

Twelve Swans

Falling

slowly

down

twelve swans fly to their sister.
She does not speak. Her fingers cold
with worry and the nettles' sting
fly up in recognition, fly up to their
small heads, long necks, plump backs.
Their *honk, honk* subsides to soft clucking.

That night, after they have flown to the wild country
she closes the door to the warm castle, steps barefoot
into the garden, kneels before the artichoke, holds
its bloom close to her cheek. The downy inside
the prickly cover

familiar
familiar
familial

To break the spell that keeps her brothers swans,

she gathers nettles near the graveyard, weaves them
into shirts, stays silent. For seven years she works
embroidering fine stitches with the sting of blood.
A witch, the townsfolk say. *Does not speak.*
Eats her children. They nod. They tie her to a stake.
She does not say a word. When twelve birds alight
she lifts the fabric in her arms. Twelve nettle shirts
finished but for one, fall on the feathers of brothers.
The air rushes with wind, the people look in awe.
The birds turn to human form, only the left wing
of the last brother remains, without a sleeve.

*Y*oungest Brother keeps his wing tucked against his breast.

The smooth, wide feathers lift of their own accord
when the wind is right. At night, he settles against
his magic limb, covering eyes with snowy softness.
He always drifts into sleep cautiously, as if dreaming
is a hidden thing, to be hidden. He always dreams
of nests, the feeling of flight in cold, winter skies.
He never tells her he is sorry she made the shirt.
If he could he would give up his arm to be a swan.

--Ariana Kramer

Background Note: This poem is based on "Six Swans" and "Twelve Brothers," German fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, and on "The Wild Swans" by Hans Christian Andersen.