

Threadbare

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smith|doorstop

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Contents

Part One

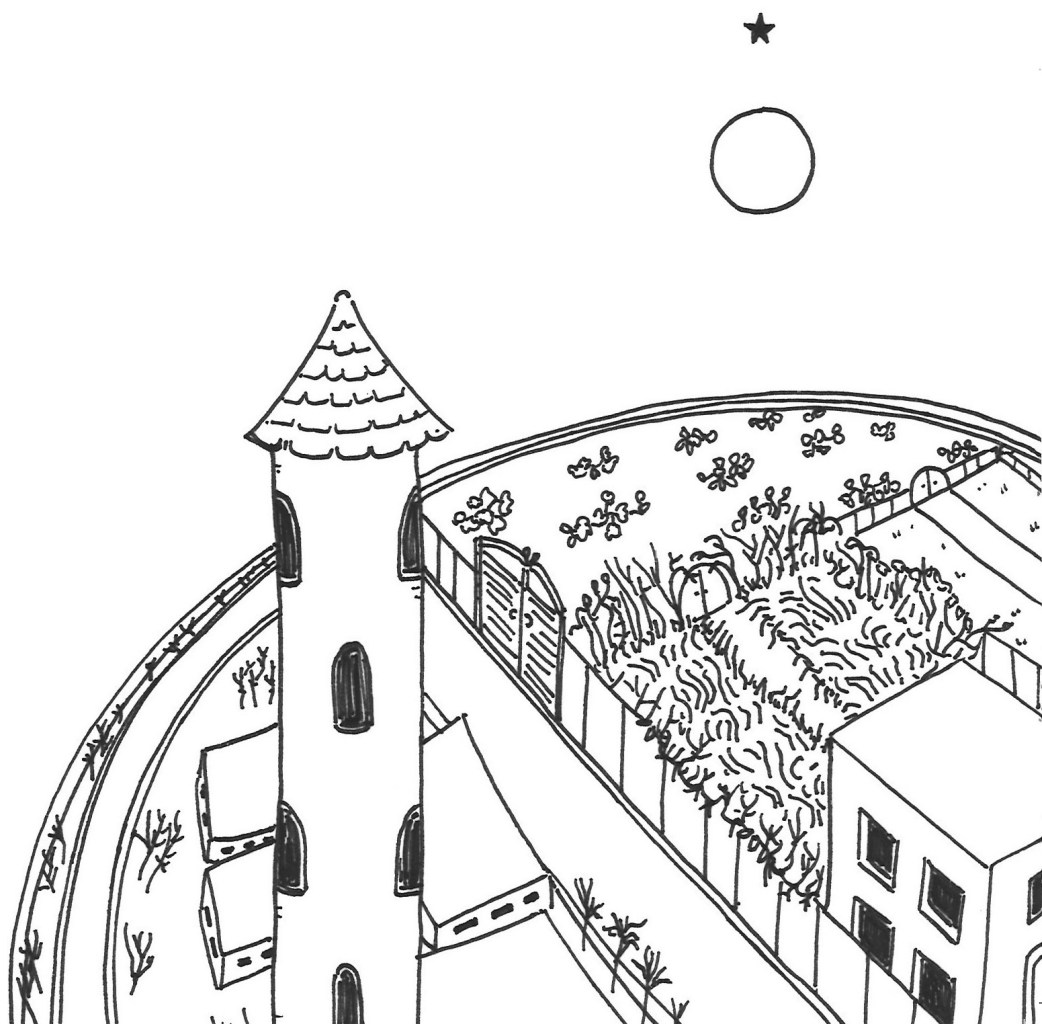
- 7 The feeding
- 8 Can you draw him for us
- 10 We saw all of it
- 12 What the women wore
- 14 Red
- 15 The neighbours know
- 16 Buttermilk
- 17 The bed in Bea's room
- 18 'I thought you were into it'
- 19 Stuart's highway
- 20 In a parked car he drives
- 21 When I walked out

Part Two

- 25 Miracles are brought
- 26 Between two clouds
- 28 In my thinking of you
- 30 The first time since the last time
- 31 A spectacle in the green hills
- 32 Long distance
- 33 Being told that you are loved
- 34 Reclaiming the word
- 35 For my sister
- 36 Painting my mother

*Dedicated to Mum, who still sews the holes
in my clothes (and my heart).*

PART ONE





The feeding

Our mother never eats.
Perhaps she is fed in secret.

She says that a goldfinch keeps her alive
but Bea thinks it's the men.

I like the one who comes downstairs.
He gives me high fives and high tens.

They always forget to wake her up
and they blacken her cotton wool.

She must eat what the men give her.
Her throat is bruised from all the eating

and her feet drag when she's full.
Bea doesn't like the new one.

He hums like he has pipes in him
and it makes her fingertips tingle.

We sit some evenings in the same room
and he asks us if we mind.

We don't reply in case it's a trigger
for him to get hateful or rude

but I'm scared if we leave it
he might get bigger,

like mould on an old bit of food.

Can you draw him for us

Bea rolls the nose of a ballpoint
across paper, mapping her walk
home from school to the police.

She details the ducks, daisies
and buttercups. When she draws
the traffic lights she pauses,

talks about ducks again because
ducks aren't the scary part.
There's no green for the wings

so she outlines the lamp post instead
where she saw the man waiting.
It cranes over him like a surrealist

showerhead. She pretends to probe
the beige plush carpet to show
how she picked the flowers

like a sandpiper pecking for prey.
The man didn't go.
Bea says she walked towards him

because that was the way home.
She didn't want his smile
or his sweets so he tripped her

and that's when she ran.
Our mother's mouth falls open.
The feeble noise that escapes

makes Bea give the pen back
and a quiet panic settle
in her throat, like feathers.

What the women wore

On a coat hanger, a bathrobe
rests against his bedroom door.
He enjoys them nylon or silk,
shawl or kimono, open-fronted
and opposite his bed, so he can
imagine the women inside them.

This one is blue, tight-fitting
and lighter than the others.
When our mother first stayed
with him, it was a pink dressing
gown, long and loose, lined
with fleece for the winter nights,

that she donned like it was hers.
For their bitter cold breakfasts
the robe was always there, until
she learnt the name of the wearer,
the woman who came before
and it didn't feel right anymore

so she bought the pastel blue.
No cotton velour, no cashmere
wrap, but a housecoat worn
in the day too, quilted and cool
for any occasion, like the morning
he woke and told her it was over.

'It's blue,' said Mum, rifling
through the box that he left outside.
We found no clothes. Her brow
furrowed, then a hollow laugh rose
from deep within. 'It's with him.'
What lady paraded our mother

around, sipping from the same mug,
slipping on the same knitted socks
he offered her? Mum recalled how
she'd put on the pink, a little bit smug,
secretly pleased that she was the one
with her hands inside of its pockets.