Her mother's wrist in her hand. She pulls her along the black streets where no lamps are lit. Electricity sourced for the King's army causes the city to drip itself from the dark sky. But she has walked in between the concrete walls before. She has marched in lines toward her school, and marched behind her mother's body to wash herself clean in the river.

*Follow the river.*

Over the stone banks they walk. They walk until the sun turns the black city walls grey and inks river blue. She squints to see the distant outline of buildings in the primordial air. *How far have we come?* The river flows through the valley beyond. The river banks tighten and steepen and the city walls are now walls of rock and mud.

“We need to rest,” the daughter says. “We need to hide before the daylight comes.”

The women find a small cave that was once the sleeping place of the miner men. The little lanterns rust in the entrance. Small plates sit under dirt within. Belongings of the people who dig for gold—the children and the dwarves that do not need to hunch below the cave ceiling.

The women crawl in and sleep.

The night comes once more and the lantern is lit and lowered. The berries stolen from the shrubs are wrapped in cloth and dust-hair is brushed back. They move silently down the sides of the cave door and follow the bank onward. Two nights of dry heat and dust caves follow. Lantern acid burns the skin of the girl's palms, which are wrapped in the algae clusters that float on the rocks. Water is sucked from the leaves. Grasshopper legs are pulled off the squirming insect body and chewed with unclean teeth. Her mother still holds her hand.

The dark of the fourth night gently blinks. An eyelash falls onto the nose of the mother and is blown by her daughter's breath.

*Over the mountain.*

They begin to climb. The moon waxes and wanes and lights the little path that the soldiers used to walk. The frost follows their footsteps and the glass leaves melt under their feet. Higher. Higher. Crouching low under the pines. *Wrap your shivering body under the needles for warmth and bury your hands into the Earth, Mother.* Search for worms. Eat the worms. Don't even let the trees hear you.

And the mother's lips turn blue. Her hair now grey. Her skin now grey. *Does her blood still run red, like the roses on the table? Or does it match her lips and her eyes and the river that's now ice?* Her blood has frozen. Eyelids wide open. The knife is taken and the finger is pricked.

Too late. The black blood drips onto the frost that blankets the mountainside, and the pain of the soul leaving the mother's body has ceased.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

And the King licks his lips.

The woman is buried in the mountain earth and covered in the frosted leaves. A glass coffin. The full moon leaked onto the glass bed and the daughter cried silently, for the trees may be spies. She cased the knife and held it in her acid palm. If she were caught, she would slit her snow white throat and bleed onto the ground her mother lay in. Her tears soothe her hands. Upward.

The sun rises again when she reaches the mountain crown. She feels the hollows of her cheek bones, and on the horizon, she can see the sands that mark the West.

*The desert.*

The crinkled map that clings to her chest leaks its colours onto her skin from her sweat. She runs. She runs between the trees and beds of pine. She runs until the soles of her shoes weather and the needles can be felt against her feet. The moon grows thin. The ice that lived on the mountain peaks disappears and the lower earth can be smelt.

Desert sand spreads between her toes. Golden dust pulls her footsteps forward by day and the dust stars of the galaxies become her eyes of the night. Visions come. Dreams. The sand melts away and the forest grows behind her eyelids. The trees turn concrete and the pine needles become thick tar that melts upward and burns her legs. Sand fly bites eat away the skin and carve their ancient language into the flesh of the feasted.

The moon swells and the night creatures buzz. The girl walks on.

And when she can no longer walk, she crawls.

And when she can no longer crawl, she collapses.

And on her stomach she lays in the desert womb and tastes the stars on her tongue and the full moon on her lips — her compass and map.

Midday sun. The desert is as empty as her belly organs, and as vast as the oceans that divide the earthed world. She spreads her fingers beneath the waves in hope of finding water, but there is none. Her legs become covered. Her arms. Waist. Chest. Shoulders. All but her cheeks. The sand stirs, liquefies, melts into glass and surrounds her. Her own

glass coffin. Her withered rags burn and the knives are too hot to touch. Her map is now ash bits mocking the clear sky. Heat haze. A distant dance. Her vision blurs. She blinks.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Her eyelids heavy. Her breath almost still. The waves of heat that move on the horizon seem close enough to touch, but something closer draws her attention. A glisten. A green glimmer. A gentle glow. Her arm reaches out across the sand shards and her fingers wrap around the jade. Coldness reaches her. The hand mirror softens within her skin. And with a cracked voice she speaks:

*Mirror, mirror, in my hand -*

*Tell me how to leave this land.*

The mirror catches the Sun and the disc light flickers once again. A morse code of light with each twist of her wrist - the only movement left inside of her. But that is enough. Birds circle the little body and screech hunger down upon her, bending themselves in and out of her disc. She can smell the presence of death. Animal death. Its distant footsteps interrupting the sands as it moves closer. The sound of hooves. The sound of muffled voices. Seven voices. The sound of words in a language unknown to her.

The little body is picked up and held. Ready to be left to the Earth. To be eaten. Stewed and swallowed.

*Open your mouth.*

*Chew.*

*Swallow.*

An apple is held between her teeth. She bites down.  
And the woman licks her lips.

