

Gretel's Dreams

In some dreams, Gretel is a piece of dark, hollow chocolate. She lives on a grocery store shelf in an airtight box with a clear plastic front. She has giant eyes, but she can't close them. She has a mouth, too, but it doesn't open. She feels as if she is slowly suffocating. People walk by and glance at her. People walk by and pick up her box and shake her around. People walk by and behind the people who walk by, other people are following who will also walk by. These other people have bad intentions, bad intentions meaning they carry large knives that glisten under the lemony fluorescent light, they carry assault rifles as dark as licorice, they carry scythes slung over their shoulders, the crescent blade curved like a witch's beckoning finger.

In other dreams, Gretel is struggling to stay afloat in a thick sea of melted chocolate. The consistency is something between molasses and mud. Its undulations are menacing, like a sea creature amping up for an attack. When she thrusts her hand up from the muck, chocolate pulls from her fingers in strings, like spit that drags at the corner of a mouth. On a distant shore, translucent blue and red bricks are stacked to form cabins that shimmer and wink in the orange sun. But Gretel doesn't dare swim to shore. She would, it turns out, rather drown. Something flicks past her—a fish, bright red and rubbery. Even in the dream she thinks, “What, in God's name, is the moral of this fucking story?”

There is a dream from which she sometimes wakes up screaming. She is reclined in a dentist's chair, her mouth open wide, a light shining from above. The dentist is an old woman with a thin face that hovers above Gretel like a crescent moon. The dentist smiles. As her lips curve, her teeth, sharp as candy corn, emerge between her lips. “They are all cavities,” she says. One by one, the dentist tears out Gretel's teeth, which are square and matte like Chiclets. Beneath Gretel's teeth, hiding in her gums, are strings of candy necklaces. The dentist pulls them out like gauze, and Gretel can feel them dragging against the raw interior of her gums. On the little silver tray next to the dentist's chair, bloody candy is piled high.

In real life (though who can tell anymore?), Gretel avoids sweets. Her tongue always hurts—it's rubbed raw, rough as sandpaper, like a cat's tongue. She likes to set cool rounds of cucumber on it, like icing a bruise. One day, while slicing a cucumber in her tiny kitchen, the phone trills—it's her brother, she rarely answers—and she nicks her finger. Her finger is as thin as a chicken bone but still, somehow, it is filled with blood, which now comes out of her and drips onto the green plastic cutting board in a pool so dark that for a moment she thinks it's chocolate. The thought that she is pumping chocolate through her heart terrifies her, but it would explain some things, like why she wants to escape from her own body, why she wants to be bled dry.

There is very little she really understands about what she wants. In shopping malls, jewelry flashes at her from glass display cases, gems sparkle like hard candy, beads glisten like silver dragées, round as jawbreakers, and the clothes are unnaturally bright, colors like jelly beans. The world itself cloys.

Sometimes, Gretel finds herself reaching toward something—a pair of earrings, a flower, a venti mocha with whipped cream on top—but she catches herself, always, and draws away. To want, after all, is to be bewitched. If it is beautiful or sweet, it will ruin you.