

Well Wishes

Emma Sterling

Entwined in the garden there lingers the well
Among where the orchids and hyacinths dwell
Don't breathe in its vapor or yield to its spell
This awful oasis, this heavenly hell

If you lean in closer, there chants from the deep
A chorus of voices now rousing from sleep
Do not toss a coin in, no matter how cheap
The thrill will be fleeting, the consequence steep

One frivolous flick of your eye and alas
One moment on foot, now flung down the crevasse
Nails rasping in vain at each stone that you pass
You splash down and plummet to your new impasse

The murmurs, empowered, now echo and chime
Judge, jury, and butcher for only the crime
Of building on sinkholes and squandering time
And chipping away at a pale paradigm

Mouth reeking of wishes, your tender skin stings
You glance all around as the tribunal sings
Surveying the lattice of lush ivy strings
And lichen-lined rubble upon which it clings

Its leaves once lay parted to show the way back
But now merely thrash like a demoniac
Eclipsing the halo with fingers so black
Their panic has passed to make way for attack

As soon as the chasm has you in its thrall
The longer you linger, the lower you'll fall
You'll stomp in its basin and scratch at its wall
But fleeing means flying and you only crawl

You'll wait for cold terror to dullen its fangs
Ignoring the tremors and vertigo pangs
And when you taste hope and its very first tangs
The thought of escape in its infancy hangs

In spite of your nausea, you'll heave up to stand
And struggle to grasp at a foliage strand
You'll start climbing slowly, just hand-over-hand
Like Alice emerging a foul Wonderland

Your skin will glow slowly beneath golden skies
Light piercing your muscles and searing your eyes
You'll tune out the whispers as they criticize
Ignoring the wishing well's final reprise

You'll finally scale to the top of the pit
With lungs barely breathing and teeth tightly grit
And sprawl in the meadow, too worn to admit
The triumph endures where the pain will remit

In time, it's no more than a fable to tell
A long-ago portrait in faded pastel
The scar will heal over, the wound will dispel
But deep in the garden still lingers the well