

Codes for Hunger

You are here to learn, to die, & this is how a witch gets business.

—Brian Teare, *The Room Where I Was Born*

1. *Threshold*

A glimmer pale as tallow: hands in the dark
hallway, curling like claws, and a face
round and red and bobbing over the curled-in nails,

and over the hall a black fungus creeping.
The bobbing is code for madness. For hunger.
You did this: knocking when you could smell,

through the screen, sour things and old fat stewing.
You could smell the big black pot on the old black stove
in the kitchen you'd never seen, and you knew

it was the wrong house. Your mother didn't send you
with your basket of goodies to *this* door.
It's not too late. You don't have to go in when she smiles,

in with the hunger. You can say *sorry* and run
like hell down the sagging steps, the cracked walk.
Then there will be no story. No boiling. No bones.

The neighbor with the axe will find nothing.
Your mother meant you to go to the good grandmother.
She wouldn't (would she?) send you to the hunger.

2. *Birthday*

Where did you go? (your torn dress, the slight bleeding)

Where? If you have to answer, make it somewhere

small and difficult: upstairs among broken toys
and spiderwebs—somewhere too dim to look.

Who did you see?

Someone. Just someone, a voice
in the dimness, behind the . . . (say *spindle*).
A voice working it, calling *come*,
come here, you try. Saying *don't be*
afraid, promising *easy*.

What did you do?

Trick question: It doesn't matter
what you did, tried or ran away.
The hunger was enough. Say this:
I shut my eyes. I slept. Slept, a dream.
Then shut your eyes. In a hundred
years thorns will cover all the lies.

3. *Caged*

To sleep you'd clutch your belly, its growls
a sharp-toothed dog. Starving one, you crawled

gladly into your cage of roasts and stews
and plum cakes, your warm cage in the yeasty house.

Jams smear your round cheeks, you stink of suet.
And still the food and still your hunger and bliss.

You know you'll pay in the end, that's how your world
operates. The other ones, father and mother, hoarded

meat from you, mocked your groaning belly-dog.
Every day they sent you out to lose yourself

and die at the hands of any passing ogre. Your sister
makes you hold out a chicken bone instead of your own

fattened finger when the blind witch comes. You know
it's the prudent thing, but you would willingly tear out
your heart and tender it on a silver plate.

4. *Knots*

Let down your hair, they tell you,
let down, meaning: *don't let us down*.

Not the full and fragrant waterfall,
not the golden banner whipping in the breeze,

not pleasure. Meaning: *what keeps you*
where we want you. Your braid

that binds you to our hunger, your rope,
your chain. The way down, the way out

(you know this in every fiber they yanked
from your flesh) is the clean cut. Leave

nothing they can hold you by—the weight
of all those coils as they slide

off your neck, fall around your feet:
Step out of your tangled nest and fly.

5. *Apple*

They love you. Skin like snow, hair
black as a window frame around
the frozen world. They would coffin you

in glass if they could, forever. Instead
they scare you into stillness. *Don't speak*
to people in the street. Don't go out after dark.

Don't go out. Never open the door to strangers.
But all alone in the house can be a terror
too. Wolves slithering down the chimney,

horny gods who climb out of sunbeams,
knives and poisonous spiders and the knocking,
always the knocking. Only a stranger would knock.

Only a deadly stranger would call out for you
to open and see what she has for you. A comb.
A belt. Not this time, not pretty toys.

This time the voice on the other side of the door
is telling you *juicy, sweet*, she knows your
hunger for what's beyond your glass box,

how you want to smell deeply, stroke the polished skin,
stab willing white teeth into flesh you've never
tasted. And she's right, you're hungry. Go ahead.

Open. Take the glowing world she's holding out.