

Flourish

Jen Calleja

I woke up one evening in early November with something warm between my feet under the bedcovers. I couldn't recall placing a hot water bottle in the bed, and the cat was sleeping next to my head; a white powder puff on a midnight pillow. I reluctantly pulled back the covers and saw something small and black curled up on its side on the turquoise sheet.

Then I remembered: while sleeping away the day, I had given birth to a small minotaur.

The oversized zebra-print t-shirt I was wearing was damp, the sheets were clammy. The knot I had been carrying in my stomach for the last few weeks had come undone and been replaced by a bubbling hunger. I drew up my legs, knelt on the bed and lay my chest flat on my thighs, I was folded and domed like a swan; all the better to see him.

He was the size of a baby, but all in proportion, and was covered with tiny, iridescent feathers. On his head were two golden nubs, the beginnings of horns. He blinked his long cow lashes, and slowly stood up, the sheets puckering like milk skin under his tiny, furred feet.

I sat back on my heels, and he looked at me with his obsidian eyes. I sensed the cat move and turned to find her sitting and looking at him. I fetched him a raw egg to eat, and he lapped it up from a dish. When I returned from the kitchen with a second egg, the cat was sleeping in the place where the minotaur had been standing, but he was gone.

I felt relieved.

I was glad that he'd left at first, but then felt compelled to find him. I went out to search for him, walking the early evening streets in whichever direction felt right. I came to a railway bridge, and in its fluorescent yellow light I saw the minotaur, now grown larger, as high as my hipbone, hunched forward and walking stiffly towards the park.

I ran after him and watched him slip into the thick sheen of the pond. He resurfaced on the other side and squatted down on the bank.

The trees that surrounded the pond bled into a submerged ring-fence of reeds, blocking my way. I went around it, burrowing through the bushes and trees. I felt hot, could feel the sweat running down my back. It was as if the vegetation was emitting heat. I peeled off my pale mint-green coat, unzipped and dropped my cranberry skirt, pulled my evergreen sweatshirt over my head. I tumbled, naked and bright, through the twigs and thorns and branches, which swiped and scratched at my skin in flashes of coolness and pain.

I stood beside the minotaur. In the stark moonlight I could see that the feathers and fur had fallen away and been replaced by thick whorls of black and bronze wool. His tiny horns glinted as he stared into the water. He tentatively reached out his arms and wrapped them around my bare leg. It felt as though an electric current was running through my body from the place where he was touching me.

I followed his gaze to a pearly swan that was gliding towards us haloed by mist. The minotaur looked back behind us; something was moving in the bushes. I turned and saw a lion with straw and moss thatched into its mane step out to greet me with its teeth.

The minotaur released my leg and turned its face away from my meeting with the beasts.

Afraid to look them in the eye, I lowered my gaze to my own body instead and saw that the marks left by the woodland had scribed an abundance of oscillating lines across my chest, my arms, my stomach, my legs. The lichen, dirt, sap, and blood had formed landscapes, mountainscapes, seascapes, horizons, ripples, cloud formations.

The perspectives and layers of all things.

I used this as a key to see what was really before me.

The swan was a mirage hiding my estranged husband. His appearance flickered from swan, to crouching man with wide blue eyes, back to swan.

The lion, I could see now, was my cruel sister in disguise – the moss and straw braided into her red hair, her skin flocked with pine needles.

I concentrated and made myself anew. I appeared to them as the animal they most feared – a peach-coloured ram – and their cloaks fell away.

Now I wore the swan's wings wrapped around my body.

Now the lion's rotting mane was woven into my hair.

My husband and sister slinked back into the water and the bushes.

The minotaur had vanished. But I could now track his scent.

I floated along the dark, silent streets, following the sour-iron odour of the minotaur, which I could taste on my tongue more than smell. As I glided through the air, I saw snakes glittering in the trees like strings of lights. As I passed them by, I collected their fiery bites, which filled my mind with poetry.

I arrived at the doors of an art gallery, where the minotaur's pacing silhouette could be seen through the tall front windows. I drifted in through the open door and planted my bare feet on vibrating wooden floorboards.

The minotaur was almost as tall as me, with sharp brassy horns, and he whimpered at me in distress and anticipation, indicating a set of shears on a small, black table. I removed his wool to reveal a skin of tawny, cracked leather, scalding to the touch. Blisters bubbled on my hands, before melting away like candy floss in the pools of my palms.

Once the wool was piled around him on the ground, he snorted and flew stomping through one of the doors and down the corridor beyond. I shed my wings and mane and took up armfuls of the wool, which bedded into my skin to form a trouser suit.

I picked up an exhibition guide and pulled open its concertina folds on the floor.

Every page face had a fold-out flap, and each of these in turn had another two or three flaps with little doors that could open like the ones in an advent calendar; the writing became smaller and smaller with every further reveal. I abandoned the guide, but it continued to blossom open on the floor with a slinking whisper.

Through the door the minotaur had taken, a dizzying selection of corridors and rooms opened up before me; some were unlit, others had no ceiling and revealed the night sky, staircases led up or down in perpetuity. There were no paintings on the walls, instead there were windows, archways, portals.

Standing before one huge, gilded frame, I watched figures dressed in shimmering sky-blue gowns dance in a room where the red wallpaper was peeling away to show a snowy mountain forest; snowflakes studded the dancers' golden red hair.

Stepping briefly through an ajar set of iron gates, I helped four creamy stags button up their pyjama shirts while they sang me a bittersweet ditty in gratitude.

A porthole magnified the very matter of the universe.

Sculpted figures on plinths marked the junctions within the sprawling gallery. They remained frozen and anonymous until I approached with a bow to complete

moulding their faces into all the people I had been subconsciously dreaming of.

There: I had seen the minotaur, now even taller than the doorframe he was passing through at the end of the corridor to my right. Through the door was a small studio that contained floor to wall bookshelves, a large window letting in enlivening sunshine, a radio playing on a table in the corner, a low fire in the large black fireplace. The floor was covered with open books, and what looked like autumn leaves; the leather was flaking from the squatting minotaur and landing like handprints on the pages.

The minotaur was perfectly still, reading from a book.

I approached him, fearing his hot iron heat, but the closer I got the more I felt a radiant chill coming off him. I reached out my hand and touched his head, and was surprised to find him as cool as bronze.

He handed me the book he was reading, and the letters scurried from the pages liked ants, leaving a pregnant emptiness.

The minotaur placed a rosy ruff around my neck, and the sun coming in through the window suddenly started setting.

He picked up another book and continued reading in the red light as if I had already gone.

I left the gallery with the empty book he had gifted me. I transformed into a centaur on the threshold and galloped home in a great rush, the snakes cheering me on with hisses to the moon.

Once home, I sat on the bed next to the sleeping cat. The ruff dissolved with the scent of rose water in the light from the dawning sun.

I opened the book, picked up a pen, and, for the first time in a year, began to write.