

I.

The wide-eyed girl from Illinois
took a long pull from the vodka bottle
on the nightstand beside her bed,
and turned out the light.

Propped halfway up on her pillows, she lay in the dark,
wondering whether her target liked to have a little drink before bed, too.

As the low meander of late-night traffic
breathed by the window,
three stories below,
she wondered.

But she slept the black sleep she always did,
the sleep of those like her,
whose humanity had been scorched out,
in a secret laboratory in Siberia.

*Cold biting into her arms as she surged forward
She was expected to survive the night
in the evergreen forests --
build a fire, kill a beast, shelter herself,
and do so outfitted with only a hunting knife that was,
at best, the size of her pale, freckled forearm.*

*They needed to know that she was the best.
At thirteen.*

*The cold earth crunched under her feet;
dead leaves, pine needles, all frozen brittle,
gave way under her pounding steps.
Her deep, hard breaths rolled forth from her lips
in thick, white clouds.
She had to keep moving,
until she could find something to kill;
if she kept moving, she'd stay warm.*

II.

She'd skipped breakfast that morning
and gone straight to work:
poised in the window of an office building in midtown,
she observed another target in another building
across the street and two floors down.
She observed him moving about his workspace
noted with disdain that he failed to wash his hands
when emerging from the restroom.
Men, she thought with disgust.

And then she'd sniped him; clean, with one shot,
directly between the eyes.
She watched him go down.
She was good at this.
Damned good.

She was not from Illinois.
She was not wide-eyed.
That was a skin she wore,
and would shed like a snake.
She was better than the best.

The dreams sometimes tried to break through
the blackness of her sleep.
She woke with flashes of memories
she couldn't quite touch,
couldn't quite name;
a pretty girl with pale skin and dark eyes
(Any?, her mind strained for a name);
her skin crawling at the feeling of hands, man's hands,
methodically stroking her body;
electric shocks stabbing through her pulse points...
She never could tell if she wanted the dreams or not.
She couldn't remember much about
What they'd done to her at the hidden laboratory
and even less about what came before it.
She suspected it was better that way.

Winds came south, cold through the cotton of her shirt.

*Prioritize: skin, fire, shelter.
She would succeed where others had failed.*

*She shinnied up a nearby larch tree,
up through its thick boughs,*

*its rough needles brushing her face
and pricking her arms through her thin sleeves.*

*She laid eyes on it almost immediately;
a large, male grey wolf.*

*She moved through the larch trees' fragrant growth
toward where the wolf waited.
Her knife, the blade like a fierce, flashing smile in the gathering dark.*

*She saw him looking around, furtive and uneasy.
You smell me, she thought. It's alright, wolf, I smell you, too.
We will be finished soon.*

III.

And when the dreams got too close,
Or the distraction of bloodlust too persistent,
And even a little light murder wasn't enough to lift her mood,
She would dance.

She'd go to the studio rented especially for her
bind her straw-gold curls up into a tight bun,
change into her leotard,
and drop the needle onto a record.
The eerie opening notes of Stravinsky's
"Rite of Spring" moaning from the record player.
Only the best, the strongest, the most enduring dancers
could hope to attempt to follow in Nijinsky's footsteps.
She'd seen lesser dancers exit the stage
vomiting after performances.
But not me, she thought with pride.

She was the best.

The cacophony of the orchestra guided her;
at first she watched her own movements in the large mirrors,
admiring her own strength and grace
as she duplicated the steps that she knew so well.
Her breathing remained even, no matter that its pace had picked up.
She began to sweat, and with the sweat came release;
that sick feeling pushed out of her stomach, out through her pores.
She would trample it on the hardwood,
abandon it among the scuff marks left by her toe shoes.
Her body was a powerful, graceful, deadly machine.

The best.

She remembered reading once
that in the most climactic moments
of Stravinsky's work of chaotic genius,
the audience at its Paris debut began to riot.
She'd be causing riots soon enough, she thought,
and not with ballet.

She would stop watching herself in the studio mirrors;
lost in the catharsis of movement,
of the cold pleasure of dissonance and discord that
she sowed in the world around her.
She was the best.

And still the dreams came,
still muffled and obscure,
but poking more insistently.
The snap of another girl's neck in her hands,
the sound of bones crunching,
that pretty pale girl.
Of course she could do it again.
She was the best.
Of course.

*Amid the quietly descending snow,
she faced the wolf she'd wounded,
regretting that she failed to finish the job.*

*She crushed her panic and fear
into a tiny, dense little fist in her chest,
and there it sat, as she and the wolf regarded each other
in this frozen moment*

*When the tiger emerged from the woods,
it tore out the wolf's throat
then laid it at her feet like a house cat presenting a mouse.
It looked at her, it's golden eyes calm.
One predator to another.
It curled her beneath its fur
and sheltered her through the Siberian night.*

IV.

Her target took her to the circus
with its loud brass band,
its reek of sweat and peanuts,
and they watched in horror as the tiger mauled its trainer.
The tiger took a bolt between the eyes.
It was more than she could bear.

She was an instrument of Justice, she was told.
The atrocities of the Americans during the war
could not go unpunished.
She was the angel of vengeance, prepared to visit
the dispassionate hand of karma on them.

She dressed as a young, fashionable mother,
pushing a pram full of canisters of poisoned gas.
She would test it at the opera,
And presuming its success, load the rest
into a dirigible that would spread it over the city.
This is what war crimes get you.
This is what murder of the innocent gets you.
A pram full of poisoned gas,
pushed by the mother of disaster.

But her target was too good.
Her target found her out.
Her target became her pursuer.
Her target chased her to an airfield outside the city
And fought her hand to hand.
Her target reminded her of that girl
whose neck she'd had to snap during training
all those years ago
the girl whose name had been torn out of her mind.
Her target reminded her of a tiger,
beautiful and fierce in the Siberian forest.

*In the morning, the doctor and his woman
came to extricate her.
She climbed from under the tiger's embrace
and looked at them, calm and clear,
having rested as well as she could recall having done.
Their shotguns slowly levelled, pointing at her.*

"Stand aside, dorogaya," they said.

*She did not look at the tiger as they
emptied shell after shell into it.*

*Behind her eyes, she felt a hot, dry ache,
where tears might form
in weaker, more sentimental creatures than herself.
She stood, cold and distant, until they were done,
and they loaded her into a truck.*

V.

Her target intended
to keep the dirigible from launching
and she couldn't let that happen.
Guns came and went and then
they fought with whatever was at hand;
a curtain rod, a fire extinguisher,
a pair of pool cues that shattered in hand
as they rained blow after blow
against each other.
It was amazing what you could weaponize
in a lounge area of a private airfield.
Her target was good. Maybe better.

Of course her target said all the things
that heroes are supposed to say:
You don't have to do this (yes I do)
You were meant for better than this (no I wasn't)
You can choose who you want to be (no I can't)
I know you (no you don't)
I know your heart (no you really don't)
This isn't you (yes it is and always was
please stop looking at me with such grief
and betrayal in your eyes
don't you know how this goes?)

The villain suffered a shot to the chest
(all the guns were not emptied, apparently)
and a fall from a second story window,
staggered away in defeat,
and left the wide-eyed girl from Illinois
on the ground in the airfield.

And the tiger?

She still prowls.