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PRESSED FLOWERS

The moon is dead, but its ghost hangs above the sleeping town, a pewter hole in the dark. It's a restless night for dead things. Horse skeletons dance in the woods amidst birch and fern and the swamps speak a language of gurgles and exhale mist beneath the shadow trees.

I am not dead yet, but I have consumed the potion and it echoes in my veins. The moon has called for the stars and I have broken all the windows. I have burned my clothes. I have slept with strange mushrooms stuffed in my pillow. I have dreamed of this night.

The book came to me before the dreams — I found it in a basket, bobbing in a dark pond. An old dust-scented volume buried in a basket full of dead crickets. There were brittle flowers pressed between the pages — rose petals like rusty kisses.

I read it in the garden, safe in the light and warmth, and at night by candle. I spoke to no one, I told no one. I cried in the soft light, I cried and burned my clothes.

Reading the book was like climbing a precarious staircase.

Passages that led into passages. I walked the damp wood, I gathered the mushrooms, soft and pale and scented like graves. I slept on them with the book in my hands and petals in the book. I dreamed of this night.

I gathered the herbs, as the book required. I gathered them under storm-cover and mist and when the dew was dark as the air, cold as the stars. I broke the herbs and mashed them, distilled their scents and oils. I drank the herbs naked, in a season of nights.

I broke every window in the old house and invited the moon. I drank the sullen green brew — I drank the fields and woods, the musty, dank and strangely spiced brew of herbs. I heard the horses in the woods.

No one would have recognized me, not with the wild hair and the green fire of the potato in my eyes. They did not see my fine boots curling in the flames, folding darkly on the logs. How could they understand — and had they ever — understand the book with its attic-breath, the smell of dead roses?

I knew the pages and the pages knew me. I slept with the book in my arms, like a lover, my dreams soft against the soft dark smell of the mushrooms. The toadstools knew my dreams, perhaps they whispered them to me, as the moon whispered to them.

Horses drummed in the woods and they danced like four-legged birches. They made breezes beneath the leaves. I passed in the cool air and I heard them off in the trees. They had dreamed of this night too.

I came upon the churchyard, deep in the mist. The church's stones were older than New England, reptilian grey and brushed with moss. The moon was on half of it, pale and cool.

The graves were waiting, the patient slate slabs dark above the dew. Only crickets stirred. I stood naked on the graves and opened the book. It creaked like a coffin. I paged through and collected the pressed flowers.

I sprinkled the flat dry blooms onto the graves. I put flowers

on the graves and the damp grass took them. Luminous wisps of sighing green rose up from the women's graves.

They rose vaporously and floated into the near wood. I saw them, like firefly smoke, moving through the black trees, gathering. I heard their sad song of moans, hollow and lovely. They gathered and dreamed; they came back with their bundles of twigs and sticks.

Naked in moonlight with the musty book, I watched as they built slender figures upon their graves. Scarecrow effigies, gnarled and brittle. The amorphous green women — their faces only hinted, faces of water and moss — went about their work and sank back into the earth when the work was done. I found myself alone in the churchyard with a rickety troop of skeletal branch-women.

I walked in the equine wood with the moon following, winking through the high branches. My windowless house waited, dusty and spidered.

The door creaked like a coffin and the stairs to my chamber were precarious. A figure waited in my bed. A woman of birch branches, beautiful as bone. Her embrace was cool as we lay together and read the final chapter of the book.