

*Before the Stories Begin*

Before the stories begin, the mothers die,  
setting their daughters adrift, little coracles  
bobbing rudderless, at the mercy of river currents  
and ocean tides. Abandoned in forests so thick  
no light touches their ferny floors, imprisoned  
in crumbling towers guarded by rampant brambles,  
banished to the dank depths of castle kitchens.

But here is the alternate reading:  
Before the stories can begin, the mothers must die,  
setting their daughters free—released from cautioning  
fingers and pursed lips, from disapproving quirks  
of a brow, from warnings weighted with echoes of warnings,  
the long line of foremothers frowning down the generations.

The daughters find themselves oddly light,  
abruptly free to renounce titles and abandon kingdoms  
for life on the high seas, to fall in love with a man-beast  
deep in the forest, a stableboy, a fairy godmother.  
Free to seclude themselves in towers full of groaning  
bookshelves, to spend their days squinting  
at the twisting calligraphy of ancient manuscripts,  
to aim telescopes toward the night skies,  
to rename all the stars.