

Jacqueline Bishop



## Calling Me Back Home

— *for the muse*

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I

When she thought no one was looking  
she removed the dress they had given her,  
crawled naked into the river.  
Men later insisted  
they saw something silver in the sunlight  
— looked like fish scales —  
one even said it had grown a tail.

II

My Great Grandmother had warned me  
not to walk alone in the bushes,  
not to talk to strangers  
— especially not women in the bushes —  
and never to look into water.

III

She stepped from behind  
a tree,  
small, dark, woman,  
chain of teeth around her neck,  
locked hair, webbed hands and feet.  
She called me to the river's edge,  
“Come dance with your water self” she said,  
standing in white mist near blue falls.

IV

It was said I was lost for two weeks in the forest.

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Calabash

V

When I went over  
she took me by the hand,  
we watched our shadowed selves  
on the water's surface,  
then I heard it:  
voice like a woman sighing,  
or singing.  
We looked into the water,  
Then jumped in.

VI

I was afraid,  
the dark and the deep  
— a frightening feel  
of falling —  
she held me close,  
my head against her bosom,  
until we got to the bottom  
where she fed me roots and herbs  
that made me sleep.

VII

The men from my district came  
with trucks, vans, chain-saws,  
cut through the forest,  
uprooted trees,  
tried to fill the river with stones  
to make sure another girl-child  
would not be lost to them  
— every year the forest claimed a woman.

VIII

They found us  
entwined, covered in green leaves  
at the bottom of the river  
and they pulled us apart.  
I held onto a memory:  
circle of women,  
fire, black cat with green eyes,  
a silver moon,  
voices raised in singing.

VIII

We were taken back to the district,  
her hair was cut.  
Still she hungered  
for nakedness, roots, herbs, locked hair  
and the first chance she got  
made her way back to the river.

X

As for me  
I do not walk by bushes  
without hearing a woman's voice singing,  
pass a body of water and not see  
an old shape  
small and dark  
calling me back home.

