

AMANDA HAAG

Huddle

An ark built for my children.

We are gathered. We are gathered. We are gathered. An old, old-fashioned house full of wedged stairs, loose bricks and sons—a grandmother, a maiden without hands, a midwife, a cook, a foundling, a wife, a quilt, a pocketknife, a breathing lizard, a journeyman, a fisherman, a husband, lost and found children, a mangy terrier and a cat, friends, holy dancers, scattered frogs, so many old bottles and repurposed cans—growing downward, like the roots of a tree through a monstrous puddle. Just ask the fish: what matters is already here. Listen to the animals in storm. Trust, don't eat, the tuna. The untreated wood of barrels splinters our hands and we howl and bark, caw, hiss, we suck and vinegar away the hard spirits that fight to enter our torn skins. Crusty lids of cloudy jars keep tight our jams and pickles, sweet and lucky summer fruits—the children tumble up the stairs with armfuls, jars as game, as riddle, as power, as philosophy: who will open up the figs, and where will all the oceans go, and have you seen my other boot? The little boys click their tongues; the little girls wonder: when can I pick off the scabs? They are many to a room, sticky forearms, working spice into the woodgrain of failing dusty antique dressers and into the gamey dinner patties—children prone to usefulness when the food wheezes and burps under their palms and against that ripe wood. Roll, pat, prepare. They keep busy, and so keep warm, so laugh, so fail to notice those certain clouds. Then off to bed, screaming, grunting, and flapping their wings with sweet kid-violence, heavy curtains pinned up with nails and ropes. Then we: we remove remaining shoes and socks, and remember the animals we've eaten, and those lost to careless feet. With our feet we stomp, dance. Music burning toes. Prowl, snarl, snap, bite, moo, hoot, parrot, bleat, meow, shiver, cluck, and crow up a new monster of jelly, meat pie, cricket, brown bear, jaguar, and honey to guard the sleeping children. Prepare arm in arm with new twins, chosen and surprising cohorts, adopted sisters and kindred, cross new uncles who smell of venison and rabbits. Trust the tide, and prepare to tell the children when they wake. Prepare to tell them: earth was once for standing. We are gathered. We are gathered.

Amanda Haag lives in Milwaukee with her husband and two children. Her fiction has appeared in *The New England Review* and is forthcoming in *The Indiana Review*.