

second best

they say your fourth wife
has given you a daughter –

a half-sister
I'll never meet

odd-looking thing
will you hold her

slipped easy into the world
will you raise her at the castle

at least this time the mother survived
will you watch her dance

no frost on this one
give her a name

come to me

in darkness
bristling with fur

silky-pawed
silver-eyed wolf
tracking tender prey
through shadow's heart

come to me
so silent swift
air barely trembles
when you pounce

devour me

hooked

*why doesn't that girl
tie a leash around your neck
and be done with it?*

his Ma never gets it right –

not a leash
but a line hooked
both ends

spooling silver thin
across the water

fragile at first

any pull
would barely sting

but each time
he's with her

he could stumble
the final kiss

hook the next
cold clumsy
to her breast

painstakingly
playing it out

as he's rowed
back to shore

he'll secure his end
barb-deep

the glint of it

one strand thicker

harder to cut

Birch

*if hell is fire
is heaven ice?*

* * *

I didn't think
it would be like this

even frost-burnt
and bitten

Tom comes back

propping the door
while he tells me
about the horses –

*Dancer's off her food
the foal's coming along*

or he'll sprawl
in a chair by the fire

to watch
while I ready
for bed

*can't touch yet
but I can look*

he can make a look
last hours

* * *

so much a part of me
I'd forgotten
almost

but last night
silver light picked out
the scars on my back

the chair scraped
he leant close –

who?

...Birch

which one?

the first

did she last?

... ..no

good

* * *

I needn't have feared
he'd ask more

he trusts I did
as he'd have done

given a swift clean death –

if only I had

* * *

too bold

if I looked her
dead in the eye

sly

if I averted my gaze

impudent

for asking questions

sullen

if I asked none

feather-head

if I laughed
or skipped
or sang

evil

any song

evil

that wasn't a hymn to her

evil

god

* * *

she left her lifework –

saving souls
among the nomads
of the shifting sands –

to risk the ice
to save me

* * *

first lesson

she had the maidservants
shroud the windows

and I might have sat
far from candlelight
to dull my haze

but for the yearning
of my gloved fingers

to chase spiky black markings
across page after page after
water-crinkled page

* * *

second lesson

she stripped
my chambers of books

had them piled
in the courtyard

over-loved
they refused to burn –

she ordered me help
carry them to the ferry

to smoulder
in the village

* * *

third lesson

she thrust
her worn scripture
into my un-gloved hand

its spine brittle-
 broke
in the fall

before I could expl ...

d
 e
 r
 a
 o
her cane s

* * *

some days she'd start slow

tread the darkening room
in measured steps

others she'd almost
 trip
to keep pace

with the rapture
 spilling
her cracked lips

 bustling
heavy
 circles
until
 she spun
to stop

eyes tight blue
scaly hands skyward

crow body
 quivering
over me

calling to
a father
 who
no matter

how many hours
 my knees
 cried
repentance

would never
grant mercy

to a creature
such as me

* * *

why pray if I'll never be forgiven?

h	r	r	t
e	e	i	h
r	d	b	e
		b	
c		o	a
a		n	i
n		n	r
e		e	
		d	

* * *

it would have been so easy
to catch her hand
at lesson

or creep
into her bedchamber
while she slept

* * *

I couldn't bring myself to touch her

* * *

the servants at the castle

the girl whose fall I broke
without thinking

the cook I backed into

the pink-nose kitten
that leapt on me

the child—

whether I list

two

twenty-score

more —

unintended

every one

but if I touched Birch...

* * *

mortal afraid

I'd snap

lash back –

the creature

they believed me to be

* * *

cook stopped over-
salting my food

the maidservants forgot
to leave pins in my dresses
or grit in my boots

two books even slid
under my pillow

't ain't right, mistress
and you the crippled king's daughter

yet

the corridors clattered empty
the minute lessons began

* * *

even a creature
with blood
on her hands

can beg forgiveness –

I held out a hand

look, no blood

* * *

the longer the cane

the more
 enduring
 the lesson

* * *

did you know what she was
when you sent her to me?

* * *

she kept calling out

merciful father

the only father
I could think of
was you

* * *

her conviction –

if I wasn't
 doing evil

I was
 thinking evil

* * *

I was beyond hope

* * *

head down
palms pious

knees numb
beyond aching

frost taking on
the gloom

I'd wrap myself
in imagining

ice-needles
 streaking
the length of her cane

 splintering
her up-stretched arm

ice-veining
her neck

her mouth
frozen

O
blue eyes
frosting
disbelief

as forever after
I used her
perfectly

positioned
arm

as a cloak-hook

* * *

but if I started

how to trust
I'd stop?

* * *

touch anyone

*cause one more living
creature to freeze*

*your arms will be bound
till you go to your grave*

your edict still hangs
limp in the hallway

* * *

the servants taught me to count

by tallying the bodies I froze
the day I learnt to walk

they could never agree
if my mother was the first –

childbirth claims so many –

they say she refused
to give me up

but held me held me held
so tight
they had to
p r i s e m e away

they say she strayed
into delirium

called on darker spirits
to protect me –

and cold death
being so close

was the first to answer

* * *

every governess
that came after Birch
was made to bear her name –

one of your edicts
I thought

but it was the servants' doing –

whether for them or me
certain protection from you

* * *

she's not buried
in the churchyard

I wonder where they put her

* * *

if she hadn't refused to rotate classrooms
 given my ice a chance to build
if I'd muted my defiance
if she'd swapped thin soles for snow-ridge boots
if my frost-haze hadn't inflamed her

if she hadn't left the nomads
if you'd sniffed the zealot in her
if I hadn't been beyond salvation
 touched her quick
if her god any god had existed
answered either of our cries
if her cane had been less eager
if she hadn't slipped mid-
 stroke
if her spine had been less brittle
if piety hadn't worn me rigid wrong
if the servants hadn't scarpered

if I could stop
 t h e
r e l e n t l e s s
 c r a c k l e
 o f m y i c e

 g l e a m i n g

 t o w a r d h e r

i n t h e d a r k

* * *

merciful father

it burns