

*Lonely in the Heart
of the World*

MINDI MELTZ

LONELY IN THE HEART OF THE WORLD
by MINDI MELTZ

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*This book is dedicated to my father, who taught me the
languages of water, silence, and unconditional love.*

The mass illusion of this mind
connecting reality with lost time,
going back where the silver river runs,
remembering when we danced upon the sun,
and the golden painted ponies, they raced upon the land,
and the brothers and the sisters, they joined the gypsy band,
and the crocodile he slept well into the day,
and the kookaburra she wept, for she had something to say:

She said kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, what have I done?
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, I'm the only one.
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, my family left me here.
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, I'm alone, I fear.

Well the flamingo he stood upon his webbed paw.
He said Kookaburra, why are you crying?
Is there no one left at all?
And the kookaburra looked up with a tear upon her cheek.
This standing, wise flamingo was a soul she sought to seek.
And the sky he opened up, where an eagle-bird did soar,
and he swept across the mountains, to love the earth once more.

Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, I see it all so clear.
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, your family is right here.
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, wipe your tears away.
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, we are here to stay.

Well the blue heron, he waltzed along the oceanside
to the song of a banjo-violin and tears no longer cried.
And the dolphin, she thought, without a single word,
about everything and nothing and how walking is absurd.
And the kookaburra she smiled. She turned her frown away.
And her eyes they changed to laughter; she had one last thing to say:

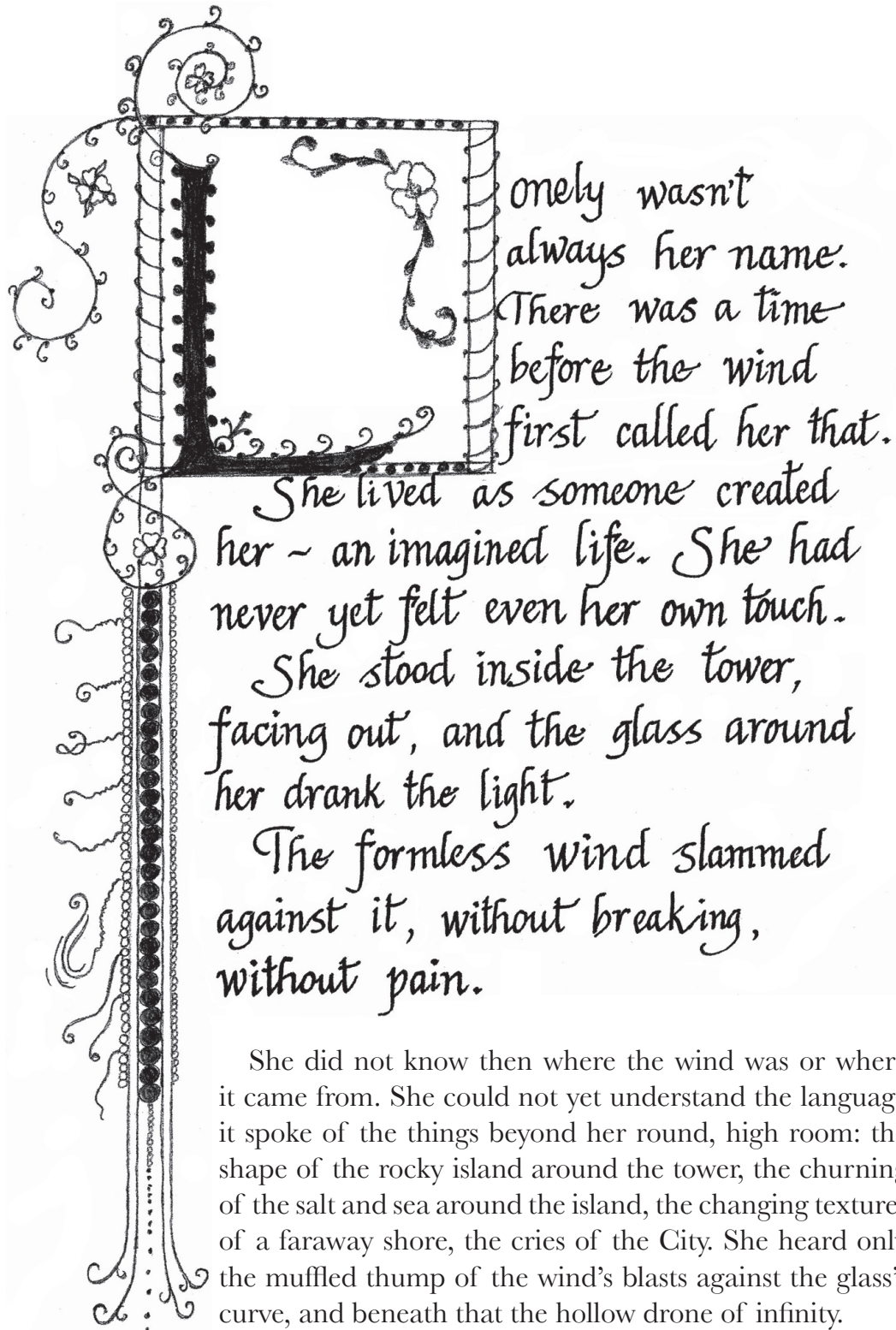
She said, kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, coo coo beh-da beh-dam doo da...
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, coo da-n-doo da-n-doo dee da...
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, sah endoo endah dah-n-dah dee da...
Kookaburra kookaburra coo coo, coo coo coo...

“Nothing of the Sort” by Utah Green



Without





The day her father did not come, she never thought to call out to him, for she had never thought beyond this room. She sat still and tried to remember the stories he had told her, and what would happen next.

Sometimes the wind hissed outward, and sometimes it sucked inward. Sometimes it wound like a soft ribbon around the tower, and at other times it came battering and beating as if the tower were the only thing that stood

in its way, and she did not know whether it raced toward something in the future or away from something in the past.

She did not yet know what she was.

“Someone will rescue me,” she remembered, whispering it. “Love will come.”

She tried to draw comfort from her father’s promise, but she did not understand what it meant. Her own voice in the silence horrified her. Though she stood at the top of the tower and faced out, still she saw nothing but herself. For the glass was not a window but a mirror, and the mirror surrounded her.



What did you mean, when you imagined a princess?

Not someone who would rule one day as queen; no one with any power.

“Princess!” you cried out as children, when your eyes could still track the movement of light off a worm path into the wilderness beyond, and you meant that anything was possible.

“*Princess*,” you giggled in the locker room when you were older, and you meant someone who wanted too much, who expected more than she had been taught to hope for.

“Princess,” you sneered when you were older still, and you meant a kind of beauty that could never apply to yourselves, a beauty which seemed foolish now that childhood was over.

“Princess,” you muttered, shaking your heads years later, and mistaking habit for wisdom you laughed at the very idea of innocence: nobody was ever that good or that guileless, and your age—if nothing else—had taught you that much.

But of course the truth is that there was a god once, who destroyed the old, beautiful world—and then he was sad, because the new world he made disappointed him, and he did not know how to reclaim what he had lost. So he locked his daughter up high in a circle of glass, in order to preserve her. He kept her apart from you, so she would never know what he had done.

In her he saw what he had intended from the very beginning. He told her she was his goddess and would live forever. *Princess*, he called her. For he did not want to endanger her with something so human, so specific, so partial as a name.



“You’re too old for this,” you say to your son, taking the toy sword from his hand. “Do your homework.”

So the boy, somewhere in some house, bends his body into the chair, and

takes the tiny sword of the pen in his hand instead. Inside, his body still swings with the rhythm of the movement he was making. He stares at the numbers and questions written on the square paper on the square desk. And he thinks about the shape of girls.

You go down the stairs, unaware of increasing your closeness to the earth. You do not touch your wife.

Once there was a story about beauty, and the heroism it took to live such beauty.

But that story is no longer told in the City.

So now you—man and woman, in some house somewhere—sit on different couches and watch the TV, because you want to know about the world.



But what *is* this world?

You think the City is reality. You think this is the world. You would say the story begins here, where all the people are.

The City is made of rectangles, and what the rectangles are made of is no longer recognizable and has no name. It is hard and shiny, and it does not change with the weather. Also the City is made of people, and all of your thoughts and feelings, and your belief in a god who fed you on promises.

The City smells like fuel and trash and sterilization. It sounds like alarms and curses and motors, sudden stops and the songless hum of machines. It tastes like black metal dust, and it feels like nothing.

The even ground in the City makes your bones clatter dryly against each other when you walk. The lights stay on all night. You step out of buildings and into cars, and then suddenly you are somewhere else, and you cannot remember what you were thinking of, and then you get out of the cars and step into buildings. And you cannot remember how your bodies did that. You all have jobs, and your jobs have nothing to do with living, and yet you need them to survive.

The City is never dark and never quiet. In the offices, in the schools, in the cars, you must sit tight and never move; yet at the same time, there is never any stillness.

It goes on like this. Comfort is bright lights, crowds, the inside of a car, big rooms up high. Excitement is loud noise, the idea of sex, and anything new. Happiness is a new Thing, and sorrow is being without It. The arms of the City do not embrace its people, but reach outward in ever-expanding roads, clawing desperately at the Earth.

This is the world, you think.

You do not ask yourselves what planet you live on. You do not ask yourselves where you are. You do not ask yourselves if this story is real.

But if you could look down from the sky, you would see how small the City actually is. It would not look real. It would look like a clumsy child's drawing: amidst richly hued hills that change with the light, the City would seem to break into those curves with a flatness that hollows your belly out to look at, leaving a plain of shattered pieces defined only by grey, thickened lines.

The god who drew this City believed he could re-make the world. He thought his drawing was realistic, more realistic than reality. He was wrong, but he was so powerful that even this ridiculous drawing could begin to destroy everything around it in only a hundred years.

You do not ask yourselves what lies beyond the City. You do not want to know because you are afraid of what you have forgotten, and because you miss it so much, it might hurt to remember.



Yet suppose that only a day's walk from the City (though no one walks any more) surged the sea. Suppose that across that sea—whose lengths could not be counted in days and nights—pulsed this tiny island, and on the island stood a glass tower. Suppose that in the top of the tower lived the fairy tale you had forgotten, that dream you had stuffed away. Suppose she was still alive.

Now the woman in the tower, who knew only that she was younger than her father, and older than she had once been, began to hear the soft, heavy echo of her own heart in her ears. At first it terrified her, like something creeping up on her from inside. But once she got used to it, she began to trust it, and then she listened to it, and then suddenly she felt attached to it. She tried to locate it, sensing that this sound kept her alive—afraid that, if she forgot it for an instant, it might stop. Wouldn't it ever tire? She had never thought about this before; she had never thought about anything ending.

But now her father's coming had ended.

For as long as she could remember, this god who was her father had been her only company. Every day he had come to the tower.

"This is the sun, and this is the moon," he would tell her, though it was not the real sun and moon, but a dream of these things that he played out for her, with his magic, on the round glass walls. "These are the eagles, and these are the deepest forests. These are the green lakes, and these are the deer—see them running!" The Princess had watched it all. She had seen the water and the fields, the focused opening and closing of flowers. She had watched her father's dreams with him in the glass, wanting to be near him, wanting to go

wherever he went—though as he spoke his voice receded and fell quieter, and often he seemed to forget she was there. She had watched the landscapes unfold before her, and the distant, wandering animals.

“When will we feel that meadow, that sky?” she had asked her father once. “When will we go there?”

But her father had shaken his head. “Someday,” he said, “he will come and rescue you, and he will take you there. I cannot.”

“Who will come?” she had cried, for she had heard this promise before and could not understand it—this idea of someone else besides themselves.

“The one from the green water, who walks in the tops of the trees...” he had murmured, but his voice came even softer then, so that she could barely hear it. And she did not know if he was telling the truth, for when he dreamed that place in the glass for her—where carpets of green lay over the water so thick they seemed like meadows you could run across, and giant trees made a rhythm in space like music, and long-necked birds with masked faces fanned their wings in a hot, weighted stillness—he would cease to speak to her at all, and he would hold his face in his hands sometimes and whisper a word she did not know:

Lost.

Her father’s eyes were a sharp and painful blue. Later she would remember how, when she asked him questions like these, they seemed to answer her with surprise—the pupils filling them like greater and greater unknowns—and something else she did not want to see there, a tightness she would learn later (from other eyes) was the pinched crease of pain.

His hair was clean and yellow, like her own, but there was a rougher tangle of hair growing beneath his mouth and over his cheeks, like the faces of the animals she saw in his dreams, and she liked to touch that. His hands were warm.

But on this day he did not come. Nor the next, nor the next.

He would never come again.

The first feeling she could identify, beneath the sound of her heart, was an absence of feeling—the strain of a dull weight in her gut, like a slow falling of loose grey sand.



You would begin the story with the City, as if the City *were* the world. But I will not begin it there. I will begin with the real world, which is at once a body and a dream.

This body is familiar to you, and yet it is not human. It does not begin head on top. It begins with the womb, which is the sea, and the womb is not a piece of the body, but rather the body is held and changed within the

sea—the rest of the body constantly born and born again from those hungry waters of creation.

From out of the sea come the sands, and the sands are the face of the world, constantly changing expression beneath the moods of the sea. Then come the fields and the deserts, which are the sad, quiet feet of the world, and at the same time its flesh, and at the same time its lungs of wind. Then come the forests, forever digesting themselves, which are its belly. Then rise the breasts of the mountains—hundreds of breasts, rising and rising, and at the same time deepening, their valleys rich and scented, their slopes falling so fast that the light weeps over them. And these highest peaks, cold and eerily peaceful, sharply braving the sky—these are the mind of the world.

The trees its boundless arms. The grass its nerves. The hot springs its lusty mouths. The rivers its arteries and veins, running everywhere, not only through the soil and stone but through the air as rain and mist and snow. The parts of this body are not arranged like your body seems to be, and they are constantly changing. Yet you remember. You remember the path this nameless goddess will walk, from the womb of the sea across the fields and the desert, through the forested mountains and into the sky—this path that will also carry her all the way back again, on the other side of her dream. You remember.

You remember, almost, that the City was built upon what once was the heart of the world. Maybe that's why the City feels so important.

Yet you cannot remember any more the landscape of that heart, before the City was made.



The Princess in the tower also remembered the world, though she did not know how. The bed she had slept in forever was not made of glass, nor of otherworldly magic. Where did it come from—this crinkly softness that, had she understood it, would have felt like real autumn leaves from some real, living forest floor? How was it that the pillow she laid her head upon to dream felt so deliciously slippery; what else has the texture of silver, if silver were a sensation, but the feathers of real birds? It seemed she slept upon the depth of water and the softness of rotting earth, and that she covered herself with the thickness of clouds or meadow grass. If this were true, where had these things come from, and how was she able to recognize them? Yet older than time seemed this bed to her, and more familiar than dreams, and more comforting than death.

Though her father had told her that her body was unimportant, that she

was a goddess and did not need the things the animals needed, she began to wonder about it now that he was gone. What were the little impressions, like empty pools, inside her hands for? Why did her elbows bend, and her wrists, so that if she brought her fingertips together she could form a circle? She lifted one foot into the air, then the other. What was this for: the roundness of the boneless belly? The undulation of a foot's sole? Her breast felt cool with the heart hot beneath it. She lost her fingers in the folds of the dress. A sudden spiral of sensation made her close her eyes.



Maybe the Princess had always known her father would leave her. Maybe that's why she had cried sometimes, though she cannot remember that now, or what it felt like.

"He will come for you," her father had said, "after I am gone." Hadn't he said that? But it brought her no comfort now.

The wind did not blow every day, and on the days it did not blow the Princess in the tower felt safer, and tried not to think of anything. But on other days it beat about the tower continuously. Sleeping, she would fall into the sound, the pillows of its gusts engulfing her, but then she would jolt awake suddenly as its movement seemed to double back behind her, bucking like a trapped beast. Its crude shoves jarred her out of oblivion, and she rose from the bed and paced. The future seemed to be rushing toward her through invisible space, coming and coming at a faster speed than she could understand. She could hear it, outside, and it was here already, and yet it was not.

The absence of her father—her aloneness without him—was so loud it hummed. It was so loud she had to cover her ears.

Circling her glass room, she replayed the love story in her mind—the one her father had dreamed out for her, over and over on the glass wall. The man on the white horse rescued the woman from the great teeth, the great jaws, the great darkness below the water, below the earth...She knew it might take a long time, because the man always had to battle so many demons before reaching the woman. But in the meantime she slept with her feet curled tight beneath her on the bed, unable to see through the glass floor, imagining what might lie below.

Over and over, she tried to remember the end of the story. She tried to understand what love *was*, and what happened when the faces of the man and the woman finally drew close, and blurred, and spoke.

Please rescue me, she prayed. She thought of the beautiful white horse, and

wondered why it was necessary in order for love to happen, and though she did not know what a horse was, she wished she had one of her own.

She missed her father. She missed his dreams, which had made so much sense at the time, and had been her only reality. She did not yet have a language for the things she felt inside when she thought of her father and lived in his absence, day after day, or when she tried to remember the last time he had come to the tower, and what had happened, and why. The hours she spent curled like a question mark on her side, her knees digging into her forehead, what she felt—no, she would not remember those times later. She would refuse to ever think of those hours again.

But the wind would name her *Lonely*, all the same. We are not named for just anything. We are named for what sets us apart.

In those foggy glass walls wrapping round and round her, she began to dream dreams her father had not taught her. Waves of color in a sea of lights, colors running in and out of doors, tensing and releasing, bringing pain and pleasure at once. She did not understand what she was seeing—that it was people, that it was crowds and masses of so many people she could never see all of their faces in her lifetime. She saw straight lines for the first time, and they were terrifying, like a neck snapped and broken. She saw buildings made of lines that lasted longer than stone, that stretched higher than the sky, built on layers of waste. She saw those masses trudging through a maze of hard, greenless hallways whose walls hemmed them close.

And then the nightmares began.

No, we are not named for just anything. We are named for what separates us from others.

Now the glass, emptied of dreams, was nothing but a mirror, dreamless and merciless, on all sides.

She saw the wilderness in her own eyes, and she saw that her eyes were not like her father's, but very dark, despite her pale face and yellow hair. She knew then that something inside her was not like him, and maybe that was why he had finally left her.

Because later she would never be sure if her dreams changed before or after her father was gone. Could it be that he stopped coming because she was not the *Princess* that he called her after all—not inside herself, where her own dreams were made?

But she had to rise now—she had to—and did not know why. She was a goddess, her father had told her, and she did not need food, and she did not need water, and she did not need touch, and nothing could ever happen to her. Yet this movement began inside her body, lurched forward in her empty gut. A bright space in her mind; a wind in her mouth. She must rise and

exist today, and every day, for some reason she did not yet know. She paced again around the room. Her face was reflected so many times over, it lost its meaning. The Princess fell to her knees and poured her vision into the glass.

“Ya!” she called out, trying to be brave. Wasn’t there anything beyond herself?

It seemed then that her father’s face appeared behind her, but before she could be sure, it changed.

It became a new face, youthful and elegant, with brave eyes that leaped right over her confusion and into the abyss of her—right into that place from which the unknown came. She felt sure it was the man with the white horse, whose image seemed now to kneel down behind her, whose face now tilted toward hers, his lips smiling and parted against her neck. She closed her eyes and shivered, and when she opened them he was gone.

“Come back!”

She would never forget that face. She knew the struggling shine inside his eyes belonged to her, and that he, too, was frightened by the heartbeat in his ears. She knew by the tremor in his smooth jaw that he was lonely too, and that his lips had opened to take her in. She felt his loneliness in her hips; she felt it in her heart falling like a silent avalanche between her ribs; she felt it seize up the muscles of her thighs. She ran her fingertips over her scalp, her cheeks, the wetness of her mouth.

She kept staring at that mirror all day, but he never came back. She stared until the image of her own face overcame her, and she fell asleep on the cold glass floor.

In her dreams, a terrible old woman was chasing her around and around the glass room, and she herself could never take a different path than that same repeating circle, and she could never get out. And the princess had never seen another woman, but the broken crazy shuffle of this old woman behind her was familiar—and the worst nightmare she had ever had.

She kept dreaming, on and on after that, and her dreams ran together, and when her mind finally swam toward waking, she could not remember them. She remembered only the smell of them, like bodies hot in the darkness, putrid with sweat and cramped tight and still for too long. She remembered someone crying gently below her, the cry echoing up through endless angles of stone and glass. She thought it was someone very young.

When she woke for real, she was lying on the floor, and it was night. She breathed in, and she could smell her own body for the first time, sweet and alive. She rolled over onto her back, looked up at the glass, and saw through it for the first time to the stars.

She was not afraid. She did not feel lost or insignificant. She felt, in a way,

as if she were still looking at her reflection, but as if her being were somehow far bigger and more wonderful than she had ever realized.

The sky looked rich and somber, with every color fallen and merged inside it, as if when colors died they all returned to the night to decompose into this fertile blackness. And through it came the white pricks of the stars, sharp as pain—faraway beams of no-color. Clouds spread across in smears of silver, each one silent and serious, cushioning the beauty of the stars as if to keep them from bursting.

Then she saw that the sky surrounded her, and was everywhere. She stood up. She turned around and around looking at the sky, whose black was so shiny it seemed to hold a brightness deep within, like a singing in the silence or a smile through tears. She spun around, just on the verge of dancing. Then she went to the glass, because the mirror had finally become not a dreamscape or a mirror but a window, and through that window where she'd seen reflected her mysterious lover's face, she now saw a mountain.

She could not tell how far away it was, because she had not yet learned distance, beyond the distance of wall to wall. She could not imagine a distance such as this. From here its peaks were merely a calm, cryptic pattern, glowing faintly white. But the mountain made her feel that her life extended somewhere beyond her. She thought she might understand, for the first time, for just a moment, what her father meant when he told her she was immortal.

She looked at the mountain all night and never grew sleepy. She pressed herself as close as she could right up to the glass, staring out. The longer she looked at that delicate, eloquent line of the mountain's edge against the sky, the more it started to look like something written, a pattern in some language that she was ever on the tantalizing brink of remembering. She knew for the first time what loneliness was, and she knew that whatever was written there was the answer to that loneliness. The world itself was her mirror, and she herself was the world, and everything was possible.

As her vision followed the rivers of snow downward, and along the patterns of stone and tree so far away that they were only shades of each other, her hands drifted unconsciously over her own peaks and valleys, the patterns of her own body that she had never before explored. When the dawn came, she felt tense and desperate in a way she did not understand. She pressed her bare limbs against the glass; she pressed her face to that image; she cried out to it and licked it hungrily with her tongue.

But when she touched the glass it shocked her, like a deathly silence that cut right through her bones. She jumped back and looked at her knees. They were red, and when she touched them, they were cold. She looked back up and saw her own face, and the mountain was gone.

Then a scream began, and the scream must be coming from her. Inside the scream were all the sounds she had never heard, as if she held inside her all the world that she had never seen: gulls and rain and laughter and wind, waves breaking and fire crackling, coyotes and thunder. As she screamed, her breath hit the glass hard. The image of her face collapsed slowly inward. The mountain appeared again where a hole opened in the glass before her, as if reflecting the widening cavern of her own open mouth.

For it was not glass after all, but ice.



In the City, there are the familiar square ceilings, the familiar angry lights. There are the signs and the words, the suits and the high-heeled shoes. There is the dog waiting outside on the concrete, his head in his paws, sniffing half-heartedly at the passing feet.

You sit in your rows of desks, raising your hands. Some of you want desperately to be seen; others want to disappear.

“Who created this world?” asks the teacher. “Who made the City and gave us all the things we need, and made us all-powerful, so that we should never suffer again?”

“Hanum,” you answer. “Hanum created the world.”

“Are there other gods in this world?”

“There is only one god: Hanum.”

In the stores, in the malls, in the catalogs, the idea of a Princess persists: Hanum’s unattainable, mythical daughter. On a clothing label, on a bottle of shampoo, on a box of ready-made health crackers or a can of fruit. She shows up in commercials, on the hood of a car or drinking a soda.

The image is everywhere, and yet no one speaks of it. The hunger that creates this image is not taught in schools, and the worship of this image is silent. You do not name her in the churches, and yet she is the reason you go.

In the schools, in the lunchroom, you laugh. Maybe someone betrays his innocence by speaking of the Princess in the Tower as if she is real. And you laugh, using your vulgarest words to express your contempt, your embarrassment.

Of course you do not believe in that image any more. That kind of beauty. Skin as smooth as still water and flushed like the first hesitant color in a pale winter dawn. Yellow-white hair shining down her shoulders like a memory of childhood sunlight, brighter somehow than the sun you see today. Eyes deep as galaxies, lips forever new. Her body at once proud and yielding, like a sapling grown without cover in an open field, her bones strong and her

curves definite but muted beneath a hazy gown of changing silver....

In the schools you only say, "Hanum created the world."

"And why do we seem sometimes to suffer?" asks the teacher. "Why do bad things happen?"

"Because of the Witch," you say. "A woman from the old world, who tricked Hanum into marrying her. She fights the magic he made. She wants to take the world back into chaos, into wilderness."

For something is wrong. Once Hanum walked among you, and magic was made before your eyes, and the purpose of things explained. Roads had a destination, and the City Center, where food and energy come from, was open to everyone and understood by all. But now life is done out of habit, and no one remembers exactly why. Money, the magic current of the City, gets dammed up in certain buildings and does not reach everyone. Some people do not live in buildings at all but on the streets. Some people are not functioning properly.

Behind the schools, skipping class, you give the Witch another name, a name you dare not speak in public: *Dark Goddess*. You whisper that She killed Hanum, after all.

And the Princess in the Tower is only a symbol now, though women still wear fake faces over their real faces in their effort to look as they imagine she looked, for they cannot believe that such beauty—that kind of beauty that unfolds from a body out of pure, raw life—is naturally possible. She is chaste, and they are not. She has no needs, and they do. She is beautiful, and they are formless, constantly aging despite Hanum's dream of everlasting life. In your manufactured world, you have never seen beauty that is not fake, and so you no longer believe in it.

The City is full of contradictions. It is shameful to make love to any one person more than once or to miss anyone after they have said goodbye. Yet it is forbidden to lust after anyone but the person who is bound and promised to stay by your side.

Families are sacred, and yet no one has a family. No one wants to be anywhere near the people who bore them or remembers where they came from.

Animals are the only ones who love unconditionally, but they are not prioritized in emergencies, and in a pinch they are thrown away.

Everyone tries to be different, but everyone is different in the same way.

Drugs are forbidden, but they are easier to get than love.

Every woman, when she wakes in the morning, imagines for a split second that she is the Princess. She imagines she is that passive perfection of which all men dream. Or she imagines that the god Hanum comes for her alone, and what it would feel like to make love to a god.

Every man, in the moment of waking, before he remembers his life, imagines that he is the one to claim that Princess from the old stories—that he is the hero who will take her in his arms, the light of her redeeming eyes focused upon him.

But none of you remember, as you trudge through your days, that you imagined or longed for such things when you woke.

Nor do you realize that everyone else longed for them, too.



Now the wind came hurtling in.

The Princess whirled away from it, curled into a ball, and whimpered. The scent of her own body flamed stronger, and it was calling to her, and she did not understand what it was saying, and she wanted it to stop. For it was something her father had never mentioned—this body. Here it had turned the glass to ice and melted it. She did not trust it. There was something wrong. Something was coming for her—in the wind, in the pounding of her heart—and it did not feel like rescue.

She lifted her head and opened her eyes. The wind filled the room, and now the room was cold and meant nothing any more.

She crawled to the hole and poked her head out, and as the dazzling freshness of the air sparked against her face for the first time, she saw the rocky island around the tower, and—down below—the old woman from her nightmare.

Surely it was the Witch her father had always warned her about, who guarded this tower and who kept her from leaving! She stood there right at the bottom, her grey form turned toward the sea.

The Princess stared at the Witch in shock while the wind spun dizzily around her head, and the Witch did not move, did not turn her head. The girl was afraid to see that face. But finally she gathered her courage and cried, “Let me out!” Her voice shook her, so that she reeled back and hit her head on the ice, but the old, gray woman did not seem to hear.

Why? the wind asked, and she understood its voice for the first time. It was so cold. She could not connect its force with the echoes she had heard from inside the tower, when it had blown around harmlessly like a distant philosophy of life. She pressed her hands to her ears and pursed her lips, which felt dry and bruised now.

Why leave? the wind repeated carelessly.

“Because I’m lonely in here,” she murmured, as if to herself, but the wind whispered back.

What do you want, then?

"I want love." The girl let her breath out hot in the face of the wind as if to blow it away, though its ability to speak to her—the only time anyone had ever spoken to her besides her father—unsettled her. She closed her eyes and let the wind touch her for a moment, helpless to the pleasure of it. Even when it beat against her in violence, it felt good to be touched.

"Hey!" She waited for the Witch to turn around. She was ready. "Can't you hear me? I want to get out now! You can't keep me here."

It was only a dream, said the wind.

No. The girl tried to ignore the wind now, panicking as she looked out hungrily across the sea. Distance. Space. It made her mind buckle.

The Witch did not move. The girl looked down for what seemed like a long, long time. The space around her head was terrible, but to turn back into the room seemed worse.

At last the wind nudged her again. It would not leave her alone. *So who are you, that you think yourself worthy of love?*

She shivered up and down her spine, and could not seem to stop. "I don't have to prove myself to you," she said to the wind. "I'm the daughter of a god. Who are *you*, to ask me such questions?"

The wind laughed, in a way that was at once cruel and kind.

I do not need to prove myself, or name myself.

"Why not?"

Because there is nothing I am seeking, and nothing that I want.

The girl sensed perhaps a judgment in this, and responded a little defensively, "Well, it's not that I want so much. I've been trapped in a tower all my life, and I ask for love. Is that so much to ask? I'm lonely, is all."

Then I will call you Lonely, since that is what you call yourself. Lonely shall be your name.

Lonely began to cry. It was an easy thing, and it melted her down into herself, where she found comfort in the hollow of her own chest. "But I don't want to be lonely," she sniffed, missing her father.

I'll be your friend, said the wind, but Lonely thought she heard mockery in its tone.

"I don't want you!" she cried. "Leave me alone."

But the wind is in charge of the path voices take, and finally it whipped the girl's voice down to the old woman's ears. The woman turned, very slowly, her stooped back rising and her bent head following. Not moving her eyes, she lifted toward Lonely a crumpled, nightmare face, and in that face Lonely saw—though she would later forget—the same sorrow she'd seen every day of her life in her father's eyes. But something in these eyes wasn't right.

The Witch said, without expression, her voice creaking as if she sucked her breath in instead of letting it out when she spoke, "Your father is dead."

The wind stopped.

"Why?" said Lonely. She had heard of death, but she didn't think it was possible. Not for herself and her father, who were gods, and needed nothing.

But the old woman did not speak again. Her hair webbed her face in the wind as she turned back to the sea. There was an old chair there at the foot of the tower, made of driftwood and bones, and the old woman fell down into it and dropped her face in her hands, as if exhausted by the four words she had spoken. Yet Lonely felt certain that she must be a powerful witch, because she did not seem to suffer from the cold, and all around her there was nothing but grey barren rock and grey churning sea and grey heartless wind.

Inside the room Lonely paced until she was dizzy. She screamed and breathed against the frozen door, but it was thicker than the walls and she only melted it a little, turning it slippery with small rivers of water that freed themselves and ran to the floor like tears. She caught them and touched them to her tongue, and then she beat the door with her fists. She punched it until her skin broke, and then she curled up at the foot of it with her knuckles in her mouth, tasting her first taste: the salty, mineral taste of blood. In that taste she sensed, vaguely, what death was. But still she did not understand where her father had gone.

She dreamed a white bird flew into her room through the hole she had screamed into the wall. He perched on her chest, his feet so thin and light, like spider webs, that she barely felt him. Tenderly, so that it did not hurt her at all, he pierced her breast bone with his long beak, and pulled out her wild, throbbing heart. He dropped it into his feet, upturned like hands, as he lifted off her chest into the air. He flew with it to the frozen door, where, glowing like an ember in his grasp, it melted a hole big enough for her body. Then he came back down to where she lay, and held her heart out to her. She reached for it with trembling hands, saying, "Thank you."

The bird said, "It was already there. I only wanted to show you." He looked at her in a way that was familiar, then flew up into the open sky above her.

Waking was like spinning upward, as if she were a leaf that spun in the spiral of the bird's wake.



When she opens her eyes, she is only a puddle of glassy limbs down on the windy stone, with the wide universe open around her.

There is no tower.



But there are people below the tower, within the sea, of whom no one ever, ever speaks.

And on this night they cry out, with a cry that makes no sound but shakes the earth under the waters, and makes the waters rise a little, and the ground tremble beneath the buildings of the City.

No one is hurt, but in a factory where Things are manufactured, glass breaks and chemicals are knocked together which start a fire—and the fire burns up part of several buildings before it is put out. And you do not think about what fire is or where it comes from, and the men who work with the chemicals do not wonder about the magic they are using, or what it means to handle such power.

But the tremors, even after they end, make you uneasy in a way you have no words for, as if the foundations of reality itself are unsafe.

Maybe there is more to this world than you remember. Maybe there are still goddesses turning under the sea, and gods in the sky who toss the rain sadly from hand to hand—hoping that someone will once again pray for it, will dance for it, will cry for it, will need it to grow food. Maybe there are people who still live real lives outside of the City—in the desert, in the forest, in the mountains, and even in places that do not exist any more.

Because you still dream, in the City. Only you will not admit to it, so your dreams cannot help you. No one has time to sleep, in the City. No one has time to stop.

But the dreams still come. Someone—did you not realize this?—someone has been keeping them alive for you.