

Anna Adami

Dirt Girl

Greta stands tall, though at seven years old, she's short. She wears hand-me-down tennis shoes, cotton shorts, and a gray t-shirt. Her shorts are too small, and her shirt is too big. She holds a thick stick in her right hand and half of an orange in her left, juice streaming sticky down her arm. She uses a dirt-covered hand to wipe ratty brown hair out of her wide, merciless eyes. She is off to commune with the tree elves.

Greta stomps past her father. "Hold on there, missy."

She stops. He cracks open a beer. She takes a bite out of her orange.

"Where are you going?"

She swallows a chunk of citrus. "Exploring."

"You got your walkie talkie?"

"We don't got batteries."

Her mother leans back in a lawn chair with her feet propped up on a stump, fanning her face with a library book. "Have. Not got," she corrects. "A storm is coming."

Thunderclouds carry too much, all that is heavy. In Texas, rain is never gentle.

Greta walks on. Her father shakes his head and calls, "Stay on the trail!"

Greta leaves her parents with the tents, the dog, and her napping kid-brother.

Her heart pitter-patters and her fingers tingle. She is alone. No one is watching her. The wind picks up. Leaves bristle. She walks far enough away from the campgrounds that she can't hear another human voice. She tests out her own voice, humming. The sound starts in her stomach, moves through her chest, vibrates in

the back of her throat. It tumbles out of her, sits with the trees, then disappears. Her voice scares her a little, so she quiets.

At the lake, she stops walking. Cypress trees pepper the water and spanish moss hangs low like curtains. The air is hot, but moving, breathing. Greta waits for the elves. She peers under leaves and draws her name in the dirt. Crouching down low, she looks close at a line of ants carrying small craters on their backs. Untethered, she is full of belonging.

A fish crow watches her.

Greta's body will change. She'll grow and stretch, and by sixth grade she'll be taller than all of the boys in school. She'll wear hoodies and try to keep her head low. Boys will hate how she makes them feel small. In seventh grade, Greta will bleed a small pond onto a chair in the choir room. Tommy Jenkins will point to the pond and say an *eww* so loud, the class stops singing. Greta will feel everyone staring at her. A hundred eyes. A thousand. Greta's face will burn with the fire of the sun, her white freckled cheeks turning red. The choir teacher, frazzled, but sympathetic, will send her to the nurse's room. Greta's best friend Cass will run after her, handing her a sweatshirt to tie around her waist. A lump will lodge in Greta's throat, and she won't say thank you for fear of crying.

The nurse will give Greta a pad and show her how to use it. It'll crinkle and itch, like a diaper but worse. Greta will want to rip it out as soon as she's put it on. She'll borrow the phone and call home. Her mother will be at work, so her father will bring her a clean pair of pants. He'll smell like whiskey, but he won't make a big deal out of Greta's first period.

He'll sign her out of school and take her to get ice cream, strawberry cheesecake. He'll tell her stories from when he was a kid, reckless and silly and responsible for his brothers. He'll make her laugh so hard, she snorts. At that moment, she'll love him very much.

Greta will become aware of her body. Not how it feels, but how it appears. She will look in the mirror and suck in her stomach. She'll pinch at the flesh beneath her bellybutton and decide to stop eating french fries.

When Greta turns eighteen, her mother will put a candle in a donut. Her father will stay asleep in the back bedroom. No one will talk about his absence, but Greta will sense it in her gut. Her brother Kurt will cover the toilet seat in toothpaste and call it a prank. Greta, unaware of the toothpaste, will sit on it. The toothpaste will have dried, but still, on principle, Greta will scream at Kurt, and he will laugh. She will pour a glass of water right on his head and it'll make his hair look like a mop. They'll laugh because joy is a lifebuoy.

Greta's father will get his second DWI and get fired from his job. Her mother will scream so much, Greta will start to hate her.

There's a creek off Pecan Street that no one will know about but Greta. She'll have to trespass to access it, but the fence will be short and she'll never once see the property's owners. She'll slip off her shoes and peel off her socks and put her sweaty feet in the cool, cool water. The rocks under her soles will be slick. Trees with low branches will shade the spot, hide it and keep it safe. Greta will sit there for hours, dreaming of leaving Texas, going to college, living in a place where it snows. She'll have only seen snow four times in her life, but she'll remember it as something gentle and something wild; something that coats the earth in quiet. She'll like when things are quiet; it's easier to hear herself.

One night, Greta will find her mother silent and still at the kitchen table, a tissue box beside her. Her eyes will be red and

swollen, though she'll no longer be crying. Greta will feel like she's trespassing on something intimate, like she's reading someone's diary. She'll look at her mother, paralyzed. Her mother will force a shaky smile that'll fade as quickly as it appears. "I'm so sorry," she'll tell Greta. In that moment, Greta's mother will transform from a powerful, dependable matriarch into a vulnerable, human peer. "I know you're applying to colleges, but without your father working, I need you to get a job."

Greta will start working at the 7-Eleven.

Two years after her start date, Greta will meet her first love in this life. He'll buy beef jerky, Cheetos, and a Monster. He'll compliment her eyebrows. After he leaves, Greta's manager, the one whose breath always smells like sour cream, will scowl and say, "If you wanna sell your body, go work on the street."

When her shift is over, the boy will be waiting outside. He'll offer a piece of jerky. She'll shrug, then accept. He'll make her laugh. She'll like his dimples. He'll offer her a ride, but she'll decline. He'll ask her to dinner. To this, she'll say yes, but she'll also bring pepper spray.

She'll spend an hour in front of the mirror trying to tame the tangles out of her hair. She'll try on a shirt that'll hit her hips in the wrong way. She'll try on another. The color will make her skin look pallid. She'll settle for a black top and a jean skirt.

Her mother will see her before she leaves. "That skirt's a little short, don't you think?"

Greta and the boy will fall quickly and recklessly into a fever dream. She'll start stealing condoms from the 7-Eleven. She'll learn to feel heat and lust move through her body. She'll trace her

hands over his arms, slip her tongue between his lips. His bedsheets will be t-shirt cotton, soft against her skin. He'll jackhammer her clit for one single minute before pulling away his hand, sighing in exasperation, and saying, "no other girl takes so long to cum." She'll wonder if something is wrong with her.

In the dark of her bedroom, she'll light a candle and fall into the moon-tugged tide of her own mind. With no one watching her, she'll relax. She'll move against her own hand, take as long as she needs, feel her skin tingle and her body heat up, and when she moans, it won't be a performance. She will shake and gasp, then relax and smile. He will never witness her ecstasy.

Greta will decide to start eating french fries again. They'll be salty and delicious, and besides, she'll have a good metabolism.

Greta and Cass will go to the football field at night, late enough that practice has ended, lights have turned off, and cars have left the parking lot. They'll lie on the turf and look at the sky. They'll share secrets, like how Cass once pissed on her brother's car. Cass wants a motorcycle and Greta wants a mountain. Boobs are a good shelf. Cass likes girls, but she's scared to admit it and maybe Greta likes girls, too. She doesn't know; how does one know? Church is weird but makes people feel holy. Cass's boyfriend pinches her sometimes, on her arm or her leg or her cheek, just enough to make a little sting. It's annoying. He gets this weird smirk on his face when he does it, like he's won something.

"I think you need to break up with him," Greta will tell her.

Cass'll get quiet. They'll see a shooting star.

As they stand to leave, Cass will say, "You're right."

A customer will pace back and forth in the aisles. He'll be short, mid-thirties, wearing a ball cap. The day will be slow, so Greta will say, "Do you need help finding anything?"

"I'm looking for a gas can."

"Yeah, I don't think we sell those."

"I've bought one here before."

"Sorry, I've never seen them in stock."

The man will raise his voice and repeat himself. Greta will apologize again.

"Don't you have a manager or something? Someone who knows what they're talking about?"

Greta's chest will contract.

"I could get him, but he's not going to say anything different."

"You should get him."

Greta will call her manager. The manager will tell the customer exactly what Greta said before. When talking to another man, one in authority, the customer will calm down. The manager will offer him a free slurpee. The customer will grab a pack of gum and a lighter, then throw them on the counter. The manager will head back to the storage room, calling over his shoulder, "Greta will take care of you."

Greta will will will. Something rotten will grow inside of Greta. She'll plaster on a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. As the customer shuffles through his wallet, Greta will say, "It looks like your lid is cracked. Let me get you a new one real quick."

She'll duck out of his eyesight and hock a loogie into his cherry blended ice. She'll give the slurpee a swirl, then return to the counter, feigning a straightening of the lid. She'll wish him a good day, and he won't wish it back.

With her lover, Greta will feel important. Seen. Appreciated. Alive in her blood. They'll drive through the country, and she'll like being surrounded by nothingness. They'll pull over and

climb on the hood. The air will be cool, autumn. Greta will lasso her hair into a ponytail. They'll talk about Sesame Street, Texarkana, and alcoholic fathers.

"You can love him and hate him at the same time," he'll say so tender, she breaks.

"I don't hate him," she'll say. "I could never hate him."

When she cries, he'll kiss away her tears. They will become a part of him.

She will do anything for this boy. He will hold her cheek in his hand and say, "You would look better if you wore mascara." She will buy mascara. He will pat her leg and tell her, "Would you get me a beer?" And she'll climb out of his arms and deliver. When he kisses her neck, she'll feel moonlight dancing between her thighs. She'll consider, for the first time in her life, getting married.

In October of their second year together, she'll slide onto his couch and snuggle into his shoulder. He'll be on his phone. She'll look over to see if he's playing a game, and he'll click his screen off.

"Who were you texting?"

"My mom."

He'll fiddle with the hem of her sleeve. She'll ask, "What do you want to do tonight? Should we go out?"

"I'm kind of tired."

Greta will be bored. She'll cook stir fry for dinner, and they'll watch a horror movie, the kind where the girl ends up dead. Greta won't be able to sleep. At 2 in the morning, she'll need fresh air. She'll tiptoe out of his room and close the door gently. Outside, she'll walk for over an hour, her sandaled feet slowly accumulating dirt. Street lamps will cast shadows of swaying branches on the asphalt. The shadows will look like they are waltzing. Greta will raise her hand, and her own shadow will join the dance to the sound of the wind.

When she goes back inside, he'll be sitting in front of the TV.

"What happened?" he'll ask. "Where did you go? You left your phone. I was worried."

She'll feel warmed by his worry, so she'll kiss his sweet cheek.

After two years together, she'll discover he cheated on her for months. She will cut off the long hair he claimed to love, throw her mascara in the trash, and weep until her face changes.

She'll be fed up with doing what other people ask of her. Her body will tremble with a new power. She'll cut back on her hours at the 7-Eleven and start taking classes at the community college. Her goal: nursing. Dreaming up a life of steady work and steady pay, she'll think: at last, I will do something that matters. I will help those who need me.

She will. Of course she will.

In class, she'll make new friends, and her friends will like to party. She'll learn the names of bartenders. Sometimes the music will blare so loud, it'll surge through Greta's bloodstream. She'll dance and swing and twirl and twerk. She'll feel in love with her body—her arms, how they move the crowd; her hips, how they sway and shake. Her goosebumps will turn to sweat and she'll laugh.

At twenty-three, Greta will drink too much Jim Beam and drive her family's car into a telephone pole. Miraculously, she will come out unscathed save for a single cut on her forehead. Her brother Kurt will pick her up from the police department.

"Mom's not happy," he'll say.

Upon returning home, Greta will find her mother sitting alone at the kitchen table, illuminated by a single lamp, tissue box in hand. She will refuse to look at Greta.

“I never thought you’d end up like him,” is all she’ll say.

Greta will move out of her parents’ house. She won’t be able to afford an apartment, so she’ll stay on Cass’s lumpy couch. The couch will make her back ache. Her school will threaten expulsion if she has another drinking incident. Thinking of her father and her future, Greta will decide never to drink again.

Still, she will dance.

She’ll eat spaghetti with Cass, and they’ll make a pinky pact: they will not let each other abandon their dreams. The moon will be bright that night, the spaghetti warm.

Greta will study and study and pass all of her tests. One night, sitting in Cass’s house and memorizing technical terms for the body’s intricacies, something will pinch at Greta. She’ll look through the window in her borrowed bedroom and imagine throwing a rock through it. She’ll imagine crawling out from between the shards, falling into the night, running until she’s too tired to feel anything but her legs.

Greta will sit on a swing with her mother in the backyard of her childhood home. It’ll be Easter, the honeysuckle in bloom. Greta’s father will be in rehab.

Greta will ask her mother how she fell in love with her father. Her mother will consider the question. In a moment of openness, Greta’s mother will say, “I did everything right before him. I was a straight-A student, top of my class. I helped take care of

my sisters. I assumed so much was expected of me. Or maybe, in hindsight, I expected so much of myself.

“When I met your father ... well, he brought out a part of me I didn’t know was there.”

A breeze will catch in Greta’s mother’s graying hair.

“Plus,” she’ll add, “his butt chin.” She’ll shrug and grin and confide, “I thought it was cute.”

Greta will grimace. She will miss her father.

“Do you think it’ll stick this time?” she’ll ask.

“No one forced him to go.”

“Would you ever divorce him?”

Birds will chirp in a cacophony.

“He’s the father of my children.”

Greta’s mother will sign as a guarantor for Greta’s first apartment. A junebug will fall from the sky, bounce off Greta’s shoulder, and bless the steps leading to her own front door.

Greta will love living alone. She’ll grow basil in the windowsill, leave her clothes on the ground, and blast music from a stereo.

When taking a bath, she’ll wonder if love is a feeling, a farce, or a choice. She’ll trace her hand over her legs, slick with bath water, then over her stomach, her belly, her nipples. She will rest her hand on her heart and feel it beating steady and strong. The water will womb her.

After climbing out of the tub, wiping the fog off the mirror, and looking at her face, she will think about her mother’s graying hair. About the inevitability of death. It will make her feel strange. Lonely, maybe. Or else just lost.

Greta will graduate and find a job at a nursing home. She’ll like Betsy best. Betsy with her wispy white hair and her sneaky

cigarettes. Betsy will try to walk out the window sometimes. She'll say, *a bird is watching me. It's watching you, too. Don't be scared.*

For Betsy's birthday, Greta will bake a pineapple upside down cake. Betsy will eat it and smile like she's up to no good, like they're up to no good together.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I joined the circus?" Betsy will ask. She'll stare out the window with a goofy glint in her eye, dazed, transported, and say, "I can charm snakes, you know."

Something about Betsy will stir up something in Greta.

Greta will meet Betsy's grandson and she'll feel something she hasn't felt in a long time: want.

After three months of his visits, Greta will slip him her number, and her heart will clog up her larynx.

"At work, too?" Cass will ask. "Respect."

Cass will have fallen for a woman by now. When Cass laughs around this woman, it will sound like saxophone practice in the park. Her eyes will glow like campfires in the desert. She'll tell Greta, "I never knew care could be so soft."

B*etsy likes you best,* the boy will text. *She has good taste.*

He will be a good man.

Greta will adore his smile, the freckle on his eyelid, the way he holds Betsy's hand and takes none of her shit. When Greta's undereyes are raccooned from a 17-hour shift, he will tell her she is gorgeous. She will know he means it. She will not have to work to trust him. It'll come easy, like getting out of bed on a sunny day. He will never tell her to become anything other than exactly what she shows him she is.

After a few years together, casually, over the dishes, he'll bring up marriage. She'll say, "Hmm." She'll tell him it's pecan season, heavy crop this year. He'll laugh and kiss her forehead.

When he leaves, her body temperature will change. Her head will spin, and she'll struggle to breathe. She'll put her face on the cool window and wonder what it is that she feels. Is it something wrong? Or is she just scared? What is she afraid she might lose?

She'll go for a run, but she won't make it far. She'll get a side stitch and resign herself to walking. In the short breath of frustration, she'll crave strong legs, speed, so she can outrun anything that might chase her. A fish crow will watch her.

Greta will sip sweet tea with her father. In and out of AA, he will now be one whole year sober.

"Why do we do this?" she'll ask him.

"Do what?"

"Drink tea and crack peanuts."

"You're my daughter, and I like your company."

"Yeah, but why this with me and shooting with Kurt?"

"Kurt likes to shoot."

"Maybe I'd like to shoot, too."

Greta's father will scratch his head and clear his throat and say, "Mom made a pie. You want a slice?"

Greta will hold a plastic stick between her legs in her apartment's bathroom. As she waits the allotted ten minutes, she'll lay a tarp on the ground in the kitchen. She'll put on sunglasses, pull out a stack of thrifted blue plates, and smash them onto the ground. Her insides will be a screaming teapot. Her need for noise will be hot. The sound of breakage will clap through the air like high pitched thunder, loud and life shattering. Greta will be pregnant.

“Let’s get married,” she’ll say.

She will feel good about this decision, hopeful even. He will scoop her up and twirl her around. She’ll laugh and kiss his salty lips.

Cass will buy a baby-sized motorcycle helmet for Greta’s unborn child.

The two will glue broken pieces of plates onto Greta’s table top, coat it with grout, and scrape the pieces clean. Their mosaic will look like water.

“I don’t think I’m ready,” Greta will admit.

“Don’t be stupid,” Cass will say.

The sonographer will squirt cool gel onto Greta’s bare stomach. “Hoping for a certain gender?”

Greta will steal a moment at work to sit by Betsy as she sleeps. Betsy will be twitching, tossing, mumbling. In a gasp, she’ll sit up, eyes wide and afraid. Greta’s heart will pound. She’ll take Betsy’s hand. “I need to leave,” Betsy will say. With a shaking, purposeful motion, she’ll throw her blankets off her chest. She’ll struggle to swing her legs around the bed. Greta will stand and grab gently onto Betsy’s arm.

“Betsy, it was just a dream, you need to sleep.”

“I need to leave. I can’t be here for one more second.”

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“I need to leave,” Betsy will repeat, determined and desperate. “Who are you? Make yourself useful and get me my hat.”

Greta will go to the creek alone. Recent rains will have deepened its depth. She’ll strip off her clothes and climb into the water. On this day, the water will be lukewarm, tinted green from dirt.

Greta will float, her belly bulging above the surface and reaching toward the sun, her hair spreading in tendrils around her, suddenly less heavy. She'll look at the sky, parcelled by leaves and branches. It will be blue and bright, shimmering and dizzying. She'll close her eyes. A fish will hop out of the water close to her face, making her heart jolt and her arms flail. In flailing, she'll splash herself in the face. Her laugh will echo off the trees, full and loud. It'll bristle the leaves. It'll be a witch of a sound. It'll wake Greta up.

Greta will visit her parents more often. Her father will pour tea, and this time, she'll be grateful. She'll watch how her parents live through the present with all of their past. Her father will wipe the counters after her mother cooks. Her mother will watch PBS war documentaries to please him. They'll plan a trip to the Grand Canyon and argue about the best route to take.

One evening, Greta's mother will pull out photos of Greta as a child. Child Greta has tangled hair and sunburnt lips, cheeks covered in freckles. In one photo, fat tears glob at the edges of child Greta's eyes.

"What happened there?" she'll ask her mom.

"I told you not to paint on the walls."

"You took a picture of me crying?"

"No, your dad did."

"Why?"

"He fancied himself an artist."

Greta's mom will call Greta's dad into the room. He'll take a look at the photo, too. He'll nod. "I like this one," he'll say.

Greta will joke, "You thought your child's pain was art?!"

"You hated being told what to do. It drove me crazy. But I admired it, too. You had a grit about you. See," he'll point to another photo, one where she stood buck naked on the kitchen table with a strainer on her head and a wooden spoon in her hand. "You can see it in your eyes."

Greta will stare at the photo. It'll be different than looking in a mirror. She will wonder about herself.

The summer rain will descend in a thick heap of charcoal colored clouds. It'll pound on the roof with the passion of a dancing woman. Greta will take her fiancé's hand and drag him into the pouring rain. She'll want to show him herself. She will tilt her face to the wild sky.

Laughing, he'll say, "You. Are so beautiful."

She'll feel her own lightning, a force. At that moment, she'll rise, absolutely in love with herself. This love will be exponential, not narcissistic. It'll spill out of Greta and onto everyone she holds dear.

By her third trimester, Greta's ankles will be swollen and her back sore. Her vagina will feel tight, pinched, constantly uncomfortable. Hobbling in the island of her body, she will feel fat and heavy. Her baby will kick. She'll have to sleep on her side, a pillow tucked between her legs.

Lights out, forehead to forehead with her fiancé, he will ask, "Are you afraid?"

The ocean inside of Greta will surge out of her eyes. She'll lace her fingers into his and squeeze. "Yes."

At that moment, she will love him very much.

When Greta goes into labor, she will sweat through her hospital gown. Her body will strain and shake and her cervix will stretch and she will cry and cry and when the nurse tells her to push, to push, to push, Greta will shit herself. When the baby finally emerges into the world, it'll be covered in a sticky, white film. Her child will be a girl. Tiny, warm, and breathing in Greta's arms, the baby will burp.

Greta, simultaneously exhausted and buoyant, terrified and thrilled, will look into her baby's eyes. Through those eyes, whatever strange magic alights a soul into life through a body will shine ferociously. Whatever panic Greta expected she would feel, she won't. She'll realize with a wave of relief that her soul is not infused into her lover's or her child's or her mother's or her father's. Her body, even when exhausted, even when home to breasts heavy with milk, even when making, carrying, and giving life, is hers.

Her child is a child of the earth as much as of the flesh. This'll delight her. At this moment, Greta will not want to run away, but rather toward. In herself, she'll recognize something intoxicating—not love, like most mothers say, though that, too. But courage. Brazenness. Full force ahead with no option to turn back. Looking at her infant, Greta will think, *What an adventure you will be.*

A fish crow blinks. Seven-year-old Greta thinks only briefly of her parents at the campsite. She didn't tell them where she was going. She didn't tell them how long she'd be gone. She remembers an old warning in her mother's voice: lightning could strike your head, shock your limbs, kill you. Greta cannot grasp the fear. She is thrilled by it.

The light changes from warm dandelion to cool navy. The water, once a murky green, now looks like night, deep and endless, minnows like stars. Quiet, a water moccasin slithers over the glassy water.

Greta doesn't see it. She reaches her face to the sky and cries, "You're not gonna kill me!"

She jumps up and down, spins and spins, then trips. The skin of her shin breaks under a jagged rock and her breath catches. She tries to gain grounding, but the bank is steep and muddy. Her feet can't find a grip. Bleeding, shin stinging, she slips into the lake. Her elbows slice the water's surface. The splash ripples in rings out out

out from her body. She stands up, heart pounding, thigh-deep in water.

She sees the snake. It is only a foot and a half away. It stares at her, eyes like marbles. She stares back. Her scraped leg stains the water red. The snake opens its mouth to a field of cotton, sharp fangs. Thunder claps loud. The snake hisses. Greta doesn't move.

The sky can't carry its clouds any longer. Rain starts. Thick drops pelt the freckles on Greta's cheeks. The snake startles, cowering its head from the storm. It glides over the water and slips in between the roots of a cypress. Greta climbs out of the lake, her shoes heavy with water. Her hands are smeared with earth. She is dirty and bloody and knows it. Her eyes gleam, wide and merciless. "You're not gonna kill me," she whispers.

No one hears her but the crow.