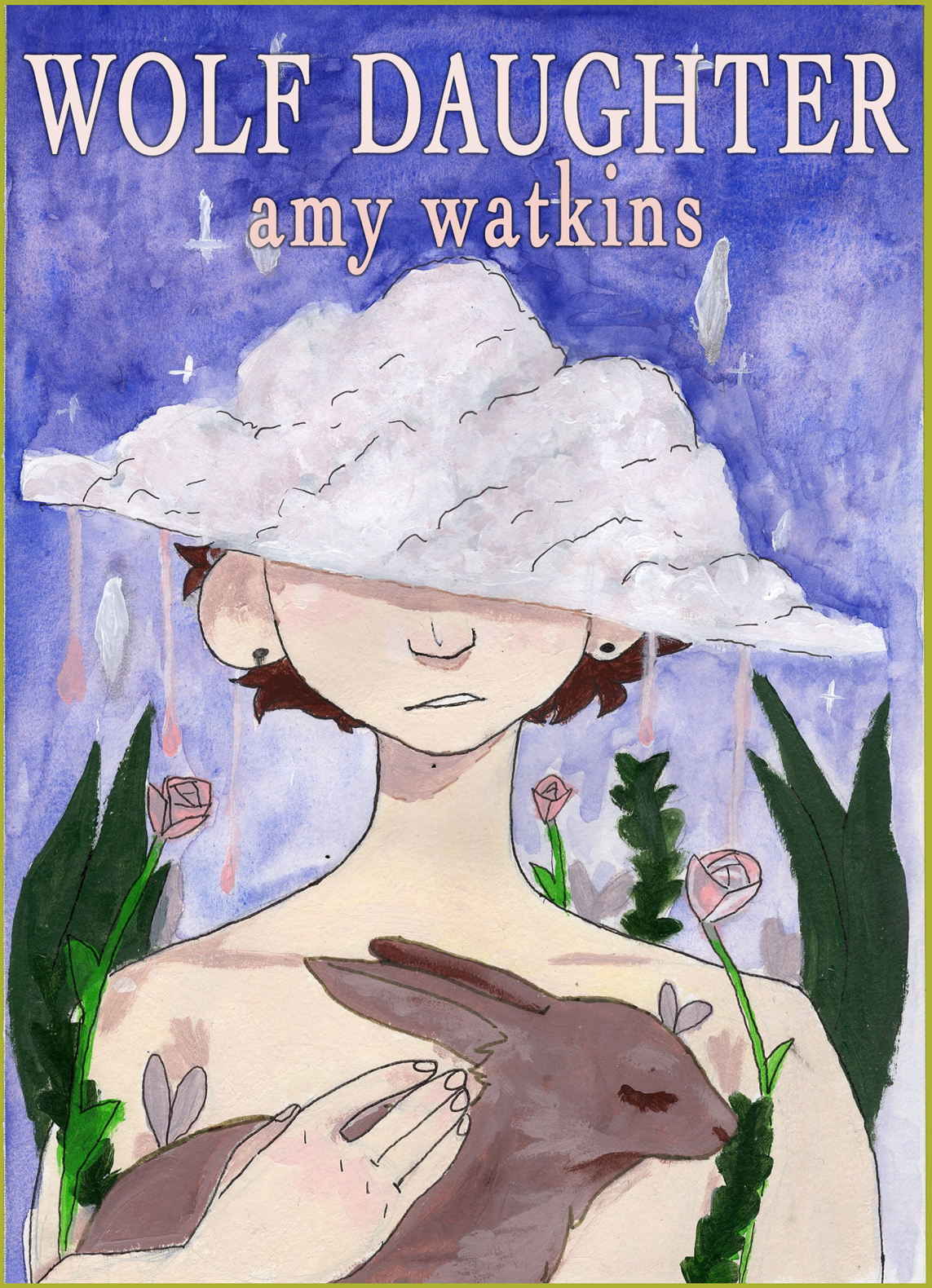
WOLF DAUGHTER

amy watkins



Wolf Daughter

Amy Watkins

for Alice

one.

My daughter says, “I don’t remember how
not to be a wolf.” She says,
“I’ve tried everything. I guess
I’m just a wolf now, and I’ll be a wolf forever.”
Her ears and teeth grow long and keen,
and there’s a ridge of guard hairs down her spine
she lets me stroke sometimes
when she’s tired and lonely from life
as a wolf. And though it’s hard
to shop for jeans and homecoming dresses,
and we don’t agree about food or the hygiene
of her bedroom—I mean, den—
I’m her mother,
and I think my wolf daughter beautiful
when she stalks and howls,
when she tears my heart to pieces.

two.

Each night we slumped together
at the head of her bed
where two walls joined, reading.
Valente, Montgomery, Pullman, Jones,
Rowling, Gaiman, Okorafor, Le Guin.
She asked, “What’s your patronus?
What’s your daemon?
Which animal would you be?”
I swear I didn’t know
what she was asking me.

three.

She hates every outfit she tries on, but when I say,
"You don't have to go if you don't want to," she cries
and slams her bedroom door. I remember a high school dance
I insisted on attending even though I had no date, no outfit.
I borrowed clothes from a friend three sizes bigger than me.
I looked like one of those wire hanger fashion models
walking the runway in clothes that swallow every curve.
I say, "Let's go shopping," but she hates shopping.
Even before she became a wolf and not one single pair of jeans
in six department stores fit her waist, her hips, her long
back-jointed legs, she hated trying things on.
I promise, "Just one shop. We'll find something."
And we do: a dress, simple and stylish and even
on sale, with a thread of full-moon-silver
that makes her eyes shine so—I confess—for one moment
I think it might transform wolf to woman. No matter
that it doesn't. She looks pretty. She feels pretty.
I say, "We'll add a camisole, keep it modest."

four.

My mother-in-law says, “What’s she done to her hair?”

I say, “She’s a teenager. Let it be.”

She says, “That’s another thing. What does she mean, ‘I’m a wolf now’? What sort of message is that sending?”

I say, “I don’t think ‘wolf’ is code for anything.”

She says, “But she’s so pretty.”

I say, “She’s a very pretty wolf.”

She says, “But don’t you think it’s hard being a wolf in this world?”

I say, “I think it’s hard being alive in this world.”

After we hang up, I go to the bathroom, wash my hands, brush my hair back over my pointed ears.

five.

In ninth grade English, my daughter reads
creation stories, beginning with Genesis.
She says, “I thought all Christian stories
were about Jesus, but it’s about Adam
and Eve and how knowledge is bad
and ignorance is bliss.” She has never read
the story of the woman who turned to salt
and could never turn back, no matter
how desperate her daughters became.
She has never learned that change
can be a punishment.

six.

There has been another school shooting.
I tell my daughter what they told me
in active shooter training at my job:
Get out if you can. If you can't get out,
hide if you can. If you can't hide,
fight if you can. Find a pack.
Find a mind for violence. Find the desperation
to place yourself in danger.
Look for points of weakness.
Take them by surprise. If you can,
learn to see weapons all around you.

seven.

She says, “You know time is made up?”
She says, “You know time moves faster
near a source of gravity?”
I know time moves fast near this young wolf,
even when I watch each day set down neatly,
like the heel-toe, heel-toe of a girl
learning to walk in stilettos.
She says, “I could fly off into space
and, when I came back, everything
would be old and different except for me.”
She says, “I had a dream like that.
I dreamed I went away, and,
when I came back, years had passed,
and no one remembered me.”
I say, “How scary. How sad.”
I part the hair at the back of her neck
and find her birthmark, faded to pink
but still visible against her pale skin.
Her limbs have grown so long and end
in elegant, tapered claws. She lets them grow
and only occasionally paints them,
always black.

eight.

Her father and I are vegetarian.
She says she doesn't mind.
She likes tofu and veggie burgers,
and her doctor says she's healthy—
plenty of iron and protein in her diet,
plus more fiber than the average
young wolf eats.

Behind her dresser, I find empty
Slim Jim wrappers and a collection
of small, clean bones.

nine.

The mother of one of my daughter's friends
hates my daughter. She confronts me:
"Do you know that your daughter says
'fuck'? Do you know she has wolf teeth,
and she bared them at me?"
She says, "I just don't feel comfortable
with a wolf in my home."

I speak to her softly.
I reveal no fear and no weakness.
I show all my teeth when I smile.

ten.

When her elementary school friend says,
“I just don’t think we have anything
in common anymore,” then stops texting,
my daughter says, “She can’t help it.
She was raised in captivity.”

eleven.

As soon as she gets in the car she asks, “Music?”
and I nod, and she looks for her favorite song,
and sometimes we talk over it, gossip
of who likes who, who made an awful joke in class,
who invited her, again, to church—*Wolf Girl, meet*
Lamb of God—but often we sing along, and I drive
a little faster when she catches my eye
and barks our favorite lyrics, the breath
in both our songs climbing toward howl.

twelve.

In a book we read, they call it “first blood.”
So much more evocative than “puberty” or
“first period.” So much more romantic.

But, for a wolf, first blood is a kill,
a hunt with the pack, harrying the prey
until the young one, finally ready,
tears the throat.

I show her how to position the sanitary pad,
fold the wings down over the pink elastic
edges of her underwear. I keep buying the brand
that fits my body, and she never asks
for anything different.

thirteen.

Some days my daughter hides her teeth
behind a closed-lip smile.
Some days she sharpens her claws.
We live in a country of hunters.
Men who carry guns wherever they go.
Men who burn forests.
Men who come for food but don't stop when they're full.
The U.S. has more than thirteen hundred endangered species,
more guns than toasters, a domestic violence epidemic,
and I can't tell you whether it's better
to look dangerous or endangered.

fourteen.

The first day after she gets braces
she says it's not that bad. She says,
"It doesn't hurt like I thought it would,
and I look cute, don't I? I think I look cute."

The second day the pain arrives.
She can't eat. She can't sleep. She can't
press hard enough against her aching teeth
to affix the wax that will shield her bleeding lips
from the metal coil in her mouth.
She says, "I can't do this for two years."

The third day she can eat soft food,
brush her teeth. She says,
"I like my teeth the way they are."

The fourth day and every day after,
she says nothing at all about it.

fifteen.

We take our daughter to Rome—a sort of
pilgrimage. Her middle name is a landmark
in this city founded by brothers
supposedly raised by wolves.

We roam the streets, the piazzas, the cathedrals.
We listen to the singing and the chatter
of tourists, race each other around the Circus Maximus,
imagining chariot wheels, reciting legends
as if they were history.

Because she loves art, we reserve time
at the Borghese Gallery, let her lead us
through its many rooms. She stops at Bernini's
Apollo and Daphne, my wolf daughter.
She circles then is still a long time.

Here is Apollo—spoiled, selfish, all pursuer,
villain, hunter, god—and Daphne, running
even as her feet take root, captured
in the moment of change,
between girl and tree, always.

She says, "Look: you can see light
through the leaves." We walk out past David,
past Persephone and Hades.
Her sharp claws click on the marble floor.

sixteen.

For months, while I read, she paced,
pawed at old toys, filled sketchbook
after sketchbook with perfect
young wolf drawings. When I asked,
“Are you listening? Should I stop reading?”
she snarled and whined.

Then, tonight, she curled against me
like a pup, long legs pulled in
as small as she could make herself,
and laid her head against my chest.
I kept reading, though I lost the thread
of the story. It didn’t matter.
It was my voice she wanted,
as I wanted her hair under my chin,
her changing self held this close
for what instinct tells us could be the last time.

seventeen.

Bored at a restaurant, my daughter asks
to borrow my notebook. She flips
past page after page of my handwriting
to find a blank space. She asks,
“What all do you write in here?”
My daughter fills her own pages
in dozens of Canson sketchbooks:
cartoon characters and elves and a girl
with the ears of a canine and a boy
whose perfect face floats, disconnected
above his body. When I ask
for a drawing, something specific
and just for me, she says, “I’m sorry.
Art doesn’t work that way.”

eighteen.

My wolf daughter borrows my eyeliner.
Her eyes are blue and they really pop.
She says, “I might be the cutest person ever.”
She says, “My glasses suit my face.
My face is the right shape for this haircut,”
repeating what the stylist said
when I came in to pay and tip.
She comes and goes with such confidence.
Even her long teeth gleam.

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