Jacqueline Bishop

Calling Me Back Home

— for the muse

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.
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.
Calabash

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.