

At Twelve (Abridged Edition)

by Jodi Barnes

She has dwindled for the better part of a year, staved off her period, breasts and hips like a warrior. Chestnut strands that danced along candy apple cheeks now surrender to metal pins, her bun severe as an old maid's. Her prominent ears make it better to hear the doctor's prescription: Gain three pounds by Monday or pack for Johns Hopkins where feeding tubes will do their magic.

It's her hands, not her tears or the cry of an injured bird I will remember. Both hands swiftly lifting like startled swans to her missing cheeks. Each splayed finger the stick Gretel offers a cannibal witch demanding Hansel's fat finger.

I swallow an acrid swell, feel a hedge of thorns behind my eyes. Her hands drop like shot doves, her eyes hollow shells. Her heavy skull bows defeat. I hear Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty, timpani rising, piped in from some other world.

