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Feeling Your Heart Beat in the Palm of Your Hand

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Feeling Your Heart Beat in the Palm of Your Hand

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Kami L. Ownbey

B.A., Philosophy, University of New Orleans, 2008

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Billie's trying to keep up, but Teva clicks through the slides at warp speed. She keeps the notebook with the answers in it hidden in the folds of her skirt, which is hiked at several angles. She's wearing those tough, gray motorcycle boots, the ones with all the buckles and scuff marks from kicking shit, and lemon yellow panties printed with blue and purple daisies. These Billie finds more visually intriguing than a million Caravaggios. These are curves and lines she could get in to.

The top of a vending machine can cracks, followed by the duller hissing noise of the Sterno pod on the bottom coming to life, heating up the sake. Except no vending machines in Lapitola, Florida sell sake. Teva gets it by the case from the Asian market near the docks; she comes home smelling of jackfruit and fish.

"My turn," Billie says. "I get a can of sake now."

Teva raises a purple-penciled eyebrow, takes a noisy gulp. "Nope," she says. "Date?"

Billie squints at the slide. Girl in a yellow dress standing on the back of a white horse. Red clown in the foreground. *The Circus* by Georges Seurat. Billie kneads her fists against her temples. *Seurat, Seurat, Seurat*. "1890."

Teva doesn't acknowledge the correct answer. "Location?"

"Musée d'Orsay."

And the process begins again. Teva sips and clicks, barking, "Artist? Title? Medium? Date? Museum?" faster and faster, a drill sergeant in some boot camp for aspiring art historians until Billie is curled on the floor with her knees tucked to her chest, whimpering. Sometimes she covers her eyes, rocks back and forth, and screams. When she does, Teva snorts and lights a

cigarette, one of those trash-smelling ones with ginseng rolled in with the tobacco, also from the Asian market.

“Shut up, Bill,” she says. “So help me, you’re going to learn this.”

Billie never gets a can of sake. Not even when she can bust through all sixty-four slides in just under seven minutes. Her exam is at eight a.m., and Teva’s not going to let her forget it, denies the canned sake reward on the basis of the test’s early hour. But Teva’s not in Billie’s loft bed—a fact that Billie tries, every night, and fails, every night, not to think about—so Billie sprawls on her afghan with what remains of a bottle of Old E that was stashed under Marvin’s desk and some 90s riot grrrl rock playing low from a tape deck near her head. She’s thinking about Teva’s relentlessness with the slides. About how it’s the most animated Billie’s seen Teva in the two or three months since Teva moved in. How, despite Teva’s graduate degree and the job she left at the Harn Museum in Gainesville, the way she grills Billie isn’t about art. Billie’s still formulating it, this idea about power and Teva’s need to control something, anything, when Marvin barges in.

He looks surprised to see Billie in her loft even though they’ve shared this room for years. Then he scowls.

“My bottle of Old E, Bill,” he says, jabbing a thumb at her.

Billie hits the tape deck’s ‘off’ button, curses when the thing squeals, whirs, and attempts to eat the B-side of *Live Through This*. “Finders keepers,” she says. She takes a safety pin out of her ear, uses the needle to extract the magnetic tape from the deck, then her pinkie finger to wind the cassette back. “Seriously, it was on the floor, behind your desk, covered in dust. I’m pretty sure you didn’t even know it was there. What are you doing in here, anyway?”

“It’s my room?”

“Since when?” she asks.

Marvin huffs, kicks off his Chuck Taylors and torn jeans, clambers into the loft. He stares at Billie with what seem to her to be scooped-out eyes, then swipes a hand through his limp, lime green hair, and says, “Since Edward started banging the lead singer of the week.” He wrests the bottle from Billie’s hand and drinks.

“That chick from Kitty vs. Hemophilia?” Billie asks. At Marvin’s nod, she adds, “Ew.”

Of the four housemates, Edward is the one to keep the attic space full of traveling punk and metal bands who pay maybe twenty bucks for the privilege of crashing at Lapitola’s famed 1810 house, and he has a thing for lead singers. Kitty vs. Hemophilia have four shows booked between here and Fort Layton, so they’re taking up space for five nights. There’d already been a fabulous row over the lack of designated vegan shelves in the fridge, the rest of the band and the 1810 housemates watching in awe as Teva and the lead singer vied for the title of Queen Bitch. Teva won, of course, seeing as how if you counted by who paid rent the most, it’s her house, but the lead singer—a chubby girl with a rainbow devil lock, more facial piercings than Billie has fingers to count them on, and a penchant for wearing 50s housewife-style aprons and little else on stage—had threatened to spread the word that 1810 was not an animal rights place to stay, as if anyone but Edward cared.

Billie has lost control of the bottle of Old E. She sits cross-legged with Marvin’s head in her lap while he sips from it and stares ruefully at the images tacked to her walls. She doesn’t want to talk about vegans or traveling bands or Edward or Teva. Finger-combing the snarls out of Marvin’s hair, she says, “Let me give you a proper ‘hawk.’”

“Uh-uh,” Marvin says, his lips glued to the bottle. “I don’t want to have to stand up for anything, Bill.” He pauses, his narrowed eyes stuck on a picture of Henry Rollins from back

when he didn't have that scary-big neck. "You want to play with my hair, give me liberty spikes or something. Something I can take lying down."

Billies shakes her short, brown curls, leans over so she can hang off the side of the loft and rummage on the shelves for a bottle of Elmer's glue. She'll give him liberty spikes, then. Tall and glorious, something to stand up for those of them who keep taking things lying down. She finds the glue, scoots back into the loft, begins separating Marvin's hair.

"You're a fucking saint, Marv," she says. "A saint or a masochist, and lately, I'm wondering if there's a difference."

"Speaking of," Marvin says, "Teva stopped me in the kitchen." He offers the bottle to Billie. It's the last swallow of malt liquor, and she takes it. "Said you've got an early exam and if I'm coming in here, I need to make sure you're asleep and not drinking or anything."

"Typical," Billie says. "So, when Teva asks..."

Marvin sneers, rolls his eyes back so he's looking at her. "Because you know she'll ask." He wipes a stray drop of glue from his forehead, wipes his hand on his T-shirt. "You were snug as a bug. I turned off your shitty girl music, finished my Old E, and did my own damn anti-establishment hair." He sighs loud, and Billie thinks he looks like he wants to say something else, but instead, he reaches down to fumble with his sock until he extracts a small flask. The smell of cheap whiskey stings Billie's sinuses when he unscrews the cap and takes a drink, liquor dribbling down his chin. "Tell me," he says, offering the flask over his shoulder. "Edward'll come crawling back to me as soon as the band rolls out, and I'm a fool, so I'll let him, and I'll be the one to apologize. But how does it come to pass that Teva's got you under her thumb?"

Teva waits to hear Billie's answer, her ear pressed against the worn oak door, but when the low murmur of Billie and Marvin's voices turns to giggling, then singing, she straightens up and walks away. They're in there butchering the Rolling Stones and Social Distortion in one go, unable to decide or just not caring which tempo of *Under My Thumb* they want to sing, and Teva will be damned if she's going to listen to Billie get drunk and forget everything they've worked on all evening.

Teva is taller than average and on the athletic side of thin. She had her eyebrows removed by electrolysis back in Gainesville, and she draws them back on every morning, a daily adventure in color and expression and shape. The inside of her closet looks like what would happen if a biker dude married a hippie chick, and she keeps a fat bundle of black dreadlocks growing long on the top of her otherwise shaved head. She's twenty-nine, but her hands are pink and scarred and gnarled from exhibit installations and prepping canvases, and these days, she can't decide if she wants someone to hold or someone to hurt.

The drive from Gainesville to Lapitola takes six hours if you aren't in a hurry, but by the time Teva pulled up in front of 1810, she hadn't showered in six days, hadn't drawn her eyebrows on in way longer than that. Edward, when he greeted her, told her she stank, and she didn't care. Marvin, when he saw her, called her 'ghoulish,' and she didn't care.

Billie. The way Billie blushed when Edward introduced them. The way she'd catch Billie staring at her when Billie thought she wouldn't notice. That's what made Teva care again. What made her start showering regularly, made her start doing her face again, wearing a bra, dressing to match the reputation that preceded her. Billie is what churns her stomach with acidic guilt.

But she's not Billie's sister, not her lover, not her mother. Teva's not the boss of this house or anyone in it; only Edward knows who she is, who she once was, the person she's not doing a very good job of trying to be again.

In the kitchen, she considers the shelf that Kitty vs. Hemophilia's singer claimed for the band despite the argument. The stupid, cardstock sign hanging from the edge reads, "Cruelty Free" in big, block capitals. But Teva knows that nothing's cruelty-free because this fridge had a vegan shelf once before, back in the 90s, back when she lived here with Galen, back when Galen was still Gail and giving a whirl to anything that might bring her peace. The lead singer can't know it, but the return of the vegan shelf insults Teva. Wounds a thing nowhere near healed, so Teva finds a mason jar and fills it with hot water and salt. She finds a roll of masking tape and a Sharpie on Edward's drafting desk, makes a label, and, like a true curator, spends way more time than is necessary deciding where, exactly, amidst the soy cheese and seitan the mason jar should sit. She leaves it a little left of center, pausing in the open refrigerator door to admire her work. The label reads, "Tears of Sheep."

Teva puts herself to bed. No pills, no booze, no smokes save one more of her ginseng cigarettes, which she grinds out in an overflowing ashtray shaped like a Gothic cross. Sober, sloshed, or stoned doesn't make a whit of difference. Teva will dream the same dreams she's had every night since she left Gainesville. Sometimes, when she's with Billie, she can forget for a minute, an hour, an afternoon, but her sleeping mind won't let her stop seeing the sparse emptiness of the museum's main gallery. She'll relive that wave of petulant annoyance with her partner and co-curator for the exhibit not being hung. Over and over again, in her dreams, Teva walks forward, ready to kick the blue scaffold. Over and over, she sees the shadow on the floor.

Even in dreams, she'll wonder for a final, innocent moment what casts it. She'll cock her head and follow the angle of light up, up. Up to Galen, dangling by his neck from the rafters.

Teva will wake up sobbing, and she'll consider getting up, knocking on Billie's door. She thinks she wouldn't have to say anything, just stand in the threshold letting the tears flow, and Billie would take her hand, guide her to bed, hold her and stroke her hair and coo until Teva falls asleep again, and this time, she won't dream of Galen. But Teva never gets closer to Billie's door than sitting up in bed. 1810 closes in around her, the same room, same four walls she sat between when Gail started talking about becoming Galen; Teva lies back down and sticks the heel of her hand in her mouth and gnaws on the skin there until she tastes blood and sympathetic pain shoots up her elbow. Then she sleeps.

From the pages Billie tore out of Marvin's journal.

The world according to Edward: The 1810 house has stood since dirt was young and, since then, it has been inhabited by punks and freaks and assorted weirdos. Snoops had just moved out, only Billie and me living here when Edward moved in, and he thought we were letting the house go to shit. Or, actually, the opposite of shit, with everything quiet and clean. Just me, Billie, and Snoops for years, no more traveling bands, no more protest meetings or community potlucks. Left that shit in the 90s. We cook meat and go to school and buy bottles of wine. Billie has a car. At the back of the kitchen pantry, there's a bong. Edward single-handedly brings the house back to what he thinks of as its former glory. He puts the ads on the internet, brings in the traveling bands and zine construction parties. When he heard that Teva Tagliano meant to come back—Teva's old school, lived at 1810 in the 90s, is a bad bitch artist known

around Lapitola for smashing beer bottles on heads that offend her—he thought we’d be set. Except Teva came back unhinged, and Edward doesn’t know why.

Living a dead dream, Edward is a starfucker, and he doesn’t know how to say ‘please.’

The world according to Billie: The 1810 house exists beyond time and outside of space. Charmed and endless, it always has been and always will be a safe place for people like her, people like me, the people who’ll never know where they fit into the world. The sort of people who’ve always lived here, who live here now. She’s like my little sister, knows I love Edward, hates it for me how Edward boffs everyone, aches for Teva, thinks that Teva is a beautiful wreck. A wreck like any wreck, frightening and fascinating, a thing she doesn’t know how to approach or even if she should.

Billie goes to work and goes to class, and when she comes home, she turns the telephone’s ringer off because she recently decided that everyone talks too much. When it’s quiet, Billie sits in her loft and waits for her life to happen.

The world according to Teva:

The world according to me: There are two worlds, the one in my head, which is perfect and seamless and everything makes sense, and the one that intrudes. In the perfect world, the 1810 house is an island. No one comes, no one goes, and nothing ever changes. Edward loves me back and Billie is always there to talk to when the anxiety gets too big, maybe to comfort Edward in other ways. Because I’d be okay with that, I trust Billie, know she’d never try to take Edward away. (This isn’t fair to Billie. Billie gets someone, too, in my perfect world. I try to imagine that person, draw a blank, and the world becomes imperfect again.) It’s not Teva. It

can't be. Not with the tragedy that trails behind her like a bridal train or the shadows under her eyes. I never knew shadows could take up so much space.

Billie wants to ask questions, but I don't. Teva came back to Lapitola with four things. (1) Her pick-up truck, (2) a duffel bag of clothes, (3) a book bag with a mini Master Lock through the zippers, and (4) the shadows Billie doesn't see. I read the news stories about the suicide in the Harn Museum. The complications, the implications... It's too much. It makes my teeth ache.

When she knows Marvin won't be home, Billie takes the torn pages out of the empty tampon box she uses to hide things she doesn't want him or Edward to find. The words don't bug her as much as the first time she saw them. She doesn't even read them anymore, prefers her memory of them, where they have a sort of casual poetry. Instead, she rubs the ball of her thumb over the blank section. The place where Marvin wrote three, maybe four, sentences about Teva then erased them. The paper is thick with smudged graphite, thin with eraser marks, like he wrote, erased, wrote, erased, gave up. The words that are there don't bother her. She's known Marvin since she was six and he was eight. He was the black-haired little boy who came out of the trailer next door one summer day to ask if he could play, too, in her kiddie pool, who offered to let her pet his hamster in exchange; who, six months later, gave her a grape-flavored Ring Pop and asked her to marry him and she said 'yes' and wore the Ring Pop, sucking on it all day long and when it was gone, when they sat down in front of his dad's TV to eat frozen dinners and watch The Simpsons, she showed him the blank plastic disk and announced that they were divorced; Billie knows by now how Marvin uses his words. The ones he doesn't use are what bother her.

Forty-five minutes late to class and either hung over or possibly still drunk, Billie aced the test. Looking at that nice, big ‘A’ now, she can almost taste that morning’s burnt Circle K coffee with the Irish Creme creamer she’d dumped in it by mistake, and she thumbs the clean pages again, not one red mark to indicate failure. The test is creased and wrinkled from a day of being put in, then taken back out of, the inside pocket of Billie’s leather jacket. Normally, she’d throw a test away in the seconds after noting the grade, but she keeps thinking about showing this one to Teva. In her best version, Teva looks at the flawless test, her bow mouth curling into a smile as she cups Billie’s chin and kisses her, says something like, “I’m proud of you,” or “I knew you could do it, Bill.” In the worst version, Teva sneers at the test and at her, throws the paper on the couch, asks, “What are you, five? You want me to hang it on the fridge?” And as far as Billie can tell, it’s fifty-fifty. She settles for the passive-aggressive thing and leaves the test on the kitchen counter, goes to the trouble of putting a coffee ring on it so it looks like she dropped it there and forgot about it.

Days pass, and Teva doesn’t mention the test. No one does, and Billie doesn’t know what she’d expected. That someone like Teva—curator for Harn’s contemporary art collection, a published name in museum science—would give two shits that she passed her Art History 102 midterm?

Billie knows things the other housemates don’t know, things she’s teased out of late-night, booze-fueled conversations. Things like how Teva found she could hardly drive by the Harn Museum without feeling sick to her stomach or bursting into tears, never mind actually going inside. How Teva loved Gail and tried to love Galen, rethought her own boundaries and her conceptions of sex to see past the plumbing to the person she loved. The little ways in which Teva failed and the ways in which Galen failed, how there was something bigger, deeper, that

changing shape hadn't changed in Galen or Gail, and how those compounded failures brought Teva back to where it began, back to 1810, back to Lapitola. Billie even knows that she's naive to think she can, in any way, help put Teva right again.

The note Marvin left on the chalkboard begs Billie to come to the Archive. She reads it while she pulls off the maroon headscarf and neckerchief that are part of her waitressing uniform.

Notorious for starting shows a couple of hours after they're scheduled, the Archive is where Kitty vs. Hemophilia booked their final Panhandle show. *Burn after reading*, the top of the chalkboard says, and Billie chuckles sadly at Marvin's attempt to get back in Edward's good graces. The phone isn't in its cradle. She didn't see Teva's truck at the end of the block. Billie unbuttons her striped uniform shirt and uses it to erase Marvin's message, looks down at herself. Her undershirt is sweat-stained. Her hair reeks of bacon grease. Egg white crusts on her pants in an unfortunate approximation of some other stain. She grunts in disgust and kicks off her shoes, then her pants, drops the whole nasty mess of her uniform by the washer as she makes her way upstairs. The cramped, hostile atmosphere of the Archive is not what she needs. Not that, not Marvin's mooning, not Edward's carefully orchestrated drama. What she needs is a shower and her art books and the bottle of Jameson she's been saving for a night she has to herself. She's got a term paper coming up, and she hasn't decided yet what to write on.

"Shit! Sorry," she stammers when she walks into the second floor bathroom. She crabwalks back out, adding, "I didn't think you were here."

But Teva says, "It's okay, Bill. Come on in. Talk to me. I saw you aced your test."

Billie slides back into the darkened bathroom and sits on the lid of the toilet, tries to figure out what to do with her eyes. Teva's hidden up to her collarbone in a tub full of frothy

bubbles, its rim lined with candles. Her eyebrows are washed off, and her dreads are piled in a knot on top of her head, the combination giving her an appearance that's part royal, part feral. Her bare knees poke above the bubbles, and Billie drags her eyes away from them to the screenprint on her own tank top, a cherry getting ready to explode like a bomb, the word 'seether' written across it in dripping, silver letters. She knows how the cherry feels, and she lets her gaze drift down to her gray, cotton panties, not sexy at all. Self-conscious and sweating again, Billie snatches one of the candles from the tub's rim. White and unscented, the candle's glass holder is wrapped in slick, green paper that bears the picture of a bearded man in robes standing on the foreground of a path that winds into the distance in poorly executed orthogonals. In his right hand, he holds a staff. Billie squints at the tiny script.

"Saint Jude?" she asks.

"Patron of lost causes, desperate situations, and hospitals," Teva says. Her voice is dark and slow as the syrup Billie spent the evening wiping up. Teva closes her eyes, and Billie steals a glance at the tops of her breasts.

"Hospitals," Billie says. "Did you... have to spend a lot of time in hospitals? With Gail? Galen? I'm sorry," she pauses, takes a breath, tries to slow down her words. "I never know how to talk to you about it. About Gainesville."

Teva's eyes don't open, but her forehead creases, and she says, "Then don't."

Billie nods even though Teva can't see her. Lost causes and desperate situations. Billie wonders if she's ever experienced either, if maybe she's both, neither, if she can count herself as a person at all when sitting next to someone who's lived as much as Teva. The weight of all the life Billie hasn't lived mingles with the thick, hot air of the bathroom. She shifts in her seat, ready to get up and slip out of the room when Teva opens her eyes and asks in that same strange,

thick tone what she'd come in here for. When Billie says that she meant to shower, Teva's shoulders shake in silent laughter.

"Yeah. You smell like cheeseburgers. I've been meaning to say. You should apply for installation jobs. The volunteer gigs. Local museums. Start now. Build it up. A shower? Don't like baths?"

"No," Billie says, her voice small, confused as she tries to follow Teva's logic. "Baths are nice. It's just, you know. Two bathrooms, four plus people. Usually, you've got to do the hygiene thing pretty quick around here."

"Thought you'd go to that show with Marvin," Teva sighs. "But no one here now. Plenty of room." She slides along the back of the tub, sitting up, exposing herself to the tops of her ribs, and a puff of bubbles clings to her sternum. "Come on in," she says.

Collar to crotch, all of Billie's insides go hot and tight like a fist, and she swallows audibly, grabs the edges of the toilet seat to keep herself from bolting. She glances around the bathroom wildly, chiding herself for this hesitation while all of her inexperience rears up, tries to chase her from the room.

"Billie," Teva says. "Please?"

Her whole body feels heavy, alien, when Billie stands and turns away. She can feel Teva's eyes on her as she undresses, wonders if Teva can hear the heart beating in her chest, because right now, that's the only thing Billie can hear. She lifts one foot, poised like a ballet dancer, ready to get in facing Teva as though they were toddlers made to bathe together, but Teva shakes her head, asks Billie to turn around, so Billie slides into the tub backwards. She settles between Teva's legs, leans back until she can nestle her head under Teva's chin. The

water is lukewarm, and Billie makes a face at the disagreeable temperature, makes quite a different face altogether when Teva's hands run the length of her arms.

Billie holds her breath, reaches out, lets her hand brush Teva's knee. She looks down, watches the bubbles swirl and part. The water underneath streaks with something cloudy and dark, and part of Billie knows even before she grabs one of the St. Jude candles and holds it close to the surface, frantically pushing bubbles away with her other hand.

"Billie, don't."

"What the fuck, Teva?" Billie shrieks. "What are you doing? What the hell is going on?"

Flailing in what feels like slow motion, Billie scrambles out of the tub, water sloshing over the edge, splashing pink on the tiles. Teva puts up a half-hearted fight when Billie pulls her arms out of the water.

"I'm not serious," Teva says. "See? I just wondered what... so I cut the wrong way." The beading blood that runs in jagged lines, perpendicular to Teva's forearms, glimmers blackly in the candlelight. Her words slurring, her eyes slipping closed, Teva says, "I wanted to feel. It'll be okay. Just lie with me, Bill."

But Billie's got her arms tangled around Teva in all kinds of awkward ways, hauling Teva up and out, trying not to crack some delicate part of her on the floor. Billie's foot slips out from under her, knocks something wedged between the toilet and the sink, something that spills and joins the mess on the floor. Billie's bottle of Jameson. Next to it, an orange, plastic bottle, Billie's heavy-duty painkillers that her gyno prescribed for cramps. ("She didn't bring *any* of her own shit," Edward ranted when he discovered that Teva used stuff from his desk for her little anti-vegan joke. "And she thinks she can just use everyone else's stuff." *And it's true, isn't it?*, Billie thinks, *My liquor, my pills, probably my pocket knife, too*, but no matter the literal truth of

Edward's statement, in this moment, Billie thinks that, metaphorically, at least, Teva brought with her more than enough.)

Billie won't think about the blood, about being naked in a pool of someone else's blood. She won't. "Goddamn it, Teva. You aren't going to die on me."

Her voice has lost the initial hysteria-pitch. It's gone low, strangely loud, and Billie wonders if this will be her new volume forever. She darts across the hall, pulls on a pair of ripped work pants and a black T-shirt, grabs Marvin's flannel robe off the back of the door to wrap around Teva. Hopping on one foot, tugging on her boots, not lacing them, the robe getting in her way. From the bathroom, she hears Teva say, "Iss a cry fer halp."

Billie will remember what happens between now and the emergency room as snapshots, stills from a film about someone else's life. But she'll shudder and go silent, captivated by the ringing in her ears, whenever she thinks of these moments.

She's got her arms hooked beneath Teva's, hauling Teva down the stairs. Teva's feet and legs *thump-thumping* on every riser, leaving nasty, purple-green bruises that will make a social worker ask about domestic violence with a steely look in his eye.

She's dragging Teva on to the porch. Teva's dreads have come loose, are spilling over her left shoulder, clinging to the pale sweat on her face, which has gone the color of raw oysters. Wet, bloodied, wrapped in the robe, Teva lolls on the porch while Billie runs back into the house to look for the phone. She remembers it being gone from its cradle when she came in, and she runs from room to room, knowing Teva doesn't have time for this aimless search. The lights aren't on at the house next door, and Billie wastes more time spinning in circles on the stoop, her fingers dug into her hair, because she doesn't know what to do. She's twenty-one years old, and

no one's ever died on her before. No one's ever tried. When she thinks this, she also thinks, *Not very punk rock*, and, years later, she'll go to therapy for the memory of that thought alone.

Cramming Teva into the passenger seat of her car. Aiming the car at the Catholic charity hospital three miles away. She punches the Dead Kennedys up loud, and she's punching Teva every few minutes, too, yelling inane questions in the hopes of keeping Teva awake, keeping her alive.

"I've got to write a paper, Teevs, and I can't decide what on. Bosch or the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. What do you think? Teva. *Teva*. You and Galen did a full-floor Rauschenberg installation once. Tell me about it. What was it like to handle his work? Did you hear about Mercy Mercury, Teev? Replaced the Bamiyan Buddhas, no grant, no go-ahead, just boom, done. Can you believe that shit?"

The driver's side door left hanging open while the car idles in front of the big, bay doors of the ER. Billie running inside, trying not to scream as she enters, falling all over the front desk, scattering the night nurse's papers. Nurse whose eyes go wide at the sight of her and later, much later, sitting in the waiting room and sipping stale coffee from a Styrofoam cup, Billie will look at her arms and chest and pants to see the blood and whiskey smeared there like stigmata in reverse. The triage nurse will come over, now that all of the ER patients are in rooms, and give Billie some alcohol wipes and, after carefully gauging the distance in her eyes, a hug.

Time ceases to exist in an emergency room at night. Hours stall out while Billie stares, uncomprehending, at a television playing CNN. She picks up magazines, flips pages, but the coiffed celebrities make even less sense than they usually do. A doctor comes to talk to her. Endless, run-together words about stomach pumps and stitches and IV drips, blood loss and synergistic reactions and how Billie did the right thing. Then there's the social worker, which,

Billie supposes, is better than the cops. Finally, some other functionary tells her she can go home. And she does, without asking to see Teva, a slip of paper printed with the hospital's visiting hours clutched in her fist.

Three-thirty a.m., one of those basement hours that's neither too late at night nor too early in the morning, Billie only has to imagine Marvin or Edward or one of the band members seeing the mess in the bathroom, on the stairs, trailing on to the porch, to know that she doesn't want to go back to 1810. Instead, she lets a mixed tape play on repeat as she drives wide circles around the outskirts of town, hospital to university to bay to river and back again. She stops once at a Circle K to buy the largest cup of coffee they sell and a pack of Kools, stops a second time at a Whataburger for a strawberry milkshake and some fries, which manage to settle the rumble in her stomach and make her want to puke all at the same time. Billie drives until the sky turns to milk and her eyes start to burn, then makes the loop to the university one more time. She parks behind the fine arts building and crawls into the back of her car.

She wakes to the first full rays of the sun and the sounds of the parking lot filling up, and she knows she won't be going to any of her classes. She's hungry, isn't wearing any underwear, and her neck aches. Reality feels an arm's-length away while Billie drives home. When she gets to 1810, she has to stay in her car to absorb the latest lesson in how quickly things can fall apart.

With a wicked scowl on his face and cheap sunglasses that fail to hide the bruising on his right eye, Edward hefts milk crates of his stuff into Kitty vs. Hemophilia's van. The band is already loaded up, crammed in the two front bench seats, pretending to study a map. From the porch, Marvin flings snippets of abuse at Edward while pressing a bag of frozen corn against his own forehead. Billie can't see Marvin's face, but his Buzzcocks T-shirt is spattered red. A door slams, and the van pulls away. No one looks in the rearview mirror.

Billie makes a big plate of nachos. Marvin fills two tumblers with whiskey and Coke. They sit across from each other on the couch, and Marvin asks about the mess in the bathroom, and Billie eats, drinks, explains, asks about Edward and the van and Marvin's face. But her ears are ringing and reality is still doing that just-out-of-reach thing, and she knows she hasn't told Marvin half of her story and the only parts of his that stick with her are the concept of a bar fight that led to Edward deciding to go on the road with the band. Something about the lead singer walking into the Archive's unisex bathroom to find Edward and Marvin making out in the john. Some shitty love triangle punching and shoving and kicking at itself, beer bottles being thrown to and from the stage, the argument making its way back to the house because it had to eventually and erupting all over again, and somewhere in there, Marvin gave Edward a black eye, and Edward maybe broke Marvin's nose. Anyway, there was a lot of blood, but then, there was blood waiting here at 1810 for them, too.

Alternately laughing and sniveling, Marvin puts himself to bed. Billie tries to mop up the mess, but the bathroom still reeks of whiskey and cheap bubble bath and candles that have guttered to their glass, so she washes her face and brushes her teeth in the kitchen sink. Heavy with exhaustion, Billie makes her way up to the loft, where Marvin's eyebrows knit in their sleep and his fingers scrabble at the empty air.

Loudest of All

During the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, you lean over to me and whisper that this is the weirdest funeral we've ever been to, but that's not true. You just forgot that Tony came from this big, Italian family. So did I. We all forgot.

The chapel is divided. A lot of starched black on the packed right side. Men wearing out the creases wives ironed into pants legs with all their genuflecting, muttering and blinking teary eyes while making the sign of the cross. Shriveled raisins of great, great aunts and grandmothers, their faces covered by black lace veils. A woman who must be Tony's mom down on the floor between the pews, sobbing into a lace hankie, interrupting the liturgy with the piercing wail of, "My *bambino*, my *bambino*," until a stern uncle hooks her up by the elbows and hauls her back into a pew. She'll be on the floor again in a few minutes.

A smattering of us, the remnants, on the left. Still in black because we're not assholes. Torn denim and safety-pinned leather, plain, black T-shirts spotted by bleach, handmade patches on the backs of thrift store suit jackets. You keep tugging the lapels of your black trench coat tighter around your breasts, ashamed here and only here of your brilliant chest tattoos, and you keeping patting your candy red hair. You wish you'd remembered Tony's big, Italian family because then you would've remembered to wrap your dreadlocks up in black lace, but it's okay. Your dreads aren't alone. We're boys with blue or blond hair hanging down to our asses, girls with shaved heads, tattoos and facial piercings and all the little markers of the things that got Tony killed. It's no wonder we're getting nasty looks over the corpse. Who's a mother to blame when her twenty-two year old *bambino* gets pushed off a roof in a knife fight except his miscreant friends?

We wait to file past the coffin after the family. They take a long time. Kneeling before it, more genuflecting, stroking it, kissing it. Davy tells us in whispers that the Italian-Catholic funeral is supposed to be open casket. That you're supposed to be able to touch the deceased's hand, kiss his cheek, maybe slip a card with his patron saint on it in there with him. But Tony's funeral is closed casket. See: Pushed from a rooftop. See: Knife fight. So the family holds on to their offerings and we hold on to ours until we're at the cemetery. Until the coffin goes into the ground. Then the rosaries and saint cards and coins and roses go in. Then the torn bandanas and one-hitters and packs of Lucky Strikes and your bra go in. I didn't see you unhook it, wriggle out of it, or smuggle it down your sleeve, but I see you tug it out and glance around to make sure the family isn't watching before you toss it in. I hiss your name. You scowl at me. I tell myself I'm not jealous. Been years since you and Tony were a thing, and you weren't even a thing for that long, but I think death makes you love everyone more. Today you love Tony again, and you don't give a shit about me.

The family gets into a caravan of long, black cars. They say nothing to us. We'll never see them again. We pile into Davy's pick-up truck, three in the cab and three in the bed, and maybe they're talking up there, but we're not back here. We're all staring up at the sky, the fat, gray clouds, wondering if it'll rain for Tony's funeral, or staring at the trees as they whiz by, thinking about how it all moves so fast, and I want to ask you if you remember. If you remember the baker's dozen of us meeting again and again in detention during middle school because we dyed our hair or got caught smoking behind the gym or said a nasty thing about God during mass. If you remember how, through unspoken motion, we all began altering our Catholic school uniforms at the same time; you ripping the hem of your calf-length skirt and hiking it well above your knees, me using a Magic Marker to draw an A in a circle on the fabric you left behind and

pinning it to my blazer. If you remember that we were younger once, and stupider, and that we haven't really gone far from there.

I imagine Tony's family crowding into a kitchen with terra cotta glaze-ware and a framed map of Sicily on the wall while we jostle for unstained spots of carpet in Davy and Rat's apartment. They'll have strong coffee and casserole dishes full of sauced and spiced food, cookies made with anise and rolled in rainbow sprinkles, cannoli and thin strips of veal and espresso made in a stovetop *ibik*. Except I think *ibiks* are Turkish, and I don't know if you can eat rainbow sprinkles at a wake.

We have bottles and boxes of wine because August said that's fancier than beer and Tony deserved fancy. Rat's bong is on the kitchen table, but no one feels like hitting it, and we order three pizzas that go cold before we pick off the cheese.

We sit on the floor in a tight circle, leaning or lying on or just touching one another, just to remind ourselves that *we're* still here. We talk about Tony for a while, sharing funny stories that make all of us laugh and scarier, fucked up stories that make all of us avert our eyes, but soon we start talking about the other ones, too, all the other people who've died.

August starts. She wonders out loud where things started going wrong, if they are actually wrong at all or if this is just how it is for poor kids born on the wrong sides of rough cities. We toss around phrases like 'limited options' and 'nowhere-to-go,' and we remember those middle school detentions that grew into high school suspensions, expulsions, and how it wasn't worth it to be there anymore because nuns and textbooks and Jesus couldn't offer us what dealers and runners and pushers did. The people we found who'd trod our road before, who gave us steady jobs and quick cash, who showed us how to stop getting caught; the people who were thieves like us.

“Who went first?” you ask, interrupting laughter, some memory of a deal gone bad or a teacher getting punked.

The room hushes, and August says, “Andy. Andy went first.”

But Davy says, “Bullshit. Andy was fourteen, and it wasn’t even the life that did him. Some kind of cancer, remember? Fucking fourteen years old, good grades, not already a screw up, probably had the best chance of any of us of getting out of this hole and he gets cancer? How’s that work?”

The shadows under Davy’s eyes get darker, and he flicks his cigarette so hard he breaks the filter off. Mumbles something that might be, “Fuck it,” and pitches the filter across the room, takes another drag off the bare-ass Lucky, uses fingernails blackened with diesel grime to pick shreds of tobacco off his lips. Andy and Davy were cousins.

“Remember his funeral?” Rat asks, and all of us nod. Rat shakes his head, careful not to look at Davy when he says, “Didn’t look like Andy no more. Looked like some old, old man in that coffin. Wasn’t right.”

“What’s right?” you mutter, and for a while, the only sounds in the room are the bubbling of Rat’s fish tank, the sharp suck of nicotine being inhaled, and the hollow clink of the empty August rolls back and forth across where dirty carpet meets cracked tile.

“So,” she says eventually, and Davy flicks his spent cigarette at her.

“Jocko,” he says. “Jocko went first. First to get kicked out of school, first to kick, period. Parents were going to send him to that boot camp place and he drank bleach, yeah?”

“His funeral was real nice,” August says. The bottle goes back and forth, back and forth. “Some, what’s it, Unitarian minister. ‘Creator’ and ‘creation’ and ‘from dust we came and unto dust we’ll return’ and none of that tired old crap about Heavenly Fathers. I liked that.”

Something about this gives August an idea. She stops rolling the empty wine bottle, brings it to rest in the middle of our circle, pulls a small, flat bottle of Gentleman Jack from her purse, and says, “Grace, get down here.”

Grace hasn’t been part of the circle, been lying on the futon since we got here, pretending to sleep. She took a handful of downers, Xanax, you said, before the funeral, and spent the whole time mumbling, “Tony didn’t rip that sumbitch off. Tony weren’t some cheap thief.” You were the only one Grace would tell about that night on the foundry roof. About the stitches she got that are going to leave a real nice scar on her cheek from when she tried to intervene. About telling the cops she didn’t know who cut her, who pushed Tony, must’ve been some rival supplier, never seen the guy before in her life but he was high as a kite. About how, when she thinks of all the little runs all of us have done for Jackson over the years and then he goes and offs Tony, she feels all tied up inside, and she eats another fistful of pills.

She props herself up on an elbow to look. “Spin the bottle?” she says, her voice a thickened sneer. “August, I’m sure I’ve sucked face with everyone in this room by the time I was thirteen. Go to Hell.”

But August’s game isn’t Spin the Bottle, or at least not the version where you get some tongue and maybe cop a feel. She wants us to take turns spinning the empty, and whoever it lands on has to name one of the fallen, then take a shot of Jack. “Suicides edition,” she says.

“Go to Hell a lot,” Grace growls, and she rolls over, buries her face in the back of the futon, and pulls the corner of a blanket over her head.

“There is something deeply fucked about you on the inside, Summer Girl,” Rat says, cocking the eyebrow with three rings in it at August, but he leans forward and gives the bottle a whirl.

It lands on me. I blank out, sputter, dribble some wine on myself taking a drink, trying to buy time. Because of you, I'm wanting to put them in order, the right order, and I can't.

"Mason," I say.

August looks at me like I'm supposed to say more, so I add, "Fifteen. Huffed half the art supplies classroom, rode his bike off the bridge."

"To Mason," August says, and we answer her. "To Mason," in a chorus. August hands me the Jack. We all take a swig of whatever we're holding. I spin the bottle. It picks you.

"Carla," you say. "Nineteen. Jumped off the balcony of the hotel room she was staying in when her folks tried to drive her up to that rehab place."

"Darlene," August offers when fate chooses her. "Eighteen. Lost a game of chicken to a train."

Rat reminds us of Marcus ripping up the bed sheet from his cell to make a noose, and we argue when Davy brings up Flyboy.

"We're just on suicides now," August says, and Grace speaks up from the futon.

"Like joining the idiot military weren't a form of suicide," she says. "We all do stupid things. Stupid things gonna get all of us killed one way or another. Stupid choices picking us off one by one." She makes a series of *ping-ping-ping* noises, a sound like a sniper's rifle.

No one contradicts Grace on this point, probably because she's right. But if stupid is a death sentence, then we'll run out of booze before we run out of names for August's game. I'm thinking of Allie and Todd getting hep from dirty needles stuck in dirty arms in dirtier places and never getting treated. About the guys from the chop shop who got to Bryan after he rolled them, trying to cut a deal. About this list of names and how I'm trying not to tick them off on my

fingers, about how none of them made it to twenty-five, so I don't see Davy send that empty swirling around on the floor. I don't see it land on you, but I hear you say,

“Me.”

And the room erupts around you.

“The fuck you talking about, Shoni?”

“Ain't dead, girl, look, I'm punching you.”

“That's some crass, cold shit, Shone.”

Everyone has an opinion on your statement, everyone but me, but all you do is close your eyes and shake your head and say, “I was dead. A minute and a half before they resuscitated me. I'm one of the people who died.”

Maybe it's something in the sound of your voice. Maybe it's the way your shoulders curve in and your dreads hang down to cover your face. Maybe it's the scars on your arms to match all of ours. Whatever it is, it makes all of us draw in one big, collective breath and hold it. I remember. The telephone game that started with me, the quiver in your aunt's voice when she said, “Eddie, you need to come over,” and how I thought she was lights out and desperate again, ready to spend an evening seeing how much of what drug would buy her a spin on my dick; that thing you and I have never talked about, but I know you know because you and your aunt, you really do share everything.

A handful of barbiturates and a fifth of gin. You *were* clinically dead. I remember.

But no one else in the room is going to let you have it. Not today. Not when we put Tony in the ground three hours ago. Not when we've put so many others under. It's a number that, right now, Grace and August especially aren't going to let you be a part of.

So this is when things get ugly. Uglier. You jump up from your place on the carpet, and you wrest what's left of Gentleman Jack from Davy's hand, decide on the spot it's not enough, and grab a bottle of wine from the counter, too. You stalk off to the bathroom and slam the door so hard it rattles.

I'm the first one to think about Rat's stash, the one we all know about, the one he keeps in a plastic Halloween jack-o-lantern under the bathroom sink. Phenos and benzos and tranks in their single-serving plastic baggies, trick-or-treat candy for fucked up adults, waiting there for your repeat performance.

When I mention it, Rat gets up and looks under the kitchen sink, thinking he might have moved it. But the jack-o-lantern is still in the bathroom, and August says some shitty things about letting you do it, letting you follow Tony to make it a real special day, things I'll never repeat to you and try not to repeat to myself. Rat and Davy take turns talking to the bathroom door.

Rat makes jokes. "Come on out, Shoni," he says. "We accept you as one of the undead."

Davy sits by the door and smokes three Luckys in a row while he talks, low so we can't hear, and he comes back to shrug and say, "Your turn, Eddie."

So I go to the bathroom door. I knock and say your name. You don't answer, and I try the knob. It isn't locked. I wonder if anyone else tried that, what their not trying it says about our assumptions.

You don't say anything when I come in. I close the door, lock it this time. No reason for anyone else to come in here. You're in the empty bathtub, clothes still on, a pack of toilet paper behind your head and the bottle of Jack in your hands, and I think maybe you're counting the

avocado green tiles. I can't even get a look out of you until I look under the sink, but when I do, you roll your eyes.

"Like I'd do it again," you say, and you turn to the side, set the Jack on the rim of the tub, tuck both of your hands under your head. "Grace offered me some Xanax before the funeral. I don't even do pills anymore, Eddie. You know why? You ever even notice that?"

I shake my head.

You laugh, a mean sound that has nothing to do with amusement. "Because of you. Because of Aunt Lynn. Because of why I swallowed a bottle of them to begin with. Fuckers."

It's the first time you've ever acknowledged it, but there's nothing for me to say. Would I say, *I was seventeen, Shone, and what seventeen year old boy says 'no' to skunk and snatch?* Would I tell you it meant nothing because it didn't to me, all the while knowing it meant a world to you? There aren't words for it, so I hang my head and nod. Yes, I'm a fucker. A fucker and a thief and a fiend and a nobody, and the least I can do is accept it.

"All I ever wanted was to get away," you say in a voice so distant that I'm not certain you're talking to me. "I used to dream, back when we were still in school, day dream that I could break into the aquarium at night. I'd take my time picking my fish, the ones with the prettiest scales, the ones that really caught the light, all rainbows and sparkles and beauty. You remember that shit? When they took us on a field trip to the aquarium in sixth grade?"

You are talking to me, you want me to answer, and I say yeah, I dug the jellyfish, but this only makes you frown and shake your head.

"Some of those fish were beautiful," you say. "The most beautiful things I've ever seen. So I'd pick my fish, use one of those big nets to scoop them out of the tanks, and I'd kill them. I'd pick off their scales one by one, scales and fins and gills and everything, real careful, lay

them all out. And then I'd start cutting and sewing on myself. Make myself a fish skin, a fish suit, so I could swim in the deep and breathe underwater. And I'd go to the same bridge that Mason rode off because it's over the bay and the bay goes to the ocean, and just like that, I'd swim away."

You're eyeing me like you're waiting for me to say how messed up that is, how completely sick, but you seem to be forgetting that we've seen plenty of sicker shit, and if anything, what's sick to me is how you seem to think this makes you special.

"I wouldn't swim away," I say, and your mouth pops open like the fish you want to be, ready to tell me off, but you're going to let me finish. "I'd use birds," I say. "Make myself a suit of feathers, give myself wings. But I'd only use crows and grackles and starlings and ones like them. That way I'd be all black, so when I flew away, I'd really disappear."

I stare at you after I say this, and you stare back. Finally, you smile, closing your eyes, so I take off my boots and crawl into the tub with you. There, in Rat and Davy's bathroom, we curl around each other, tight and safe for now. The sky through the tiny shower window is going dark, and I listen disinterestedly to the ruckus August makes when she hauls Grace off the futon to take her home. The bathroom door rattles once, and Rat curses at it being locked, but it doesn't take much to remember who we are, and Rat picks a lock in his own house. He turns the light on for a second, sees us here in the tub, flicks it back off. I open one eye to watch Rat take a piss in the half moonlight. He closes the door when he leaves. Soon your muscles go slack, and your breathing evens out, and I can't see a reason why we shouldn't spend the night right here.

A Season of Headless Buddhas

The night Oogie took the death trip, set his sights on the Big Hard Drive in the sky and missed, Mercy Mercury was in Afghanistan, paying fifty American to spend five nights in the Bamiyan Valley caves, but Jet Denner was there, in the room, with Oogie and a camera. Mercy didn't find out about Jet or her brother until her return layover at Heathrow. Her mobile erupted with messages, and Arlo, one of the activist artists on the Bamiyan project, pulled her out of line at an espresso kiosk, a newspaper under his arm.

“Merce? You need to see this.”

The headline, *ETH's Boy Genius Dies in Dangerous Experiment*, stretched out in bold between Arlo's hands. The article said nothing about Jet. Mercy's voicemail took care of that.

Jet was there. Everyone's guessing it's his death art thing. He isn't answering anyone. The cops didn't question him. He's the one who called them. Mercy, I think him and Oogie had some kind of pact.

The prints are already in New York. There's talk about a last minute addition to his new show. It's probably pics of Oogie. Merce, are you getting these?

She spent the five hour layover sitting on the floor at an empty gate, sipping the espressos Arlo kept bringing her, either on the phone, video chatting, or letting Arlo do the talking for her whenever a fresh snippet of info brought on tears. Arlo'd been there from the beginning, knew all the shit, all the ways it went down, encouraged her to follow her art, insisted Oogie would be fine. Mercy would've liked Arlo to go with her to New York, and she kept glancing at the paper peeking out of his flight bag.

“Thirty-two years old,” she said, “And Oogie was still a boy.”

Arlo smoothed her tangled hair, cupped her face in his hands. “You did the best you could,” he said. “He was beautiful. In his way, Oogie was perfect. When you see Denner, you put your fist to his face and tell him it’s from me.” Arlo walked through the gate, and Mercy was back on her own.

From Bamiyan to Heathrow, all she’d thought about was Bamiyan. The weather had been warmish, dry. The Taliban’s destruction of the Buddhas revealed ancient paintings, and international scholars roamed in and out of those caves, scribbling notes, checking equipment. Bamiyan’s most impoverished citizens inhabited the more surface caves, and Mercy liked the thought that her team’s money would get those people a couple weeks’ worth of food, shoes with soles. She had an old Camelbak, water purification tablets, the companionship of Arlo and three other iconoclasts, and what could only rightly be called a cubic fuck-ton of outdated electronics. Then she let the project fall through. The team spent days humping scrap from cave to niche, waiting for her instructions, and when she didn’t have any to give them, the younger artists muttered that Mercy Mercury was used up.

The televisions and fax machines, computers, printers, and 200-pound copiers got rewrapped in excelsior, put back in their crates, and were airborne long before the team. Mercy talked a lot about donating the money to UNESCO, maybe giving it to the locals, but she couldn’t decide. Replacing the Bamiyan Buddhas was designed to be the biggest stunt of her career. The niches had been empty for twenty years. So what’s another twenty years of emptiness?

From Heathrow to LaGuardia, concerns about art, Bamiyan, or her career struck Mercy as selfish, juvenile. She thought instead about how long it’d been since she’d last seen Oogie,

how long she'd known Jet Denner. She scribbled broken sentences and long, rambling pages in her journal during the flight, gearing up for New York with twenty-five years of personal history. A teenaged friendship turned casual fling. A casual fling turning into something more serious until Mercy made her first big sale--a larger-than-life pietà, the Virgin and dead Jesus sculpted from melted Apple products; sold that bitch to MoMA, too, for some real solid coin--and all of Jet's petty jealousies came forth. He couldn't handle her being more successful and, at a small celebration party at a Greenwich dive, revealed just how little he respected her art, or her.

Mercy texted Arlo as soon as she got to LaGuardia. *The night after we really, finally broke up in Greenwich. I found him buying breakfast for Oogie. I should have known then. Exactly how low Jet could get.*

The meeting in New York went bad. Mercy tried to tell herself later that it didn't have to, but she should've known better about that, too. Jet arrived late, his ferret-faced lawyer in her Armani suit oozing fake apologies about last-minute flights. The arguments started as soon as he walked in the door.

"There's no way that can be a legally binding contract," Mercy said when faced with the single-page, typed document both Oogie and Jet had signed. "It's not even notarized. Signed or not, I'll fight it. I still have durable power of attorney. Oogie wasn't fit to sign a contract like that. He didn't understand."

"So he could think tank in Zurich, consult for CERN, and be the go-to tech expert for every news outlet from here to Australia, but he couldn't make an agreement with an old friend?" Jet stopped using a Sharpie to touch up the chips in his black nail polish long enough to sneer at his lawyer. "Come on, Mercy."

Mercy asked for the room. The door closed behind the lawyers and Jet's dealer, and she moved to the other side of the table, pulled out the chair beside Jet. "I want those prints," she said. "And the negatives, and anything else you have of his. I want to know where it happened. What's it going to take?"

Jet poured himself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table, took his time drinking it before he spoke. When he did, he asked how Bamiyan had gone. "I heard the project didn't get completed," he said. "Didn't even get started, really. I think you're going to look back on Bamiyan as the place where 'Mercy Mercury' died, and I wish I would've been there to shoot it. Think how special that would've made my next show. To have the literal and metaphorical deaths of a pair of siblings?"

Fists and faces may have been Arlo's style, but Mercy drew her bowie knife from its sheath in her boot, got it intimate-close to Jet's jugular, and leaned in. Not screaming but talking threat-low to growl, "Oogie was my brother, you piece of shit. The only blood relation I had left. Not your goddamn portfolio fodder."

"Everything should be considered fodder for art," Jet said, trying to lean away from Mercy's knife. "'Nothing is sacred.' Mercy Mercury, as quoted in the *Spiritual Machines* catalog."

Mercy pressed harder. "Got your camera handy?"

The dealer and lawyers returned to Mercy back on her side of the table and Jet holding a paper napkin to a hairline cut on his throat, and Mercy said, "I'm prepared to make an offer."

It cost a lot more than fifty American to get the prints and ensure Jet wouldn't be hanging his next show.

She studied the prints on the flight to New Orleans. Jet didn't take many shots of the room, but there was enough peripheral information for Mercy to get a sense of composition, imagine how the room had looked. Oogie had propped his laptop against the front of a dresser. Even in photos, it looked a monster thing, a Frankencomputer with a six terabyte drive and more ports than Mercy knew what to do with, built from scratch and scraps to specs only Oogie would understand, coaxial and AUX-in cables trailing across the B&B's hardwood floor. The power drill fell midway between the laptop and Oogie's head, its bit spinning long enough to gouge the baseboard, and in the photographs, Mercy couldn't tell if Oogie's fingers were still curled loosely around the cord to the drill or around the jack he'd been trying to ease into the hole he'd put in his head. Three-eighths inch bit. Oogie wasn't fucking around. He'd had tubes of conductive gel, a syringe of anesthetic, vials of stuff Mercy guessed were meant to bridge the chemical-electrical gap, some saline. A well-thumbed copy of *Neuromancer* lay face down on the floor, its spine broken, its pages flecked with gore. The book wasn't among the effects on her lawyer's list, but there it sat in the photograph, another baited hook.

One thing Jet didn't photograph: the decapitated Buddhas. The broken statues littered the yard of the New Orleans B&B. Mercy didn't notice them when she checked in, only saw them later, when she had to take a break from the room, from the one little stain on a curtain the cleanup squad missed, the drill-scuffed baseboard that hadn't been fixed. She went outside to get the scene out of her eyes, started walking the perimeter of the blue and white building because standing still wasn't Mercy's thing. She counted at least two dozen of the statues, ranging from two feet tall to taller than her, Gandhara Buddhas, all of them. All in the same half-walking pose, all throwing the same mudra--Abhaya, fearlessness--and every one of them without a head. The heads lay on the ground, scattered without pattern. Some of the statues were toppled, lying on

their sides in the grass, separated from their heads by inches or feet. Oogie died in this hotel with its yard full of headless Buddhas while she was in Bamiyan. The coincidence wasn't lost on Mercy because coincidence wasn't her thing, either.

The innkeeper had been living and working at the B&B the night Oogie died. He was puttering around in the entrance hall when Mercy came in, straightening rugs and sorting mail. He greeted her, said, "We will be serving breakfast. Nine a.m."

Mercy had paid for a night in Oogie's room. Would pay for as many nights in that room as she felt she needed to be there. She would not be up by nine for breakfast, but her travels made it easy for her to peg the man's accent as Kashmiri. He seemed pleased by her recognition, then shuffled a little from side to side, and said, "Please excuse me if this is rudeness, but you are family of the boy who went to the other realm? You are staying in his room. No one else stays in that room. People are saying there are bad spirits now. Grandmother Lal would say I burn sage, so I do, but still no one else stays."

The room did smell funny, but Mercy figured she was imagining things, ghosts of hot electronics and scorched wood. Rudeness would be complaining about it, and she picked at the dry, flaking skin around her knuckles. "I'm sorry it's affected your business. Oogie kind of shaped things around him, whether he meant to or not."

"It is I who am feeling sorry for your loss," the man said.

"Thanks." She knew he'd just sorted it, but she couldn't stop herself from reaching out and straightening the stack of outgoing mail on the side table. The piece of furniture, Regency if she knew her history at all, was without blemish, gleamed with lemon oil. Everything in the B&B seemed to have been kept with love and attention. It made her want to pay to have the floor in Oogie's room repaired, the stained curtain replaced. It didn't seem right. "The statues in your

yard,” she said, considering that not everything had been so well kept. “None of them have heads.”

“A storm,” the man said.

“Sure. But a storm knocked all the heads off? And you just left them where they fell? Why not repair them, get new ones?”

The man shrugged. “The other man with your brother, with the black hair. He comes here first, rents the room,” he said. “He also was asking this question. But my statues are being like your brother, maybe. Some things that are just meant to be.”

Mercy couldn’t reply to the offhand revelation. She’d felt as much was true when she’d seen the statues, knew it couldn’t have been an accident, but still. The innkeeper had been too polite to expose to the fire in her head, her heart, that his words had struck. So she helped herself to a Newcastle from the bar and went back to the room, the prints, her memories of Oogie and Jet.

She tore the room apart, looking for the Gibson novel. She catnapped on the floor, in the spot where Oogie last lay, then on the bed; gathered the prints in her arms and tossed them, haphazard, around the room, turned them face down where they landed and walked on them; took a bath; tried to call Arlo and ended up maxing out his voicemail. Half an hour before midnight, while she was busy downloading a copy of Oogie’s favorite book, someone knocked on her door.

“You are needing to talk,” the proprietor said, and he lifted the tray he held a little higher so Mercy could see. “You will share tea with me?”

She let him in, and, setting the tea service on the dresser, he walked a tight circle in the center of the room, looking at the prints.

“These pictures,” he said. “The other man is the one who took them?” He shook his head, made a tutting noise. “I will be asking your forgiveness if he is also family or friend, but he seemed to me of a bad sort. Disrespectful.”

Mercy laughed, startling the man, and she said, “Disrespectful. Yeah, in a word, that’s Jet. So, not that I don’t appreciate it, but, tea?”

Moving about the room with a fluid conscientiousness, the man arranged a sitting area for them, poured jasmine green tea into short ceramic cups. “Grandmother Lal says talking about the dead helps the living to remember, helps the one who has passed to be moving on.”

“I’d like to meet your grandmother,” Mercy said, letting the steam from the tea warm her face. “She sounds wise.”

“Grandmother Lal is also on the other side. Her wisdom is here.” The man tapped his forehead with a finger, squeezed lemon into his tea, swirled the cup. “Now,” he said, “you are talking to me about your brother.”

It felt awkward at first, figuring out what to tell a stranger about Oogie, but the innkeeper told her to start wherever she wanted, and once Mercy got going, she saw how right the man was. Talking to him was better than talking to Arlo or her lawyer, Jet or anyone else she could think of. This man didn’t have any preconceptions about her brother. She started from the beginning, told him about how Oogie reached the age of five before he said a word, and when he did start speaking, he wouldn’t shut up.

“He talked almost exclusively about brains and thoughts and machines,” she said, and with a laugh, “He bored the shit out of most people, honestly. Didn’t like to be touched, acted a gauche mess in public. But he was reading graduate-level textbooks on neuroscience by the summer between third and fourth grades. He had this favorite novel. He read it when he was

eight, and it stayed his favorite, even when he could tell you, in detail, all the things Gibson got wrong.” She rose abruptly, grabbed a photograph, pointed to the image of the book. “He had it with him when he was here. You haven’t seen it, have you?”

But the man hadn’t, and soon Mercy was telling him about how she introduced Oogie to the internet, where he took her activist surname as a handle. Mercury: fast, formless, always changing, and just when you thought you had it under your fist, could put your pressure on it, it would slip away.

“I told him, ‘that’s art,’ but he didn’t agree. He said that was human consciousness. Webspaces.

“Our remaining parent ghosted when Oogie was nine,” Mercy told the man. “I was seventeen. So I had my street art and a savant sibling. That was my world. Over the next couple years, my art started selling, actually started selling, but I didn’t travel then, or do the renegade installation thing. Not until Oogie got picked up by a research university. He was fifteen. I mean, I couldn’t be jaunting off around the world and leave him by himself at home. Not even with Arlo and the others. I thought we had a real community back then. I believed so much in so many people.”

“Belief is not bad,” the man said. “Only mislaid. Continue.”

“The university gave him room and board in addition to his pay, plus a new community of people who cared about the same things he did. He was supposed to be happy. Safe.”

The pot of tea dwindled, and Mercy told the man about Oogie gaining his own kind of fame, how people never associated the two of them, despite the ‘Mercury,’ which was for the best. Their shared fascination for electronics, she told the man, stopped at the superficial. “Oogie knew how they worked, what they could do, what he wanted them to do. He was my muse. I

started constructing my icon sculptures from the parts he threw away. Give me a welding torch, and I can turn mobiles, cameras, faxes, motherboards, anything, into a new religious art. Oogie was going to figure out how to put his brain into the things, upload a consciousness, live forever in cyberspace.” She set her cup back on the tray and looked around the room, pointed to the pile of prints. “I guess he was going to die trying.” And the tears came back.

The man sat quietly. Didn’t say a word, but covered one of her hands with one of his, let her cry, went into the bathroom and came back with a stack of tissues. Eventually, after Mercy apologized and he told her tears were good, he said, “You were asking about my statues.”

Mercy nodded, wiping her nose. “I was in Bamiyan when he died. I had this grand plan to build new Buddhas. It was going to be a statement with a capital S. It never got done. Were you familiar with the Bamiyan Buddhas? They were Vairocana and Shakyamuni.”

“Vairocana is understanding the goodness of tears,” the man said. “Because Vairocana has the wisdom of emptying. Shakyamuni is having the same mudra as my statues. Abhaya: ‘fearlessness’ in Sanskrit. It is also meaning protection, good intentions, reassurance, blessings. I don’t think the other man with your brother understands Abhaya. He is not understanding that language.”

Mercy held the man’s gaze, uncertain what to say. The only thing she could think of was wanting Oogie’s novel back, but it didn’t make sense. Not in context and not even to her. What did an aged, fouled mass market paperback have to do with anything? She pushed her hair back from her eyes, let her hands fall, palm up, on the table, stared at the grime under her nails, and wondered if any of it was dirt from Afghanistan.

The man correctly interpreted her silence and tidied up the tea things. He balanced the tray against his shoulder, squeezed Mercy's hand one last time. "You understand," he said. "You should not keep staying here. It does not help you feel right about your brother."

Jet Denner owned an apartment in the French Quarter, a carbon copy of other apartments he had scattered around the world. Spring was Jet's Berlin or Tokyo season. He wasn't supposed to be in New Orleans any more than Oogie should've been or Mercy wanted to be, and she took her time getting to his place. She paid little attention to the sights out the streetcar window, thinking instead about the old, dead community she'd told the man at the B&B about. Her and Oogie and Jet and Arlo and Jenine at the core, a rotation of other musicians and artists and writers who were already city-hopping. She could have told the man so many stories. She could have talked to him forever, laying open her past, which she guessed meant her self, and she realized she'd never even asked the innkeeper his name. She would've liked to have told him about her last big fight with Jet, the severing one. The man's grandmother might have had some sage words about the guilt she felt the next morning, finding Oogie and Jet at breakfast. Forgiving words for how she'd dragged Oogie away despite his protests and the scene he made.

Oogie had yowled as if in pain when she grabbed his arm and yanked him up from the table. "Mercy, no, I don't want to go," he'd said. Whined, really, and people turned to look. "I want to finish my breakfast. I'm talking to Jet. He bought me breakfast. He's helping me."

But Mercy wouldn't relent, and Oogie got more volatile, yelling and slamming his open hand against her, the table, the chairs she pulled him past. She left him gesticulating to himself and stuttering nonsense in a chair in the lobby, went back and got the rest of his breakfast packed

to go. She scooped scrambled eggs with ketchup and bacon so crispy it was almost burnt into a foam container.

Jet smirked. “You’re making a mistake, Mercy,” he’d said. “You’re making so many mistakes.”

Later, in the cab to the airport, after hearing Mercy out and asking too many uncomfortable questions, Oogie still didn’t understand. “But he’s a friend,” Oogie said. “I’ve known Jet my whole life.”

“And I’ve known him longer than that,” Mercy said. “He uses people. Look, Oogie-Boogie, sometimes it takes a lifetime to see people for who they really are, and sometimes, if it’s bad enough, you can’t make yourself unsee it. I can’t call Jet a friend anymore. Hell, I can’t even say I’d piss on him if he was on fire.”

Pressing the buzzer for Jet’s Royal Street apartment, it struck her she’d never said what she’d do if she was the one who was burning.

“I told you I’d ship you the negatives,” Jet called from the kitchen.

Mercy made a slow circuit of the sitting room. The décor was ostentatiously posh, predictably macabre, and embarrassingly proud. Framed catalog covers featuring Jet’s own work jostled for wall space with the work itself. Then came the row of promo shots. Jet crouching in the open mouth of a cremation chamber, Jet shaking hands with Damien Hirst, Jet giving the hanging carcasses of a slaughter house a curatorial eye. He came back into the room and offered her a crystal glass full of a puff pink liquor.

“It’s a local distillery’s latest. A rouge absinthe. Please put that down.”

“I won’t,” Mercy said, and sipped at the drink. “The absinthe’s nice. Tastes like hibiscus. But I’ll be taking the book. Because you wouldn’t have mailed it to me. And you knew I’d see it in the prints.”

The ruined copy of *Neuromancer* had been given pride of place on the mantel, and Mercy set her glass in its spot, thumbed the pages before tucking it into her rucksack. Jet didn’t stop her. The oldest voicemail waiting for Mercy when she’d landed at Heathrow was the last one she listened to, working backwards through the wash of bad news. It was Oogie’s due diligence. *I’m doing an experiment*, he’d said. *It’s dangerous, but I have a friend to help me. I wanted you to know, in case it goes wrong. If it does, I think it means you win.* She hadn’t thought about it or listened to it since London, but watching Jet watch her, drinking his absinthe and smirking that damned irritating smirk, waiting, she recalled each minor inflection of Oogie’s tone.

She said, “Oogie wasn’t a metaphor-maker. Not like you and me. He wouldn’t even have noticed the statues in the B&B’s yard, but if he did, he wouldn’t have made a connection like that. I wondered, at first, why he didn’t do it in Zurich. Why fly back to the states? Why not just fly you out there if he meant to have you around? Then I saw them. It’s a nice touch, Denner.”

Jet laughed, asked her to sit down. Once they were facing each other across a coffee table made of black glass and inlaid with a pattern of animal vertebrae, he said, “Let’s get real, Mercy. Let’s stop acting like Oogie hasn’t always been somewhere around or in between you and me. I picked that B&B for the statues, yeah, but all I did was put his message in a language you’d listen to. Maybe even damn well understand.”

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

“You think I could’ve stopped him? Could you? You’re still not listening,” Jet said, and he got up, pulled a catalog from a shelf. He gazed at the cover for a moment, then held it up for Mercy to see. “Remember this one?” he asked, and he tossed the catalog to her.

Every now and again, Mercy broke from the digital icon thing that had become her trademark. She’d had a piece in a death art show once, a show populated by works like Jet’s. Gruesome curiosities, flags made from human skin, puppies in jars and John Wayne Gacy’s finger paintings. It wasn’t her proudest show, but *The Suicide Machine (Is Built For Two)*--a graffiti-covered booth stuffed to bursting with dangerous detritus and miniatures of her electronic symbols--was the largest piece Mercy ever made besides the pietà and the idea to replace the Bamiyan Buddhas. The *Killer Art* catalog landed with a swish of glossy paper against the watered silk ottoman beside her. She picked it up. Small, sticky flags marked the pages for her work, Jet’s, and she idly flipped pages.

“Your art killed Oogie,” Jet said. “He was so upset in Greenwich. Thought pieces like your pietà showed a disdain for progress, told people that religion and technology couldn’t mix. That’s what we were talking about at breakfast. And I asked him how different the merging of one mind with all knowledge could be so different from nirvana. He liked that. Made him feel better. I like to give people ideas, Mercy. But you? You take them away.”

But Mercy knew: it had been stencils and wheat-pastings and spray paint before Oogie started building his machines. The things he made, what he said they could do, scared her. Made her re-find the gods she thought she’d lost. Oogie had been her anti-muse. And if he didn’t understand her art, at least he understood the myopia of passion. She hadn’t started traveling until he had a new home. Until she could be sure he was safe. He’d understood that. Hadn’t he?

“No,” Mercy said, uncertain whether she meant the word for herself or for Jet. She ran her fingertip over the image of one of Gacy’s Pogo paintings, rubbed it again and again, wishing she could make the clown makeup smear. “I think it’s the other way around. I think Oogie killed my art.”

“And what if it isn’t about art?” Jet asked. This time he pulled a slim, leather album from the shelf and set it in front of Mercy.

Snapshots and news clippings filled the album. There were technical abstracts on Oogie’s projects and articles celebrating his successes, postcards in her brother’s handwriting addressed to Jet and postmarked from Switzerland, and Mercy bit her lip. She didn’t have a collection like this. She turned to the frontispice, and it was about the same as getting sucker punched.

“What if it’s about that boy?” Jet said.

The faded 8x10 showed one of her old nighttime installations, from the days of the street pieces, the spray paint, wheat-pastings, and stencils. Ragged, sheet metal angels were strung up between the girders of her hometown’s famous bridge and foregrounded by the shit-eating grins of the teenaged anarchists and artists who’d helped her put the project up. There, in the middle, their arms slung around each other’s shoulders: her and Jet as kids. Oogie would’ve been almost eleven in the photo, a tiny figure nearly cut off by the camera’s crap angle. His head and shoulders made it in, though. A moon-cheeked little boy whose expression seemed flat if you didn’t know how to read it, one hand gripping a loose buckle at the hem of Jet’s leather jacket, and his face turned up, gazing with wonder at Mercy. He’d had so much fun that night, and for weeks after, he’d asked every day when they could go back and play on the bridge.

When the news came at her in Heathrow, Mercy thought she had it figured out. No one else in their lives had ever rejected Jet the way she had, and if he couldn’t make her love him,

then there was still Oogie, easy to manipulate if you were good at manipulating people. But now she made quantum leaps like Oogie's machines, doing the logical acrobatics from a night over half a decade ago in Greenwich to the afternoon she touched down in Bamiyan, and Oogie's final message to her. *If it goes wrong, I think that means you win.*

"Did he call you, or did you call him?" she croaked.

Jet only shook his head, took the album away from her.

"I want a copy of that picture," Mercy said.

"Can't always get what you want," Jet said. "You've always been good at imparting that lesson. To me, to Oogie, probably to Arlo and Jenine and all the others. Maybe it's time you learn it yourself. Did you ever ask Oogie how he felt about you flitting around the globe all the time? There wasn't a home base anymore, not as far as he could tell. *You* were home, Mercy, and if he couldn't find you, well, then what? You didn't listen to him in Greenwich, either. Wouldn't give a thought to how he felt about you ripping away another symbol of stability for him as long as it served you." He gathered up the catalog, album, and glasses, then stood near the front door, giving Mercy her cue. She rose, and he added, "No one needed a special phone call. You'd be surprised by the bonds between people who've been abandoned by you."

Rucksack on her shoulder and a hand on the doorknob, Mercy said, "Arlo wanted me to punch you in the face for him." She shook her head. "Whatever I did wrong, you're the one who snapped pictures while your friend died."

The French Quarter was caught in an odd place between closing down and coming to life when Mercy stepped onto the sidewalk. Boutique owners were locking up while bartenders were opening doors. She bought a disposable camera from a tourist shop, took a cab back to the B&B,

but the man wasn't in. Mercy took her own pictures. Not of the room, but of the statues in the yard. All those headless Buddhas to stand in for the ones she'd failed to replace. Oogie was dead; what Mercy knew of her art died with him. She had enough from the sale of the pietà and a few other pieces. Mercy Mercury would never come back to New Orleans. Or Afghanistan, New York, San Francisco, London, or a dozen other places. Next stop: Zurich.

Some things, the man had said, just meant to be.

Modern Blue

In the room, there is a chair. They don't appear to be anything special, neither the chair nor its room. The ceiling slants here on the third floor, an angle a few degrees short of forty-five, highest above the dormer window, acute near the door. The walls are painted a matte gunmetal, the trim is white begrimed to soft gray, and there is a fireplace. Its mantel is furred with dust, its firebox black and cold, its corners clogged and its hearth scattered with ancient ash. The floors are hardwood, a deep mahogany once finished in a thick, fine varnish that has worn and chipped. When the sunlight streams in, the floor discloses the favored paths in the room: The varnish is thinnest in a steady circle around the chair and again in a paced line from the chair to the window.

The window looks out over rooftops flanking streets too narrow to be seen from this height. Roof and sky alone greet the gazer from this window--flyspecked without, smudged with the oils left by fingertips within. Slate, tile, and tarpaper jut at various angles and heights, but the variety is subtle. There are no extremes. The roof on the right might slant more steeply than its neighbor to the left, which is taller by scant inches. The rain, when it comes, falls in punishing sheets, and the sun, when the clouds permit it to shine, is allotted a mere hour or so at a time, its light watery and uncertain.

A medallion decorates the middle of the room's ceiling. It depicts an abstract floral design carved in plaster that has chipped, colored with a sage green paint that has flaked. The center is marked by a light bulb socket, empty and dangling from loosed wires. A batik scrim of rust and corrosion lines the interior of the socket. It has not held a bulb in a long time.

Beneath the medallion sits the chair. A dictionary illustration of a chair: wooden, straight-backed, spindles stretched between four legs. Its finish has degraded, too. Specific chafed areas,

worried lines along its back and on the edges of the seat where fingers have gripped, fidgeted, and rubbed. The seat is worn in the center. Shining, gentle concavities, and it is unclear whether it was carved this way or if ages of its proper use have broken it in to this reassuring state. Like the room and the sky and the view out the window, the chair also does not strike the eye. No one expects this chair, but all who find it know it is perfect, the exact object that was unwittingly sought. The chair is familiar and sitting in it will be, too.

Ask any inhabitant of the city how the chair got in the room, and they will say it's always been there. There was an old woman once, they think, who knew the chair's provenance, but she has gone to her reward. The building the room is in is old. As old as the city, and the inhabitants think perhaps the room was intended for storing things that can't be gotten rid of but that should, perhaps, be forgotten. The single flight of stairs up from the second floor leads to a small landing outside the room's door. There is nowhere else to go. Some suspect the rest of the third floor is an illusion, a glamour to hide what doesn't exist. No third floor at all, just the room, which others say was put there to hold the chair.

Except for the times when it has stood as a desolate connoisseur of dust, the building below the room has always been rented to shops. The nature of these shops has changed over time according to fashion and philosophy. For decades now, the shops below the room have been, on the first floor, a bookstore, and on the second, an apothecary's. That is appropriate, the sorts of places a person might want to pass through on their way to visit the chair.

We all visit the chair.

Natalie visited it when her first child miscarried two months before it was due. The surgery was attended by nightmares bored and unfazed by the drugs the nurses administered, and the scar on her flesh became a reminder of the wound in her soul. When Natalie entered the

bookshop, the proprietor averted his eyes. She ascended the first flight of stairs, and the apothecary--older, more experienced with the room and the chair and its brief occupants--bowed his head in acknowledgement and offered her a small, brown bottle of diluted ether, which she refused. Natalie sat in the chair for days. Twice she rose and went to the window, which she tried to open with the intent of jumping, and when it would not budge, she bloodied her fists against glass that would not break.

Randall visited the chair when he lost his job and the bank men came to foreclose on his house. He walked through the shops with unaccepted defeat in his eyes and his hands clenched in the pockets of his coat. The apothecary, like the bookseller, avoided Randall's fevered gaze. The soles of his shoes, in his pacing, wore thinner the varnish in the circle around the chair and in the line from the chair to the window. He thought of smashing the chair against the mantel, but the chair would not be moved, would not be lifted by a hundred strong men, and Randall left the room more worn than when he went in.

Joseph sought the room when Stephen left him, only to find Stephen descending from the room when he arrived. Lauren went after the fire. Julia visited the chair when her mother lost her battle with cancer, and Angela went when Mark was killed in combat by friendly fire.

Loss and death and wasting illnesses. These are the strong salves that keep the chair intact and the room full of air.

The walls are re-blued by these visits. A fresh layer of dust settles on the mantel. The chair deepens the curves of its seat, and a new cobweb is spun in a high ceiling corner. A reawakening of purpose trickles from the solitary room. The bookseller shifts in unease upon his leather-padded stool and decides to place a selection of edifying works in the display window. The apothecary, made of sterner stuff and no longer enamored by hope, dusts off his cobalt

bottles of sleeping tonics, his brown bottles of analgesics, and moves them to the foremost shelf. Purpose seeps on. The city streets narrow by centimeters. Each roof makes a private decision to more resemble its neighbor, and the clouds scud more closely together, fattening and billowing themselves in hoary shows of cloud pride.

Life spins on outside the borders of the city. The small changes in atmosphere are rarely spared the opportunity to dissipate, for neither the chair nor the room nor the city begrudge the smaller offerings. There are people who flirt with the street, skirting its sidewalks and shuffling past the bookshop with their collars turned up and their faces turned down. Some of these type find their consolation in this noncommittal walk alone, stopping by the bookseller's window and rubbing with their elbows to make clear spots in the tarnished glass. They will see the edifying works and wonder if they are in the right place, if they've turned wrong somewhere on their convoluted path. The confounded expressions they wear cause the bookseller to smile. He never meant to stay here, after all.

He dislikes those who browse the shop without ascending the most. These sightseers lack nerve. They suffer from a dearth of conviction. Since they fear their darker selves, the bookseller feels justified in tilting his chin at them and sniffing at the air. Some of them have misunderstood so blunderingly they actually try to purchase a book, and when this happens, he rises silent from his stool and walks away, disappearing behind a musty, threadbare curtain the color of old bone. No one ever follows him. Whether the book they chose walks out with them, whether they leave some coins on the counter or stoop to theft in insolent offense is irrelevant. The book will find its way back to his shelves. They are all books that were never published, books that were never written, except when their authors sat in the chair. The bookseller--the *bookkeeper*--has read them all. He knows which are morally uplifting, he knows which wallow, which authors will

recover and which will propel themselves over the edges of bridges, and in his way, he dislikes them all. All of the authors who keep him bound to his shop with their times in the chair when he meant only to spend his own short time here.

Seated there on the third floor, his fingernails digging into the soft wood on the underside of the seat because his wife had left him for his agent who then dropped him, he foolishly wondered about all of the stories that might be told from this place. And since his wife was gone and his agent was gone, his advances were gone, his house soon to follow, until he found himself sitting there, wondering about stories that remain untold. He was cleverer than most. More clever, or he felt the chair's command of itself and its domain, knew in his heart what it would and would not allow. So he rose from the chair and stepped beyond the room's threshold, and he flung himself down the stairs. The apothecary helped him turn his head back the right way 'round, then showed him to his bookshop on the vacant first floor. The broken spot in his neck still aches on the sunny days, and he has not seen the apothecary since.

For himself, the apothecary meant to stay before ever setting foot here. He knew what kind of man he was. He'd spent seven years trying to forgive himself for the accident that took his little granddaughter. Spent seven years wishing everyone else would forget so he might stop seeing pity or blame in the way they looked at him. He came to the room with no intention of leaving, cyanide in his pocket lest the chair or the room--as they do--have their own prophylactic measures. His pharmacy was waiting for him when he awoke, and now he prepares his tinctures and pills for those who might share in his or the bookkeeper's resolve. He gives away the weaker things to those who exhibit a propensity for return. He has no patience for their type, the poets who would lie, haphazard, with despair, but never take her for wife.

Uncounted years have passed and while many have tried within the confines of the dictatorial room, the forgiving room, the sorrowing chair, none have shown the inventiveness of the apothecary or the bookkeeper. All fail to circumvent the room and its chair. They leave with cleansed vision and a horror at themselves and what they have contemplated. Perhaps one will come soon, and the bookkeeper may find his reprieve and the building below a new sort of shop for its ground floor, but the prospect is unlikely. It is not a suicide room. Not a suicide chair. They exist to prevent that. Only very occasionally do they fail.

Perhaps the world was a simpler place and life an easier game when the bookkeeper and the apothecary arrived. Their shops were not long unlet before them. The city folk strain to recall what those floors held in the past. Perhaps it has always been memory collectors and medicine men. Perhaps worse and perhaps not. It is rare that the shops remain empty, for the room and the chair feed on the world as its passersby feed them. The small sorrows reach them from the far corners of the four winds just as all rivers, it is said, flow to the sea. They know they are needed whenever a woman weeps, wherever a man slumps on a bar. These are the weaker salves that keep straight the room's walls and smooth any splinters in the seat of the chair.

Anthony stood for an afternoon at the opening of the street when another relationship ended just past the two month mark. Melissa pictured the room and the chair in the darkness behind her closed eyes as she lay curled and shuddering after her date refused to hear the word 'no.' Craig made it all the way to the top of the stairs before turning around and walking away to give up his five-year sobriety chip at the nearest tavern. When his daughter ignored him and married *that boy* anyway, James accepted one of the apothecary's potions rather than ascend. Karen cried out her guilt on the bookshop floor when the husband who'd beaten her finally died.

The chair feels these things happen beyond its vicinity. It knows the intimate details of them all, the smoked and salted flavors of all the shades of sorrow. The room quivers, licking at the leavings of human lives. They taste. They absorb. They grow strong in the unconsciousness of man.

You know these things are true.

For we have all seen the room, even if we haven't been there. We have pictured that perfect, plain chair. We know the copper taste of the air and the ember smell of the dust. We can feel the room's, the chair's presence. We have acknowledged their existence, accepted their actuality as part of our lot. If we are wise, we appreciate their reality. We have glimmerings of what they do for the mind of man; their parthenogenesis from the same, for sorrow needs no fertilization. It springs, fully formed, from our play.

Shiver and Shake

Get lost in northwest Florida, as close as you dare to get to the Alabama state line. Wander east, away from the stuccoed pastels of Layton Key. Stray not too far south into the university, military, religious perversity of Lapitola. Keep west of the paper mills of Cantonement. Read the hand-painted clapboard and aluminum signs offering hot boiled peanuts and live chickens for sale along Old Spanish Trail Road. When it crosses the Perdido River, turn north. Perdido means 'lost' in Spanish. Follow the lost river to the lost town of Muscogee. Spend an afternoon indulging a morbid fascination for an 1880s lumber town gone bust. Photograph rundown empty forgotten shacks. Pocket a spike from a rail line turned to rot and rust. Daredevil dance on the remains of a bridge, on river docks, throw a stone through the broken window of the Oran Merritt House, ancestral home of the last family to leave Muscogee. Do what you want, what you will, with the bones of the buildings of Muscogee, but don't look too far inside, for those who seek are sure to find.

Shiver and Shake had always lived in the four long rooms of Muscogee's train station. For all they knew, they were born there. The old man never would say. There was an old man, once. The fraternal twins agreed upon that. He would make a day's trek into Cantonement or out to the farms on Old Spanish Trail Road. Come back with soap and tiny cans of propane for the camp stove, candles and long stick matches and skinned rabbits strung on blue nylon rope, blankets and bootlaces and odd bits of outdated clothing purchased for pennies from shriveled women with too few teeth who'd cleaned out their attics after a child moved away or a husband died.

The old man had taught the twins their letters and sums on two lined, lap-sized

chalkboards filched from Muscogee's dusty schoolhouse. The old man read them their Bible--he liked Isaiah and Ecclesiastes and Corinthians best--and told the twins they were of the devil.

Sometimes he brought back a growler of whiskey from the home of a Cantonement man who had his own still, and for the next five or six nights, the old man would froth and howl at the twins about their mother. Only the whiskey would tell them about this woman who'd given birth to them. According to the whiskey, she: was a whore, had consorted with Satan, had screamed to raise the dead when it came her time to foal, fainted straight away when Shiver emerged from her accursed womb, retained an undeserved merciful unconsciousness that spared her the sight of Shake, quietly bled to death without laying eyes on her abominations, and was probably cavorting with all the daemons of Hell to this day.

The old man set off in the direction of Cantonement one morning and never came back. The twins figured they were about twelve or thirteen years when this happened, on account of Shiver being possessed by that time of her womanly curse, and they went perhaps a week on the provisions the old man had laid in before they found his purse and set about determining how they themselves would go to town to purchase what was needed. They spent no tears and precious few words on the disappearance of the old man, save making up stories about what had become of him. Shake favored a theory where the old man had walked along the river, too close to the marshy shore, got himself snake bitten, fell down, died, and, if the twins were to trace the banks, they'd find his body, moldering where it'd dropped. Shiver was frivolous and dreamed up a beautiful young widow on Old Spanish Trail Road. Her husband had been the man who'd sold them the rabbits for their stew, but he'd died in an accident while cleaning his guns. He'd been rich, and his wife didn't know it until he died and all that wealth became hers, so she seduced the old man and they'd run away to New Orleans, where the old man had better whiskey and the

young widow wore fringed dresses and flowers in her hair. Shiver liked this story, and she embellished it every time she told it until one day Shake told her all she was imagining was just a different kind of snake bite, which meant Shake won, and they never talked about the old man again.

Shake stood tall, but his sister stood taller. Shiver was pigeon-toed. Shake was duck-footed. They both had broad shoulders and long, jangling limbs with knobby joints, tawny skin, and wavy hair as dark as chicory coffee. Shake would use a cutthroat razor to lop his off even with the long lobes of his ears, but Shiver allowed hers to grow until it swung level with her waist, and both twins had one green eye (Shiver's was the left, Shake's was the right) and one brown. Their chins jutted from their necks. They had slight overbites. In short, their appearances were unfortunate, but if swaybacked limbs, mismatched eyes, and crooked teeth had been their only misfortunes, the old man probably would not have consigned them to living in an abandoned train station in a ghost town in the backwoods of northwest Florida. Would not have accused their mama of witchery, would not have called them Satan-spawn and told them they'd have been better off born dead. What engendered those beliefs to the old man were the two gently spiraling, parallel ivory horns that sprouted--and grew, from half an inch at birth to where they stopped, three inches, by age seven--from the crown of Shake's head, and the curling, whipping, lightly-furred tail that hung to the backs of Shiver's knees.

The twins rummaged the chest full of attic and yard sale clothing, hoping to gain more freedom in dressing themselves, but Shake found his horns quite sensitive to changes in the weather, and Shiver's tail bulged, unseemly, uncomfortable, and suggestive in pants, so when they went into Cantonment, they went as the old man had always attired them: she in full skirts and he in a dusty top hat. Middle-aged women were the first to gossip over the sudden

appearance of twin orphans in strange clothes. Cantonement's men scowled at their women and schooled them on God's love for all his ill-starred creatures, but in the privacy of garages and the town's small, dark bar, the men themselves talked. Where'd these children come from, and where did they go after their weekly visit to town, both of them hauling bags slung heavy on their shoulders? Who'd taught that boy no better respect than to leave his hat on in the diner? And what, pray tell, was so precious underneath that the girl's skirts hid her ankles and brushed the pattern of her passage in the dirt?

Weaned as they'd been on Muscogee's hollow silences, Shake and Shiver were struck dumb by a piss pot like Cantonement. Shake stammered when he spoke to shopkeepers in a way he'd never done with his sister or the old man, and service was refused to him in each greasy restaurant on account of his unwillingness to remove his battered top hat. As such, he lingered on sidewalks or in the shadows of doors while Shiver conducted their small businesses, and by way of apology for his failures at being a man, carried home the heavier bulk of their load while Shiver sucked a chocolate malted through a straw and offered him licks of canned whipped cream from her thumb.

The schoolboys were the ones gave Shake the idea how they could earn money for themselves. A small pack of dirty-kneed, spit-faced boys but a few years younger than Shake had taken to following the twins about town. They spied around corners and snickered in the twins' wake, and one day got up the courage to start following brother and sister back to Muscogee. Three boys followed into the old pine forest, calling taunts.

"Hey-ya, stupid boy. Hey, ugly girl. Where you going, Ugly and Stupid?"

The boys' ringleader mooed at Shiver when she turned and asked to be left alone, clucked like a chicken at Shake for not turning.

“I know where they’re going,” the boldest boy said in a sing-song voice. “They’re going to the ghost town. That’s where they live. Where no one can see them. So’s they can make stupid, ugly, ghost cow babies. Stupid and Ugly sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”

His companions took up this new abuse, and soon Shake’s face went hot. He saw tears welling in Shiver’s eyes, and he wheeled on their tormenters. In a loud voice shorn of its stammer, he demanded the boys silence themselves and head on home. When the leader asked how Shake meant to make them, Shake stood still as Death, folded his hands, and looked to the ground.

“I’m not stupid,” he said. He looked up, ripped off his hat, lunged at the children, and howled a beastly howl. “I’m the devil’s son,” Shake yelled, “and if you keep prodding me, I’ll rip out your tongues and wear them on my horns like jewels! Run home, babies. Run, before I get hungry.”

The next time the twins went to town, folks talked less in their presence and threw more sideways glances. Shiver and Shake had talked about this thing, ruminated and contemplated and turned it over in their heads. They discovered they were of a mind: it might be a sin on its face, but weren’t no sin in putting food in their bellies, and they weren’t stealing and weren’t lying, so surely God would take notice of context. Surely He would understand. So when four more little boys followed the twins to the edge of the wood and flinched when Shake turned to acknowledge them, he merely folded his arms and cocked his head and said, “Yes, children?”

The boys glanced at one another. A spokesman was chosen by silent proxy, and a fifth-grader in a striped shirt twisted his baseball cap in his hands as he spoke.

“Mr. Devil, uh, sir. We was wondering. I mean, we heard. Can we see your horns?”

Shake smiled sly, gave his sister a knowing nod. "I mislike the sun on my head. It affects me poor," he said. "What'll you give me for my discomfort?"

The boys consulted with looks and fluttering hands.

"I have a dollar."

"I've got three quarters left over from my lunch."

"Me and Ben got two dollars ten cents between."

"Well," Shake said, holding out his hand. "Give the Devil his due." And when \$3.85 was deposited in his hand and passed on to Shiver, who tucked it in the pocket of her skirt, Shake bowed low, allowing his hat to tumble. He caught it with a flourish before it touched earth, and the little boys gasped, oohed and aahed, and one reached out a grubby hand. Shake danced back, swinging his head, replacing his hat. "Ah-ah, children. It's one thing to see, another thing to touch."

"We ain't got no more money, Mr. Devil."

"Then come back when you do."

In a week's time, Shake developed a price list. A dollar to see, two dollars to feel, fifty cents more if you were fool enough to draw your own blood on a point or a curve, and they made what they needed to live their small lives. As Mr. Devil, Shake found he could walk, head high, through town and converse with the shopkeepers without his stammer. The diner he still avoided. It would do no good to remove his hat out of politeness if it meant giving a free show. But his customers were only boys, sixteen at the oldest, and Shiver noted that Cantonement's supply of boys would one day soon run dry. Acting after her brother's example but setting her sights higher, she took it upon herself to enlarge their income.

Shiver started going to Cantonement on a second day of the week. She chose Fridays, made sure she stood across from the paper mill's gate near quitting time. Two weeks running, she made big, doe eyes at nothing that wanted to walk her way, but on the third week, a mill man loitered at the gate and, when the last of his coworkers departed, made his way across the street. He called her a hussy and asked what she meant, watching the men come out of the mill for the weekend.

Shiver blinked slow. "I know y'all talk about what's under my skirts," she said, trading a coy downward glance for a look in the eye. "Five dollars says I show you. Ten says you can touch it."

Naïve girl, but the mill workers wouldn't let her stay naïve for long. Nearly all of them handed over a five to see the girl with the tail, to stand and watch it sway, transfixed. More than half gave ten to wrap their hands around it and feel Shiver's tail twitch beneath their touch, to later wonder if it made them less than men to like the feel of something hard and cylindrical in their fists. Less than a quarter of the mill workers took five Fridays' worth of her presence at their gate to inquire about something more. Shake had, by then, discovered her ploy, and was none too happy, begged her to stop, but Shiver saw little difference between horns or tail except she brought home fifty dollars for Shake's every five.

"I ain't let them stick their willies in me," she'd said, pouting at the argument. "Got to be at least twenty-five for that. *At least.*"

Shake thought it ought to be double, but he needn't have concerned himself. Shiver couldn't do it. The men slobbered, or got glazed looks in their eyes, or grabbed at themselves or parts of her she didn't want them to grab, so she made her twenty-five by touching herself with her tail while the men touched themselves, and after they were done, they'd place a few soggy

bills in her palm and leave without meeting her eye, but they'd always be back the next Friday, and the Friday after that.

Shiver and Shake didn't hear about the carnival that passed through Lapitola, staking its grounds in a large lot on New Warrington Road. But the carnival's twenty-four-hour man—a dwarf who wore platforms on one shoe so he might walk upright—heard about them when he visited Cantonement to paste fliers and big, red arrows to telephone poles. This carnival wasn't the Big One, but they weren't some dog and pony show, either, and when the dwarf met back up with the caravan, he went straight away to the ringmaster and the canvasman, told them his tale of bona fide freaks ripe for recruiting. But the bossmen were busy when the circus was about to come to town, and they sent the dwarf to the anatomist they'd picked up back in Mobile.

The dwarf didn't like the gilly doctor. Didn't like his unpainted, gilly Airstream keeping pace with the garish animal trailers and the bright living vans; got uneasy standing around all those amber and cobalt bottles; those murky, round jars with *things* floating inside; those steel trays with all those sharps. The gilly doctor had approached the bossmen back in Alabama to state his case. He was a cutting edge physician who specialized in something he proudly called 'teratology' and sheepishly admitted meant 'the study of monsters,' and he thought he'd find no better store of subjects than with the circus. He'd pay his own way, taking none of the show's food or supplies for himself, and act as medic to anyone on the show for as long as they'd have him about or until he got bored and moved on of his own volition. The bossmen were suspicious, but if the anatomist was willing to treat the variety of injuries that came with life on the show free of charge, they couldn't complain. They'd let him follow in the caravan's wake, let him camp at the edges of their circles so long as he kept himself out of the cookhouse and conducted

his research with respect and permission. A renegade ousted from every university and hospital position he'd landed, Dr. Roker accepted any rules the carnival would suffer him by.

Presenting himself late one evening at Cantonement's lone all-night diner, Dr. Roker waited until his dinner was served to enquire as to the whereabouts of the boy the town called Mr. Devil. He couldn't have known that Shiver's entrepreneurial endeavors had left a sourer taste in Cantonement's collective mouth for the twins than it'd already had, and he found himself the recipient of a look of disgust and a sharp snort from his waitress, who henceforth filled his coffee cup and bussed his plates with a wordless indignation. A mill worker followed him outside, offered a match for the cigarette Dr. Roker rolled, lit his own Pall Mall from the self-same match before shaking it out, then, with darting eyes, clapped the doctor's shoulder and leaned in close.

"The boy they call Mr. Devil don't come to town on the regular no more, and I don't know where those cursed twins keep themselves nights," he said, and sucked hard on his cigarette. "But I can tell you where to find the sister."

What with his pale, blue, silk shirt and his crisp, gray vest, his slicked blond hair and his polished, black satchel, his gold wire spectacles and his hand-rolled cheroot, Dr. Roker, as he lounged on Shiver's corner a quarter of an hour before she arrived, stood out like something shiny wedged in shit. Little over a year now, Shiver had been lifting her skirts and dropping her drawers for the men of Cantonement, and she'd made good study of the looks in men's eyes. This one seemed different. She could mark him—he was there for her—but she couldn't make him. By the look of him, she felt sure he could afford fancier tail than hers. She sidled up to him with her pupils gone small and her nostrils wide. Before she could sass, he introduced himself and stated his purpose, most of it lost on Shiver, most of the words he used being outside her

ken. But she squinted hard at him and stated her prices, then added, “But you got to come back. Tomorrow, maybe. Shake ain’t here. He don’t like my trade, ain’t proud of what I do. And besides, it’ll cost you three more dollars to take a gander at him.”

When Dr. Roker laughed and explained that he meant to visit the twins at their home, he probably ought to have known Shiver would feel threatened and mocked, but Dr. Roker was a city man still learning the ways of country folk and freaks, and the kindness of his intentions should be weighed against the ignorance in his heart. Shiver made a snarling sort of noise, turned and started to walk away; Dr. Roker called, “Wait.” He pulled a soft, leather billfold from his vest and extracted a note, held it between his fingers for Shiver to see. “I’ll compensate you more than your usual rates for the privilege of a home visit.”

The man in the center of the note was bald on top, had long, curling hair down the sides of his head, and Shiver gaped at the one hundred printed in all the corners. It was the biggest bill she’d seen in her life. She didn’t think it real. Lengthy consultation decided that Dr. Roker would prove the bill’s worth by breaking it at the diner. Feeling rich and increasingly benevolent to the city doctor, Shiver strutted into the diner. She ordered herself a chocolate malted and a ham biscuit with grape jelly.

“Pack up another of them ham biscuits for my brother,” she said, her chin held high and her hands on her hips. “Make it strawberry jam for his, and put the jam in one of them little cups on the side so his biscuit don’t get soggy. And wrap it up in foil so it stays hot. This fancy doctor gone to buy our vittles, I ain’t bringing Mr. Devil no cold ham.”

Dr. Roker paid, handed the change to Shiver. She wouldn’t get in his truck, so he resigned himself to the three mile walk to Muscogee. For all the fuss she’d made about Shake’s ham biscuit in the diner, Roker couldn’t help but lift a brow at the way she crammed the brown

paper bag into the pocket of her skirt or the noisy gusto with which she consumed her own biscuit, grape jelly dribbling down her chin. She wiped it off with the back of her hand, then brought her hand to her lips to “suck away the stick.” She made the malted last the entire walk, and Roker tried to decline politely when she offered him the whipped cream with her thumb. He found her an awkward conversational companion with little knowledge of her origins and scant book learning, save passages of the Bible and snatches of Milton that had clearly been recited to her in her childhood.

His neck prickling at the sights of the ghost town and the thoughts that bubbled up with them, Roker waited outside the abandoned train station while Shiver explained the situation to Shake, plying him with a ham biscuit smeared with strawberry jam, a concoction that made Roker green no matter how he tried to think on it. Invited inside, Roker was greeted by the male version of Shiver in a torn and stained top hat. The same hateful suspicion danced in Shake’s eyes, and he gripped Roker’s hand so firm and held it so long Roker wondered his own knuckles didn’t crack.

It took the good doctor some time to compose himself after the twins gave him a tour of their home. His Emory-educated mind filled with pity, revulsion, and admiration. Squalor and deprivation caused him to hate a man, a town, a society, a world that would allow children to be raised such while the innovations borne of privation, the very fact that the twins had done for themselves for however many years, filled him with a strange pride, almost an awe for the tenacity of the human animal. He made some small talk, conjured nice things to say about the odd decorations the twins had made out of dried flowers, small animal bones, empty tin cans, and found keys, then he coaxed them down to business. When Shiver and Shake stood before him, she nude from the waist down and he with his head bared, Dr. Roker couldn’t suppress an

admiring gasp, and he went straight to digging in his satchel for a measuring tape and a handheld recorder.

The twins submitted to the examinations passively. They turned or bent when told, lifted or separated limbs, shrugged off shirts, coughed or held their breath, glanced at one another and giggled at Dr. Roker's five-dollar words.

"Female subject is one-hundred-eighty-three centimeters in height, approximately fifteen years of age, estimates achieving menarche at or near the age of twelve. Exact age unknown," Dr. Roker told his little recorder. He seemed to the twins occasionally short of breath as he spoke. "Male subject is of the same age, approximately one-hundred-seventy-eight centimeters in height. Both appear to suffer from advanced, untreated lordosis. Female subject presents metatarsus adductus. Male pronates. First instance of mirroring noted in initial examination. Both exhibit heterochromia iridium, one iris being green, the other brown. Though fraternal twins, in this aspect also, they mirror, the heterochromia reversed accordingly."

Dr. Roker paused to wipe sweat from his brow. His eyes glittered something fierce, and Shake made bold to ask him what the words he'd used meant. The sky grew dark, and Shake lit candles, brought Dr. Roker a hurricane lamp with a cracked shade so he could carry on with his work.

"Female subject presents vestigial atavism extruding from the lumbrosacral region, measuring approximately forty-four centimeters in length and five in diameter. Presentation is most akin to spina bifida, but such an extent is undocumented if not unprecedented. Further analysis required. Subject's tail is not prehensile, but can be swayed and flexed at will and is covered in soft down roughly similar in coloration to the hair of the scalp and pubis. Male subject presents..." Here Dr. Roker trailed off and shook his head, scowling in the train station's

poor light. He muttered something about needing his books, turned back to his recorder.

“Professional knowledge recommends classifying male subject’s deformity as cutaneous horns, roughly seven and a half centimeters in height, originating slightly above the parietal ridge.

Examination, however, suggests not keratinous skin tumors but actual osseous protuberances.

Scrapings and microscopic analysis will be required to determine composition.”

Midnight came and went, much to Dr. Roker’s surprise, and he had little choice but to lie down for the night on a nest of ill-laundered quilts and suffer the twins’ whispered debate until the murmur of their voices drove him to sleep. By morning’s light, though, he’d gotten what he came for.

At the age of fifteen, Shiver and Shake joined the circus.

They took some training and some gussying up. The aerialists taught them how to dance, forced grace into the twins’ crooked limbs. The Mermaid and the Tattooed Lady cut and styled Shiver’s hair, added dye to give it a ruby sheen. At first they applied her makeup, then taught her to do it herself, and every night, before the show, they’d massage watered henna into the down of her tail with delicate hands so unlike the mill workers’ that Shiver lived up to her name. The Strong Man snipped and slicked Shake’s ragged mop until he sported a glistening widow’s peak, while the Illusionist coaxed Shake’s sparse facial hair into a respectable goatee, and every night, before the show, the dwarf would rub rouge into the whorls of Shake’s horns with calloused fingers that never got cut.

Shiver and Shake were the First of May, but the company saw themselves cowed by the twins’ awkward ways and peculiar innocence, and The Devil’s Darlings, as the show billed them, got their own painted Airstream and their own trunks of costumes within months. No

longer a dented and dusty top hat: Shake had three fine specimens from which to choose and four smart suits with long coats besides. The Illusionist gave him a device that let him shoot small flames from the palm of his hand, and the Roman Rider gave him his very own crop, though Shake could figure no use for it other than waving it about like a baton or swatting his sister's thighs as she pranced on stage. Between the aerialists and the Mermaid, the Tattooed Lady, the Bearded Lady, and the Cutter's girl, Shiver was showered in sequins and spangles. For her, the Illusionist paid from his own pocket for a pair of contacts that made her eyes glint gold, and every night, before the show, he'd slip them in her eyes and add saline drops. She had feathers for her head and bracelets for her wrists, and she kept but one of the long skirts from her Muscogee days for when she wanted to explore a new town.

In a sideshow tent, the Devil's Darlings would play a game of gin rummy across a red-lit table, bickering from a simple and poorly-written script, Shake shooting a flame and Shiver flashing her eyes to keep the marks standing until the canvasman deemed the tent full and closed the flap. Only then would Shake drop his hat and Shiver whirl her way out of a skirt made of gossamer scarves. They'd cavort about the stage, reciting their blasphemous lines, taking pratfalls and making small stunts to prove to one another who could best make Papa Satan proud. Shiver learnt to whip with her tail, and she'd use it to smack her brother's wrists, to which insult Shake produced fire from his hands or ran at her like a Spanish bull, a horn piercing a hidden packet of India ink in Shiver's side. They'd bow to the crowd and put themselves on display, Shake kneeling with head lowered, Shiver with her back turned. The marks ogled, and the dwarf would be there with a jangling, locked box, keeping one of the twins' old ways alive. The people had paid to watch; they could pay a little bit more if they wanted to touch. And the dwarf let them do it, too, because Shiver and Shake's peculiarities didn't come off with spirit gum

remover and a tug, weren't hoaxes like the Cutter's retractable knives or the clear, plastic tube hidden in the Mermaid's long, blonde hair. They were the genuine object, and the circus loved them for it.

Carnival life suited Shiver and Shake until the day it didn't. Traveling and learning, regular showers and exotic food, pretty clothing, celebrity, community, and a growing sense that they were more than nature's freaks compounded and collected interest, and where once Muscogee and Cantonement had seemed the world, now the whole of the American southeast couldn't add up to enough. Thanks to Dr. Roker's patience, the twins could read bigger, more complicated books, and his library gave them notions of larger worlds. Shiver found romance novels and last season's fashion magazines in the Goodwills and Salvation Armys of every town the circus passed through, and she snipped the pictures of the prettiest ladies and the handsomest men. Shake preferred travel stories and atlases. He bought other people's used postcards, a quarter for five, from shoeboxes in grimy junk shops and traced routes imaginary and real in red marker. Between their private obsessions, the walls of the twins' Airstream grew to resemble a map of dreams, with velvet dresses and pearl-embellished push-up bras as pit stops between L.A. and Vegas.

In Muscogee, the twins had whiled away long nights playing checkers on a makeshift board by the light of the cracked hurricane lamp, fantasizing pancake breakfasts and turkey for supper, regular baths with Ivory soap and feather beds. Older now and two years jaded by the show, by life on the road, they played double solitaire and rummy and crazy eights. Shiver rolled her own cigarettes, black Cavendish tobacco just like Dr. Roker, and dreamed of blond-haired, barrel-chested boys who'd look at *her* the way everyone looked at her tail, who'd buy her rings and necklaces, flowers and champagne, and make her swoon and rip her bodice like the ladies in

her books. Shake threw back tumblers of the Strong Man's apple jack and grumbled about feeling the sun on his head and having folk look at him with respect. He wanted fast cars, though he didn't know how to drive, and airline tickets, though he had only a hazy idea of a plane, and a different girl on his arm in each different city. In his more petulant moods—Shiver guessed these were when the apple jack started talking, the same way the whiskey had once talked for the old man—Shake would punch and curse and kick at his hats, as though the very existence of top hats was what had made him live a strange and narrow life, and the next day, Shiver would deliver the battered things to the Illusionist, who fancied himself an amateur haberdasher, to be set right.

So the twins grumbled and dreamed, and the dwarf, who saw all and heard all, both inside the caravan and twenty-four hours ahead and behind it, warned the ringmaster and the canvasman that the Devil's Darlings were about to fly the coop.

Should've would've the bossmen listened, but between a sickly pachyderm and dressage ponies about to foal, between the Cutter's girl getting herself with child by someone not the Cutter and the Mermaid developing an allergic reaction to the chlorine in her tank, they didn't have time to concern themselves with surly teenagers holding second-rate billing. The dwarf might as well have told the big cats or the rolls of the aerialists' tape, because by the time the bossmen got around to it—"What you been *on* about with the Satan-spawn, now, half-man?"—Shiver and Shake had cemented their plan. They were telling their dreams to Dr. Roker, with his ether mask and his scalpel blades, while the dwarf poured bourbons for his bosses and settled down to repeat himself.

Dr. Roker was a decent man possessed of a good enough heart who never could quite believe that the twins' deformities hadn't been removed at birth by a surgeon worth half his salt. He'd never stopped imagining the life brother and sister could have lived, and he'd never

stopped being disappointed with the carnival's lack of real monsters. But he'd stuck around because the life was easy and the rules were simple. Bureaucracy in the circus being a matter of drinking one's opponent under the table or whipping him in an arm wrestling match, Roker had proven his worth by making a side tent out of his specimen jars, charging the looky-lous two tickets to see unviable, mutated fetuses, both human and not, and all manner of neoplasms floating in formaldehyde. When the twins approached him with their request, he thought maybe twice, considered that the circus didn't own them and that they'd probably never owned themselves, then did what he'd been trained to do.

Roker recommended they take some days to rest and heal, but Shake knew the bossmen would have their hides. Freshly bandaged, still oozing pus and blood, Shake packed up what they'd agreed was theirs into a single, antique valise while Shiver penned a note of apology and thanks. They left the caravan with the moon still a pale sliver in the sky, she in pants and he without a hat for the first time in their lives, and they set themselves to I-10, thumbs pointed to the wind.

Gentle, decent folk should be spared the painful, pitiable details of things such as the twins' ignorance with money (they rented and lost an apartment in Texas in six weeks' time), or the abuse of unscrupulous employers who opted to work inexperienced blood to the bone for subpar pay, or the fast woman who rolled Shake for what few bills he had in his pockets and the gold-plated watch Roker had gifted him, or the advantageous men who confused 'circus performer' with 'prostitute' and tried to use their fists to persuade Shiver into unnatural acts.

It ought to be enough to say that the world is a harsh, cold place, not made for the ignorant, the naïve, or the sheltered, and that, within eight months of their freedom, Shiver and

Shake hang-dogged themselves back to Muscogee on the generosity of a God-fearing trucker.

A hurricane had taken the train station's roof, a fire the better part of the floor and two walls. Windows had busted and platforms had rotted, and what remained was covered in a patina of spray paint. Upended crosses and inverted stars and the mark of the Beast, and when Shiver tugged down a hank of kudzu to reveal the hidden words, 'Here lies Mr. Devil,' the twins gaped at the old ruin of their childhood home and felt some deep despair, the keening of a soul which knows no place to go, and they made their way to Old Spanish Trail Road. Never welcome in Cantonement, they kept to their trek, Old Spanish Trail to Ten Mile, walking most of a night, the circus's valise traded from hand to hand, then dragged on the ground, until they found themselves a booth in a Lapitola diner.

Shiver went to brush her teeth and splash sink water on her dirtier parts in the single-occupancy bathroom, harsh with fluorescent lights and sunshine yellow tile, and on her way out, she spied the bulletin board, the pinks and greens of the old show's flier. A circuit that showed no signs of quitting its route had come back around in their absence, and Shiver tore the flier from its tacks, imagining that she smelled dirty hay and the dwarf's sharp aftershave in the flutter of the paper. She laid it on the table, atop Shake's hash browns, without a word. Shake's hardened eyes got a mite harder, then hollowed themselves out. His shoulders sagged, and his fingers dug deep into his shaggy-again hair, feeling for the nubs Dr. Roker left behind. Shake didn't speak, either. The twins didn't have many words anymore, not for each other and not for themselves, for words and plans had got them nowhere fast and back again, and Shake nodded. They left the diner, slept on the cold ground of the lot on New Warrington Road, and when the circus rolled in, when the bossmen found them, ready to stake, they took their lickings and knew, without being told, that they'd be scooping the shit of elephants, ponies, and cats until they both

got ammonia lung or got let back on the show or died, whichever came first, and it seemed to them that it all amounted to the same.

Dr. Roker was gone, chased off by the bossmen and with a bit of bird shot lodged in his right shoulder, when they discovered what he'd done. The dwarf was the one thought up another way Roker could pay, and the carnies kept the doctor's specimen jars, still charged the marks two tickets to see the freaks, preserved and floating forever. The twins felt different about Dr. Roker now. Educated, sharp-dressed man like that ought to have known there wasn't a world outside of Muscogee or the circus for throwbacks like them, and sure, they'd asked, but he'd taken away the only things made a place for them, the only things made them special.

Shiver and Shake worked off their debt. They knew their act. When the Mermaid jumped trains and the Cutter's girl squelched out a squalling new artist, the bossmen needed to fill a sideshow tent. The dwarf isn't there, nor his jangling box, for the marks aren't allowed to touch no more. Every night, before the show, the Strong Man helps Shake align the poor parodies made of resin to all that's left of his real horns, helps slather on the spirit gum and hold the phonies steady until it dries. And every night, before the show, the Tattooed Lady applies pancake makeup and latex to Shiver's backside, enough to hide the seams where the fake tail is attached to her own scarred nubbin of spine. The twins still dance and cavort on stage. The contacts and fire-device and India ink are the same, but there's less life in their show. Nowadays, they're just a couple more fakers in a caravan of fakes, and as the years wear on they'll start to fail to remember whatever it was made them Shiver and Shake.

A July Story

Iron red, linseed-cured, and caked in salt, in a place where the mercury never crept much above fifty Fahrenheit, the two-room house chose to keep its back to the sea. A wise choice, given the facing of the windows and the predilections of the wind. Still, in other Julys, Kitten had stood naked between ancient trees or buried his toes in sun-warm sand. In this new July, he donned the buckskin jacket from the peg by the door and used wool socks for gloves, swaddled his head in a gaily-patterned scarf given to him by a gray-haired marm in some other July on some other island. Shivering on a shore made of black cobblestones--waves did not break but clattered and rumbled--Kitten watched a bazaar of common murre bob on the wind and wondered which side of what ocean the house had selected this time.

The sky grew orange, pinkish blue, then muted violet and freckled with stars while Kitten enjoyed being outside. His nose was numb, his eyes watered small icicles whipped up by the wind, and his stomach gurgled, but Kitten kept his back to the house just as the house kept its back to the sea. How long had it been this time? Was there a town nearby? Would they have good things to eat there?

Kitten dug a socked hand beneath his scarf, shoving at the coarse licks of hair that itched his neck. He'd yet to see a mirror. He removed one sock and blew on his fingers to keep them warm, dug under the scarf again, yanked. He could just see the hair in the fading light. Gray now, perhaps even white, but still black near the tip. The wind snatched the hair from his fingers. Kitten didn't watch it go. There never had been, never would be anyone to care about his hair, and besides, had nature been allowed its usual way with him, Kitten's hair would be like spider silk, lining the bottom of a pine box.

Gray hair led to golden hair, green eyes, and Kitten found himself thinking about Angelica Wilson, the young schoolteacher he'd fancied in his youth. Angelica was kind to Kitten on his fifteenth birthday, his last day in the world. She'd lent him the few coins he needed to purchase the bestiary he'd been eyeing on the bookseller's cart, and she'd given his baby sister, Mousie, a sweet. The bestiary is like the scarf: one of the few items the house let him keep. He suspected it had something to do with them being gifts.

Kitten glanced back at the house. Angelica Wilson would be dead now. Like Mousie. Like Mum and Father and the mates who, on the afternoon of his fifteenth birthday, dared him to go inside the strange red house. For the first few decades, Kitten liked to imagine that Angelica had married one of his mates, that Mousie found herself an upstanding young man and borne children of her own. He would pretend a child he passed in a July street was his nephew or niece. But these stories grew cold as a century turned and time marched on without him. Everyone Kitten once loved was dead. He should be, too.

Facing the sea once more, he spoke aloud. "My name is Kitten Blankenship." The wind would hear his usual prayer. "My parents were Margaret Hudson and Roger Blankenship, and I had a sister, Marcella. I was born in Yorkshire in 1853. And I would like to be free of the house now, please."

The bazaar of mures rose as one body at the echo of his voice and made bleating for a rock formation that rose from the sea. Their departure drew Kitten's eye to distant, electric lights. From their sparseness and height, he could pick out the perimeter of a small town. Kitten smiled but remained sitting on the cobblestone beach. A waning half-moon sagged low on the horizon, and he'd found a hollow in the rock face, its entrance swollen with small bones and matted fur. He didn't like to venture into the towns on his first night out of the house. Better to marvel at the

natural world in a new place, enjoying his discoveries and regretting all he'd never been allowed to learn. The bones and fur, for instance. Kitten couldn't even say what they probably were; he didn't know where he was or what lived there, what sorts of animals nest in rock hollows on stony beaches. The bestiary might tell him, but probably not. Kitten was sixteen or seventeen when he learned to tell stories to himself.

Hunger drove him back to the house. Some Julys, he slept outside. Even if no better shelter had been available and he had to huddle against the house's oxide-colored walls, he'd never forsaken the mercy of a July. Not this time, though. This new place too cold, its wind too harsh, and its town too far away, so Kitten grudgingly pulled open the door that scraped loud on dry grass and reentered his prison.

On the table: a loaf of sweet bread, its crust steaming in the chill, an apple with reddening green skin, a smallish hunk of an orangish cheese, a pot of hot water with lemon, and none of it there when he'd stepped outside. A July news bill told him the year was 1912 before Kitten stopped trying to catch the house in the act of providing his food. And 1946, a radio said, before he accepted that the house was smarter than him. Food simply appeared, three squares, when he had his back turned. The fare was never complex, but what Kitten appreciated more was the secret of its appearance that the house kept from him. He didn't want to see a hallway extend from a wall gone soft as clay, couldn't stomach the thought of the house reaching into other empty spaces to steal for him.

More often than not, Kitten dreamed of meat. A roast Cornish hen dripping in juice, sizzling belly of pork, a fat slice of ham. In his meat dreams, there's tea, too, and butter and jam for the bread, tall tin tumblers of fresh milk, lemony crumpets with a bit of clotted cream, peppermint sticks. Tonight's humble meal he pretended was a fast for July Eve. Tomorrow, he

would go into the town. He would learn the year, see what new marvels the passage of time had wrought, and find the good food. He would gorge himself on it, carry it in baskets wherever he went, and never share a morsel of it with the house.

The socks limited his dexterity, and Kitten's hands grew numb while he ate. Finished, he rose and stood before the lone, small cabinet by the window. Shivering, with his hands tucked in his armpits, he said, "Gloves," then counted to ten, and opened the cabinet. Only the sewing kit there on the shelf. Only ever the sewing kit, full of needles and thimbles but lacking thread. The expectant smile he'd worn since the house touched down, the front door opened, and he knew it was July faded from Kitten's face. He could feel the knot in his throat. It made him sound like he was whimpering when he said, "Please? I'm cold."

The door to the second room, the hated room, the one that could expand and contract, reach through space and push beyond time, creaked open, swung itself shut again. In the cabinet, the sewing kit skittered.

"No," Kitten moaned. "It's July. Please?"

The eldritch door opened and slammed, opened and slammed while Kitten squeezed shut his eyes and wrapped his arms about his head. Sometimes the house got angry with him, and it would tilt on its unnatural axis, befriending gravity to send him sprawling through the door. There, in the house's warped second room, roamed all of Kitten's lost time. All the months and years he should have aged but didn't, so long as he spent them wandering through the house's unmeasurable, self-contained maze. It was July, though, and Kitten had been let outside. The door shut itself once more, made a sound like the clicking of a lock, and when Kitten opened his eyes, a blanket rested on the back of the table's only chair, and the wood-burning stove crackled to life.

Kitten sniffled and wormed the socks back over his hands, readjusted his head scarf, wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, and settled down with his bestiary in front of the stove. Hours later, when the moon's light grayed the barren front room, a muffled sound drew Kitten back from the edges of sleep. He squinted at the new shadow beside the door. When he made it out, he sighed.

"Bicycle," he said. "Thank you."

Tucked into the basket on the bicycle: fleece-lined gloves, a wad of ten-dollar bills. The house provides. Its reach extends beyond closed doors and down long hallways, into empty rooms, abandoned atriums, and untrod stairwells. It connects to all forgotten and vacant places, into sealed-up voids and architectural blanks. The second room with its closed door is in perpetual communion with all the world's closed doors so that its pets may never escape. Kitten, like others before him and more sure to come, attempted, in his younger Julys, to leave the house behind. To run, hitchhike, beg clemency, seek asylum in a new city, a new building somewhere far from where the house touched down. All of them, the house's pets, hundreds of miles and weeks away, thinking themselves free, have once opened a closed door, crossed the threshold, and found themselves back inside the house.

Call it a cuckoo building. A spat-up space. Its learning curve is slow, recursive. It knows not what it does, only what it needs. A damned, demanding thing. Like a child. It killed its first pet, not out of malice, but for lack of knowing when its pet needed fed. First a starving pet, moaning low, then a rotting pet, full of stink. So the house chose to return to its first pet's home, to use its hidden geometries to slip the bones through unoccupied walls. It put its pet back where it found him. Like a child.

Learning to mistrust doors, other pets have run away, not to other places, but to other sides, determining death as preferable to the house's love. The house hurts but does not know how it came to hurt. It knows that it is broken, that some part of it is torn, ripped from its moorings and made sick inside. It cannot form ideas; its communication is nonverbal, crudely symbolic, like a child's. It shakes the sewing kit at its pets, but they don't know what to do.

The pets rail and leave, come back and leave again, come back and kill themselves. The house hurts. It keeps them alive well past their times, its brokenness wronging them, too, from the inside out. It waits for one to come who can mend the tear, who knows the proper use of needle and thread.

Kitten stays. He is the oldest. He no longer tries to leave. He pales when the sewing kit appears, screams at the walls and weeps. *I don't know what you want me to do*, he says. *Tell me what to do, and I'll do it*. The house hears him, wishes it knew. Kitten would do it, the house knows, if he could. He would mend the tear, sew them both up, house and pet, seal them up safe and together forever, the house and its Kitten.

Highway 101 graced the coastal Oregon town for two and a half miles before hairpinning back along a picturesque but desolate shore. The people there prided themselves on their cows, and Kitten had his fill of cheese and burgers, ice cream and taffy and smoked jerky. He fished pale shells and marbled rocks from the waves, explored junk shops, rented a kite from a beach shack and spent an afternoon flying it, huddled in the town's small library, filling his mind and his eyes with history he'd never lived, learned that the century had turned again. Not just a century, but a millennium this time, and Kitten thought that this must make him unique among men, but there was no one to tell, none who would believe him.

Sometime in the town's past, a train ran through it. When the train stopped running, the town planted a caboose at the dead line-switch. The day that Kitten discovered he'd been experiencing a new millennium, he took to pacing the rusting tracks until, five paces from the caboose, he saw a tie catch the light, and he knelt to look. Keys, a few dozen of them, from tiny, gold ones meant for padlocks to thick, silver ones made for deadbolts, were nailed to that tie and that tie only, and Kitten crouched low, finally sitting on the ground to run his fingers over the keys and wonder a new wonder.

"You know what they're there for?"

Kitten looked up into the face of a young girl. She had long, black hair, like Mousie's, and Kitten had seen her more often than anyone else in the town. He suspected she was the daughter of one of the waitresses at the town's breakfast diner.

"You've been following me, haven't you?" he asked.

The little girl shrugged. "Maybe. You want to know about those keys, though?"

Kitten nodded.

The girl smiled, plopped down beside him in the dirt, put both small hands on the tie as though she could touch all of the keys at once if she just tried hard enough. "I think they're very beautiful," she said. "All the colors and shapes and the different ways people nail them." She looked up to see if Kitten shared her feelings on this matter and, apparently not finding what she sought in his expression, lifted one skinny shoulder. "Anyway," she went on, "my mom says people treat these old train tracks like a wishing well, but opposite-like. These keys, they're for locks that people can't open. To places they've lost or can't go back to or that aren't there anymore. So they nail the keys here so the places won't be forgotten."

Kitten wished he had a key. He hadn't taken a key to the house in Yorkshire with him that day. He'd only meant to be gone with his mates for an afternoon, meant to go home to his birthday dinner before the sun had set, and he thought how out of place that old key would look next to all of these modern ones. He exhaled, slow and shuddery, and said, "That's pretty."

"Pretty sad," the girl said. "I'm Lana. And yeah, I've been following you. I follow all the travelers. Not much happens here except new people coming and going." She seemed to have lost interest in the keys, having instead pulled a wad of mismatched yarn and string from her pocket, and she sat, trying to untangle the hopeless knot. She didn't look up from this project when she asked for Kitten's name, but when he replied, she dropped the pile of threads in her lap. "A boy named Kitten? You aren't BSing me, are you?"

"I don't know what BSing means."

"It means," Lana leaned in close, whispering, "bullshitting." She giggled, but Kitten still looked confused, so she rolled her eyes and said, "It means I think you're making things up. Where are you from, anyway?"

"A long way away," Kitten said.

"Like how far?"

"Like England," Kitten said, surprised at himself for mimicking her speech. But she reminded him so much of Mousie, it felt like playing one of their old games.

"Oh," Lana said, drawing out the word. "I get it. We talked about England in social studies last year. Mrs. Mullen said you still speak English there, but it's sort of a different type of English from here." She nodded, satisfied with her own explanation. "Where're you staying?"

"Outside of town," Kitten said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of where the house had come down. He didn't like thinking about the house while talking to Lana. "On the beach."

“In a motel or like camping?” Lana asked.

“Like camping.”

Lana wrinkled her nose. “My mom took me camping once. I hated it. There weren’t toilets, and I couldn’t shower. Do you get to shower at your campsite? You smell like you get to shower. You’re not one of those weird people who refuse to have jobs and jump trains and camp all the time because of politics, are you, Mr. Kitten?”

“I…” Kitten cocked his head, tried to figure out what the girl meant, couldn’t. He’d have to see if the library had any books on such subjects. It was embarrassing to know less about the world than a young girl, so he gave her a mischievous grin and said, “Well, what do you think?”

She crossed her arms, looked him up and down, left and right, then shook her head. “No,” she decided. “You’re not a weirdo. Even if you are camping on the beach and your clothes are funny.”

“Funny how?” Kitten asked.

“Old funny.”

“I’m an old man.”

“How old?”

“Would you believe me if I said I’m a hundred and sixty?”

“No!” Lana laughed. “How could you be that old and not be dead?”

“Maybe I should be dead,” Kitten said, and he looked down at the keys. They caught the light, reflected it, dazzled his eyes, and before he could stop himself, he said, “Maybe I have a secret house with hidden rooms and endless hallways, and when I get lost inside it, time stops passing for me. Maybe I’m trapped there, and I only get to come out for one month every couple of years, and when I go back, the house erases my years. Maybe that’s what’s happened to me.”

The sound of Lana's laughter broke the keys' spell, and Kitten's eyes got wide with the realization of what he'd said. A thing he'd never said to another, but even as Lana mocked him, he couldn't deny that telling someone, speaking it aloud, had felt good.

"Okay, *now* you're BSing me," Lana said. "You're funny, Mr. Kitten. I like that."

Something very close to them made a musical, chirping sound, and Lana pulled a flat, black phone from her pocket, poked it and frowned at it, then announced she had to go. She mounted a blue bicycle with pink streamers on its handlebars that she'd left leaning against the side of the caboose and rode away.

Kitten remained on the tracks, feeling the cool shapes of the keys, thinking about what Lana had said about them, feeling clean and light from his confession.

Lana cropped up again, again. When Kitten least expected her, she'd slide into his booth at the Cow Belle Café and steal his fried potatoes, or flop down into the seat next to him at the library's long table and ask what he was reading, or find him on the beach and start skipping stones if the sea was still or drawing in the sand with a stick if the waves were high. She asked him questions about himself, sometimes, but mostly she talked to him about her own life. About the boys and girls at her school and who liked who and how nobody liked her, not like that; about her mom and her mom's new boyfriend, who drove a big, Mack truck and smelled all the time of beer and cigars; about video games and the Internet and how her mom wouldn't let her use certain sites. She used Kitten to rehearse her arguments about why she should be allowed to wear makeup (Susie Dilligner did) or shave her legs (the swim team girls did) or have her own Facebook account (she was going to be in middle school this year, after all, and did her mom want her to be unpopular forever?). And Kitten listened, asked questions in return, offered what little advice he

had to give, and imagined that Lana was a new millennium's Mousie. He told Lana about Mousie, about how his mum had given five babies back to God before his surviving sister was born, how her name was Marcella, but she was Mum's Miracle, and if he was Kitten, then she was his Mousie, and when Lana asked, instead of his story about Mousie marrying one of his mates, he told Lana the truth: that he'd sent Mousie back home from the market on his fifteenth birthday and gone to meet up with his mates, and he entered the house on a dare, and he never saw Mousie or Mum or Father again. And when Lana's phone summoned her home and Kitten went back to the iron-red house, he thought about all of the Julys he'd passed alone, wondering if he could call Lana a friend.

A column of names, places, and objects decorated the inside of the house's front door. Kitten started it in the beginning of his tenure in the house, when he hadn't an inkling of how or why he was there, what would happen to him the longer he stayed. It was his list of remembrances and desires, started with 'Mum and Father and Mousie,' followed by 'Angelica Wilson' and the names of his mates. It got vaguer from there on out, included things like 'mutton' and 'my good shoes' and 'a real bed.' In more practical moments, he'd included the dates from the two times the whole world had gone to war and a sort of genealogical tree he updated every time he learned about a new member of the royal family. The notation 'John the dog' helped him recall a shaggy, gray puppy that had followed him through a 1970s July. The hound bayed piteously when the house made its departure; Kitten wept at the decision to leave John in the world. If he hadn't, maybe he'd still have a dog-friend, maybe he wouldn't need the passing fancy of a little girl. Nonetheless, one day he gave Lana two dollars and asked her to buy him a permanent black marker from the drugstore. She asked why he wouldn't do it himself, and he told her that the house wouldn't let him keep anything that wasn't a gift because she said she

didn't believe it, but she came out with the marker tied up in a red ribbon. To the painted, carved, and penciled-in list, he used the marker to add the name 'Lana.'

One day, Kitten didn't go into town. He talked aloud, telling himself lies about wanting to explore the parts of the coast people didn't inhabit, to see the animals and contemplate the black waves of the sea and its cobblestones. The truth gnawed at him. July was winding down, a week left at best, and he needed to distance himself from Lana. She occupied his thoughts when he returned to huddle by the woodstove at night. He'd recall games and jokes he'd shared with Mousie and wonder whether Lana would like them or if they were too old. He'd flip the pages of his bestiary in the slim stove light, looking for neat tidbits to share with her. And though he wasn't ungrateful, he wondered if it had been a bad thing to make a friend. One hundred and fifty years he'd missed his family, his friends, and the time made the missing fade. He hadn't had to miss anyone new, and he suspected it would hurt all over again, like he'd never missed anyone before, because already it hurt to think about how, once the house took off, he wouldn't get to see Lana again. The house hadn't chosen the same place twice, not since Kitten had been with it, but even if it picked this part of Oregon again, another century would have passed, and Lana would be dead, the railroad tie rotten, its keys sunk into hard-packed gray earth.

Kitten didn't go to town the next day, either. Rode his bicycle in the opposite direction instead and delighted to find the factory the people had built for their cows. He spent the day going on the guided tours, learning about the making of cheese and ice cream and watching the cattle grazing in a pen so huge, Kitten felt he'd traded seas of water for seas of beef. He tasted free samples of ten different kinds of cheese, tiny spoonfuls of thirty-six flavors of ice cream, sampled snippets of jerky, and watched children crank a machine that left smiling cow faces

stamped into their pennies. With a bloated belly and a smile on his face, Kitten rode back to the house, where a pink bicycle streamer fluttered in the grass by the front door.

By the time he found Lana, pouting over a cup of hot cocoa in the Cow Belle Café, the cold on Kitten's skin seemed like a side effect of the cold in his belly. He didn't know what to say. He didn't want to admit to the house, not after he'd told her the truth about it, so he ordered a cup of coffee and sat across from her, enduring her scowls, waiting for them to turn into words. Lana's silence continued until Kitten suggested they go sit on the boardwalk across the street. There, Lana admitted that she thought Kitten had left without telling her goodbye, so she biked all along the beach, looking for his camp. She demanded an explanation for his two-day absence, and when Kitten said he'd only wanted to see what was in the other direction, Lana sneered and said it was only the Tillamook factory, that she'd been on a field trip there for every year she'd been in school, and she never wanted to eat another piece of cheese in her life. She also admitted to finding the house, which had never been there before, and she wanted an explanation for its appearance. She refused to believe it wasn't his, an edge in her voice when she recounted his tale of a moving, mysterious building capable of swallowing time and life. But Kitten couldn't humor her. Kept seeing the pink streamer from her bike curling in the grass and getting a feeling like he was sweating inside when he thought about her pushing at the door or standing on tip-toe to peer in a window. He pointed to a jagged rock formation.

"Look, Lana," he said. "Look at all the murrees."

Squinting at the ocean, Lana nodded. "Did you know that a group of murrees is called a fragrance?" she asked. "I know you like words and information and stuff."

"A fragrance? My bestiary says they're called a bazaar," he said. "A fragrance. Like the fragrance of myrrh. I like that. I think I like that one better. I'm going to miss you, Lana."

“You are leaving, then.”

“Soon,” Kitten said.

“How soon?”

“Soon.”

“And will the house go with you?” she asked. “If I go back there, after you’re gone, that house’ll be gone, too, won’t it? You weren’t lying to me or making up stories. I felt it, when I was there. This strange feeling. The same feeling I got the first time I saw you. I didn’t go in. Just so you know.”

“Don’t,” Kitten said. “Don’t you ever go in. Promise me, Lana. Promise me you won’t ever go into a strange house by yourself.”

But Lana didn’t promise. Wouldn’t promise, talked instead until the sun slipped low in the sky. She pulled her wad of yarn and string from her pocket and picked at it while she talked about wanting to leave Rockaway, Oregon. How she thought she never would and her mom didn’t seem to care, and how Kitten had become a better friend in a few weeks than anyone she’d known in her whole life here. Kitten patted Lana’s back and stroked her black hair while she sniffled young girl sniffles and despaired of her future. Told her she’d leave Rockaway one day, she just had to be patient, and she’d grow up strong and smart and beautiful, move away to a big city, live a brilliant, exciting life. But Lana only bit her lip and thanked him for trying. When her phone chirped, she got on her bicycle and rode off without saying goodbye.

The sewing kit scrabbled at the walls of the cabinet throughout the night, flung itself at the cabinet’s door, keeping Kitten awake. He got up, once, opened the cabinet, removed the kit, walked it through the crisp night air to the overhang, used all of his might to throw it into the

Pacific, and waited for a splash he'd never hear above the waves. By the time he got back inside, the kit was back in the cabinet, and the cabinet dripped saltwater from its corners.

Four more days. Four more days of hot food and the sight of people, being in the world, and Lana's company. The girl acted subdued. On the fifth day, Kitten woke to the knowledge that this was the last of July. That he'd go back to the house that night and not emerge again for decades untold, and for the first time in years, he found himself wondering if he could outwit the house. Perhaps he could live on the beach, camp like he'd told Lana he did. Find a job, save money, build a house of his own, one he wanted, one without doors. Yet even as he thought these things, he knew it was useless. Who would hire a gray-haired man with no experience in any trade, who barely understood what a computer did, who'd never once spoken on a telephone? If he'd learned anything from Lana, it was how ill-fitted he was for this new millennium, or it for him. His thoughts opposed themselves. Maybe he'd never come out of the house again. He'd never understood why it let him out some Julys but not others, so maybe it did that to keep him human, to keep him sane, and the real way to end it would be to never come out, to fall deep, deep inside, to go mad with the house, become its soul.

Kitten took the rest of the money to town with him. He'd spent some time looking around the house for some token to give to Lana, but the only thing that seemed appropriate was the bestiary, and Kitten couldn't bring himself to part with that. Instead, he treated Lana to a big waffle breakfast and ice cream for lunch, bought her a knapsack she coveted from a shop on Main Street. He assumed he'd return to the house once Lana's mum called her home. He hadn't expected it to be so early. Midafternoon when she jumped up from the railroad tie where they'd sat to contemplate the keys together one last time, and she said something about a dentist's appointment, how she'd begged her mom not to make her go, to change the appointment to a

different time or day. She hugged Kitten long and hard until his neck ached, and he hugged her back.

One last meal at the Cow Belle Café before walking his bicycle through the main street of town, saying silent goodbyes to Rockaway, Oregon. Kitten rode slow, looking at the coast but not seeing it, thinking instead of all the places he'd been, the places the house had taken him The tip of Florida where no one would look him in the eye. A deserted Italian shore where he hardly saw another living thing. The coast of North Carolina, where he'd met John the dog. A frozen lake where the inhabitants didn't speak any language he knew and who gave him salted fish and a hard, flavorless bread in exchange for his coins. Only the sight of the Tillamook factory shook Kitten from his memories and, confounded, he pointed his bicycle in the other direction. He rode back and forth, seeking the house and not finding it, secretly hoping it had taken off without him, suspicious of that thought from the outset. He sought the overhang and the forked rock formation instead, the one always covered in a fragrance of murre, and when he found them, he dropped his bicycle to the ground and stumbled forward, sobbing before he even knew what he saw.

Blank earth and pushed-down grass to mark the footprint of the house. Empty ocean shore and the sound of waves rattling the stones. A hollow in a rock full of fur and bones. A blue bicycle with pink streamers on its handlebars lying in the weeds. And nothing more.

Lana is nineteen by her own clock and twenty-eight by the world's the first time the house lets her leave. She experiences an acute sensation whenever she remembers her initial hours in that warped and damaged place. How she'd opened the knapsack Kitten had bought her, the one she'd stuffed full of all the things her ten-year-old mind thought she'd need to hide out there and run away with Kitten. How she found the knapsack empty and was convinced she'd freeze,

starve, because she hadn't believed Kitten when he'd told her the house would provide. She trembles a bit, still, when the second door opens and the floor shakes and groans and tilts sideways, giving her a glimpse of a plain, unfurnished room that unfolds, unfurls into a growing black spiral, finding depth, seeking distance, Euclidean geometry stretching itself thin before it sucks her through, though it's happened so many times now she's lost count and isn't as terrified as she'd been the first time she got lost in the house's secret, shifting maze.

The sewing kit bothered her a lot those first few years. It pounded and scraped, battered the cabinet, might as well have been battering the inside of her skull. She doesn't remember when she fished the knot of tangled thread from her pocket, when she set the knot next to the kit and watched, tears pouring down her face and a bad feeling in her stomach, while the two objects danced. Lana only knows that this is a recent development, this sense of what she needs to do.

The July air is warm when she steps out of the house. She doesn't know where she is, and she hardly thinks it matters. Lana doesn't wait. She walks to the nearest town as soon as she picks it out, inquires, finds a crafting store. She spends all of the money she has, save the price of a hot meal, on yarn and twine and embroidery thread. Then she goes back to the house.

It is excited. It knows that she knows. Atonal, piping music plays from behind the second door. The sewing kit jigs on the table, spins in circles and hops up and down.

"Shut up," Lana snaps. "I figured it out, no thanks to you. Have some patience."

She finds the marker she bought for Kitten when she was ten. It still has a red ribbon tied around it, though the ribbon has faded and split, and Lana cries a little bit, thinking about it. She wonders if she'll be able to find Kitten again, if it's as simple as she thinks and the house will be fixed, and she will be free. She tries to remember being ten and what it was she'd been thinking. She goes to the front door, runs her fingers down the list Kitten made. She's read it so many

times she could recite it by heart. Then she kneels, lowers herself to her elbows so she can reach the door's bottommost edge, uncaps the marker, and makes her first and only addition right beneath her own name.

Kitten, she writes.

Feeling Your Heart Beat in the Palm of Your Hand

Grab on to something, an object, a person, an ideal, anything. Grasp it and try not to let go. Not when your fingers cramp, not when the meat of your palm goes numb, not when you can feel each carpal and metacarpal and phalange straining toward hairline snaps. Clench your fist until the creases in your flesh fold deeper, lifeline and heartline furrowing inward, away from tenacity, until the mound of the palm meets its girdle and soft tissue connects to cold callous with enough pressure to obliterate life, time, love.

At first, our conversations went like this:

“Why are you running the scrubbers? I was going to do that.”

“Well, I’m doing it now. You do the other things.”

“I don’t feel like doing the other things.” The general tidying, the jettisoning of waste via chemical toilet, which included scooping out the litter box of the cat kept on board ostensibly for experiment--first feline at twenty-thousand leagues! except this isn’t some Jules Verne shit--but because someone had the prescience to know that a third life would be needed, a mediator between two other lives. “I did them yesterday.”

“So do them again today.”

“How about tomorrow? Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?”

“Don’t quote Shakespeare at me.”

So I didn’t, and I won’t, and now I’ll be Sycorax *and* Caliban because *I* have the magic in the language they cannot speak, all the prosperous, the Prosperos who sent us down there in the first place while they stayed up above, dry on their island.

All the world’s land is an island when seen from the benthic-side. I’d never thought about that before. How you can look out little bathyscaphic windows and above you there is land, the

underside of land, black and craggy or sloughing and muddy, but if you look straight out, there might be nothing but abyss and what lives in abyss. The fleeting red veil of a vampire squid or the blinking green bioluminescence of a thousand possible creatures, the eerie glow of a viperfish, the glittering iridescence of ghosts.

We named the cat Nemo. Not just for the obvious reasons, but because neither James nor I thought of the orange tabby as a pet, didn't plan on getting attached to him, so he was No One. No Man. No Name. And I'd love to say that Nemo saw the ghosts first, that he started acting strange when we reached ten-thousand feet, started yowling at the portholes and scratching at the ballast hoppers, but cats are just cats and the world is the world and life isn't magic or at least not in any of the ways you expect it to be.

Ours was the bathyscaphe to end all bathyscaphes, even the ALVIN-class bathys, James said, back when he could say, because it was quite literally ALVIN cubed. On our initial descent, he told me all about how ALVIN's crew had seventy-two hours to get into Challenger Deep and get out, but we were getting triple that in a ship three times ALVIN's size. The final ALVIN-class bathy, ALVIN's grandbaby, could only get to the bottom of the abyssopelagic, but James and Nemo and I were headed for the hadopelagic. Christened the *Hyperborea* because, James said, someone at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute or the Ocean Exploration Trust or one of the other big funders was a Lovecraft fan with a real twisted sense of humor. Despite having designed the *Hyperborea*, James never did play well with others. Expeditions like ours require bureaucracy and board meetings, and when people are Skyping across continents about naming a submersible, I guess you pick your battles.

So there's the *Hyperborea*. Her crew: (1) me, Katrine Stevens, marine biology PhD candidate at the University of Massachusetts, Woods Hole lab tech, and assistant to and long-

time student of; (2) Dr. James Anderson, commonly referred to around Woods Hole and OET as Dr. Doctor since he holds one PhD in subsea engineering and another in oceanography; and (3) Nemo. Her mission: exploration. Map Challenger Deep, see what lives down there, plus, my thesis project, confirmation of a rare, abyssal species, the hadal snailfish.

Initial descent could still get my heart rate up, that slow sink through the euphotic, watching the hypnotic sway of sea lettuce, the swirling of wrack, all of it shot through with rays and angelfish and the veil dance of jellies. Then into the dysphotic, where I thrilled at the sight of a coelacanth, and James went all pedantic about varieties of ooze along the continental shelf, the smoker chimneys of hydrothermal vents. Nemo clawed at the porthole, hissing at a passing octopus who poked an alien eye in at us.

But any submersible hits the bathyal zone quick, and then there's nothing to see without the aid of searchlights. Routine kicks in fast. James would check the autopilot and make minor adjustments to course, dictate readouts, which I'd record. We'd watch the stream from the cameras, silently marveling at life normally left unseen going about its business in the dull green of infrared. If a school happened by at the right place and time, we'd throw the searchlight on it for kicks. Watch blind things do the blind-thing-equivalent of blinking at this intrusion of the unknown substance of light. Nemo acted like a cat. Slept a lot, rubbed up on our legs, *maowed* for food, stole pens and chased them around the cabin.

I saw the ghosts first. We'd unlatched the small table from the wall, and we were having dinner. I'd joked that I'd cooked: a can of tuna mixed into MRE mac-n-cheese with freeze dried ice cream for dessert. Nemo plopped in the center of dinner and slurped juice from the can. We were laughing, matching each other memory for memory from when we first met, when I was just an undergrad at UT Austin and James was a visiting professor. He had to bring up how bad I

used to be at filling out lab reports, but even then, he said, I'd been better than the assistant the university had assigned him. I remembered her as a nervous, excitable woman who never managed to prep a slide without bluing her fingers with chemical stain, and I was giggling around a mouthful of tuna when our cabin's little porthole filled with flashing, whitely shimmering movement. A brief glimpse of something nearly solid and close, wisps that could've been mantles or fins, the possibility of shape suggested as photophores caught and refracted. I caught my breath, and Nemo looked up from his can, licking juice from his nose, his yellow eyes tracking the movement. The cat hissed, tail bushed out, but James and I were too busy falling over each other to get to the controls. I got there first. The searchlight on that side of *Hyperborea's* cabin was aimed aft. I tried to get the manipulator arm and one of the cameras around, but the school was gone before I could move the joystick.

"So what was it?" James asked, peering over sensors that indicated the mass moving off starboard. "Headed that way." He pointed. "Want to follow it?"

"Hell yes, I do."

We slept in shifts. Sure, the *Hyperborea* came equipped with any number of automatic controls, but all the computers in the world can't stave off the terror that comes with the knowledge that you're floating around in a tin can 30,000 feet underwater. The best subsea engineers in the world--and James was one of them--can't erase the fear of collapsed lungs or nitrogen narcosis or the idea of your body getting crammed into the tiniest, most rigid, airtight space if-when all the pressure comes rushing in. I'd thought about these things, but James was the one who insisted on shift-sleeping, which proved my point. I was having my go in the bunk while we followed our mystery species, the flimsy goldfish-printed shower curtain we'd hung between the berths and the controls drawn, Nemo curled behind my knees. I found sleep while

fantasizing that the shimmering mass we chased would be my snailfish and inventing the appropriate new taxonomy. *Pseudoliparis stevensis*? Would that be unfair to James? How about *Pseudoliparis stevanderonis*? *Pseudoliparis nemonsis*? I ran a mental checklist of our live harvesting equipment. Were we about to cure glaucoma? James' startled yell woke me. Nemo had already left the bunk, and more than James growling, "Jesus, fuck," it was Nemo's screech that made me feel prickly and cold.

The conversation went like this:

"Katrine, for Christ's sake, get *up* here."

"What? What is it?"

Nemo circled, jumping on to the panels. James pushed him off, Nemo jumped back up and glared at the viewer screen like he knew what he was doing and hissing, a surprisingly snakelike sound for something with fur.

"They weren't polychaetes. Not benthic jellies and, I'm sorry, Katrine, not even your mythic hadal snailfish."

"They're not mythical. Priede and Jamieson caught the hadal snailfish on video in Japan Trench in two thousand--"

"Well, this *is* fucking mythical."

"What already?"

"It's ghosts. They're ghosts."

I stared at him. James was always so hardline, a scientist's scientist, the first person to make me self-conscious about wearing necklaces with crystal charms. In skepticism and methodological doubt, I'd had no better teacher, but he only stared back at me. The *Hyperborea* crept along, navigating Mariana, still nearly two miles northeast of Challenger Deep and at least

another five-thousand feet farther down left to go. It might have been warm and bright in our crew cabin, but it's so dark and so cold down there. James inched the camera through the water, hoping to spy what he'd seen again. The image jerked in time with his nervous tics, and he restrained Nemo in his lap with his other arm. The cat twitched and mewled. I gripped James' shoulders, peering over them, my chin by his ear, my body pressed against the back of his chair. We'd never touched like that before. It wasn't intimate.

He couldn't find it again, not with that aimless wagging of the camera, so he ended up reversing the film. Dull and motionless hosts of green-tinted sand and rock playing backwards and only the timestamp to show that it wasn't forwards. Something filled the screen, there and gone quicker than I could register its details, but something clicked. Something that made me dig my nails into James' shoulder until he said 'ouch' and batted my hands away, and then the glimmering. He stopped, let the footage play forward at normal speed. The tatter and flash, wavering motion we'd seen the previous day, the almost-photophore glint that made James say 'jellies' and me pray for snailfish. He slowed the footage down, made everything out there appear even more weighted, moving underwater times five. The glittering slowed, coalesced, gained shape.

"That," I stuttered, pointing. "That looks like--"

"Wait for it."

A face filled the screen. Nothing could have prepared me for it. Nothing. All hollow-eyed and hollow-mouthed, an elongated 'O' of a wail, right there like the thing looked right at the camera, and I screamed. Nemo went bottle brush-shaped, howled, and ran from the room. James hit 'pause,' both of us gaping at what we shouldn't see, what couldn't possibly be there. And yet.

“You see?” James whispered, as though they could hear us through five inches of titanium hull. “Ghosts.”

I nodded, mute. James hit ‘play.’ I watched the single ghost face recede, look behind it, make a motion, and it looked like the camera backed away, but thinking back on it now, I believe the ghosts were the ones playing with depth. The congress let us see them swarm. Through the dumbfounded awe, through the cold fear, I thought of that Disney film, *Fantasia*. That part somewhere in the middle, the animation of Mussorgsky’s *Night on Bald Mountain*, the giant, blackened demon figure rising up out of the mountain and commanding the dead from their graves, bidding them *Come to me*, and the dead obey, ghosts spiraling up the mountainside to meet their god-king. It’s only eight minutes of the movie, but I’ve watched the Mussorgsky clip probably two dozen times or more since we resurfaced, and I can say: It was exactly like that.

Turns out the deep sea is full of ghosts. They don’t hang around on dry land, they’ve lost the legs for it, and without a Heaven to go to, why bother floating up into the air? All that light, all that lightness. They’re insubstantial enough; they don’t need that atmospheric shit. They need what only the deep can offer: weight, gravity, and pressure, darkness to help them illumine what light they have left.

Ghosts don’t look like they did in life. They are revenants. Crude, humanoid shapes with only the suggestion of features, limbs with only the suggestion of hands, bodies without form. Billowing, ectoplasmic things, the Spiritualists might have been right about that, even if they were wrong about ghosts answering to the knocking of wood. No, I’ve had the time to think, and ghosts answer to disturbances in the water. They don’t, won’t dance for bored Victorians or Russian composers. It’s Hurricane Katrinas they wait for, Gilbert Inlet-proportion tsunamis. They could give a crap for mountain demons; they know water devils and cyclone nereids and

the spirits that rise from typhoons. They worship at the wells of Scylla and Charybdis, and the invasion of the living's submersibles is heresy.

The *Hyperborea* would enter Challenger Deep in a little over an hour, then we'd have three days in the hadopelagic, the longest, deepest dive on record into the real final frontier. James and I watched the ghost footage a handful of times, then retired to the back of the cabin to try to talk ourselves out of seeing what we damn well saw. We hunched over the small table, playing cards scattered between us. Not because we were playing a game but because we both wanted something to fidget with. We weren't paying attention to the mission. We missed the initial crossover. Nemo stalked unhappy circles around the crew cabin. He jumped when *Hyperborea's* electronic voice announced 35,756 feet. James stopped tapping his foot. I quit bending the corner of a two of clubs. All of our weak rationalizations died in our mouths, and we stared at each other. He raised a hand, open-palmed, his shoulder twitching, and I thought about it. Chewed my lip. Said, "Floodlight it."

"Really, Katrine?"

I still wonder if it was disdain or fear I heard in his voice, but I told him yes, really, do it, just do it and get it over with, let's know, and I held my breath. I don't know what I expected to see out there. A city of ghosts crowded around the ship, staring without real eyes, grimacing without real mouths, making gestures of threat without hands? James counted down from five, threw on every searchlight the *Hyperborea* had to offer. Terrified, half-turnt, atheistic Prometheuses, Dr. Doctor and I: We brought light to Challenger Deep. And we gasped with a more familiar type of awe. To watch light puddle in absolute blackness, to know the true meaning of 'abyss' is something you feel in the gut that radiates from that pit of neurotransmitters all the way out to what I guess people call the soul. Wonder that this, *this* is the

truth of the ‘blue’ in ‘little blue dot;’ a sort of horror that comes when the mind tries to conceive of the depth and the darkness. It’s always down there, always lurking, always full of mystery, and we skip along the surface, going on with our lives.

James and I jostled against the porthole, no longer concerned for personal space, shoving each other aside to watch scalefish dart away from the lamps. Sea cucumbers curled and bent, trying to burrow into the diatomaceous ooze, their faint bioluminescence rippling with their contortions. We sighed with the outrush of steaming bubbles from hydrothermal vents. Our eyes danced with the glitter on the seabed floor when the light caught the clay test shells of foraminifera, those amoeboid protists that could tell us so much about the age and composition of Challenger Deep if we could get them back to a lab.

We forgot about the ghosts in those moments. Seeing the foraminifera, James rushed to the manipulator arm’s pressure hatch, loaded it with sampling gear, returned to the controls for the first time since the ghost-sighting. Then the lights went out. Not the cabin lights, but the searchlights, and I shouted at James, something about how he expected to collect a sample in the pitch, and him replying that he hadn’t done it.

“What the shit, *Hyperborea*?” he barked at the ship.

I could hear him stabbing buttons, flipping switches. The light returned. “You got it,” I said.

“Wasn’t me.”

I looked back to the porthole. A caul of ghosts drifted away from the light, which brightened as they unmingled their substance, darting back to the protection of darkness. “James,” I whimpered. Beside me, claws digging into the thick denim of my pants, Nemo made a miserable *roow-roow-roow* sound. “James!” A ghost face pressed against the porthole, its hollow

features twisting to approximate some emotion it remembered from life but which I couldn't interpret, and it backed away, motioning as it went to the tattered taffeta of its body. I felt paralyzed, watching it. James briefly gripped my shoulder before letting go to point at the thing I was trying not to see, the frenetically whipping, pink-white mass more solid than the substance that contained it, thrashing within the ghost.

"What...?" James said.

"My snailfish," I moaned.

And now I think five inches of titanium hull didn't matter. I'm convinced the thing heard me because as soon as I named its prisoner, the ghost reached inside itself, grasped the spiny, tadpole-like creature, and hurled it at the porthole. I yelled when the snailfish hit and died against the tempered glass. The ghost swam away. James looked at me. I looked at him. Then I stalked to the bunks.

James tried to get the manipulator arm to scrape what little the sea left of the snailfish off of the porthole while I huddled in the bottom bunk and wept into Nemo's fur. The cat purred low, stayed mostly still, nuzzled my face and snuggled ever closer. It surprised me when I started crying, but once I got going, I found it hard to stop. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried, and I wondered the whole time if I was crying this hard, this long, over a rare species. A species that would have made my career, sure, but still. Really? Was I crying for the hadal snailfish, or for my own sense of terror, my helpless, useless wish to be back on land, to be back there now, to never--career be fucked--dive again?

James knelt beside the bunk for a long time before I acknowledged him, and when I did, he only held a specimen jar out for my review. An unrecognizable blob of organic matter

sloughed at the bottom of the jar, looking like nothing more than a spoonful of sick-pale Jell-O with a spine sticking out of it.

“Enough to map a genome?” James asked with a false hopeful note in his voice.

I nodded, reached for the jar, cradled it to my chest, whispered a sniveled ‘thank you.’

We spent a lot of time in silence after that. I don’t know what James was thinking, why he didn’t talk. I didn’t because all I could think to say was ‘Send us home,’ and that wasn’t possible. *Hyperborea* had to register some self-diagnosed machine distress to begin ascent on her own. Otherwise, we’d have to tell her why we were going back up early, and there were codes to enter for that, digital records for financiers who’d be a little more than pissed if we aborted the mission for nothing. I thought maybe we could use the code for ailing crewmember, but what would OET and WHOI say when we came back up and no one was sick? There wasn’t a code for being menaced by the supernatural, and even with the footage, would they believe us? We didn’t have footage of the snailfish, no other evidence of the ghosts yet at all. The *Prosperos* would have James and me sent for psych eval while they stripped us of our privileges, degrees, and positions. We couldn’t go back up early. We had to make it through sixty-eight more hours of Challenger Deep, seventy-two more hours of ascent, most of those spent in the aphotic zone, Ghost Land.

Time is already wonky on a dive, even the recreational ones that stay in the euphotic. Go dysphotic and hours and minutes merge, and all divers start to understand just how irrelevant humanity’s clock and calendar divisions are. Multiply the record deepest individual, unassisted dive by thirty-thousand feet and some change. Throw in some trauma. James and I were on autopilot. He did better than I did. Dr. Doctor mustered whatever got him that nickname to begin with and fell back on being a scientist. Kept to the controls when it wasn’t his turn to sleep,

marked movement and depth, loaded, unloaded, and reloaded the sampling equipment, labeled and stored them by locking them in yellow containers. Tried to shake me out of my stupor when a species drifted by.

“Katrine, viperfish!” or “Tube worms. Tube worms! I’m taking video as we pass over. Would you get up here?”

The ghosts were constant in the hadopelagic, keeping pace with the *Hyperborea*, swirling before her cameras, outside her portholes. I tried to keep my back to anything that gave me a view of the outside. My dream since the marine section of middle school biology, and there I was, living it, and trying my damndest to see nothing. But Nemo, facing any direction I spurned, would hiss, and I would shudder, tell myself not to turn but turning anyway to see a ghost outside the ship making some arcane expression or gesture. How long between the incident with my snailfish and when the ghosts got bold? I don’t know, but even if none of the footage remains, the mess of the *Hyperborea*’s electronics--the crazy-cycling timestamps, the blocks and bursts of static, the depth readings gone haywire--ought to stand testament to her crew’s sanity.

The ghosts started entering the ship. Some chose to breach the hull, make themselves seen, however faintly in full light, in the cabin. One of these restrained Nemo, used differential pressure to pinion the cat while he spat and flailed, made impressive gouges on a bunk with his claws. Others possessed more esoteric skills. Ghosts of the water who knew how to commune with the ghosts in machines, who sent dials and gauges spinning as they learned to insinuate themselves into the *Hyperborea*’s electronic voice.

“Leave,” *Hyperborea* commanded us in its sexless, robot tone. “Deep is dead’s. Our place. You leave.”

No one on land believes that this wasn't our idea of a practical joke. I gibbered, nonsense sounds stuck between tears and screams, and James blanched, shook in his seat for long minutes before bundling me up and dragging me with him to the controls. I slumped into the co-pilot's seat, even Nemo kept his distance now, eying me from a few feet away, his tail lashing. I stayed there, staring at the floor, while James futzed, rubbing my hands together until my knuckles were raw, until I heard the sharp intake of James' breath. I felt woozy, bended with the bends when I leaned over the screens to see. The log screen, a tiny thing with a tinier keyboard, scrolled in binary-green capitals an endless series of the word LEAVE.

I don't remember what I did, then. I suppose I went hysterical. Must have, given that James shot me with half a dose of morpho from the medical kit. He hauled me to the bunks and dropped me there. Later, when he could still say, he said that I slept for sixteen hours straight, terror-exhaustion and morphine lassitude, meaning that he'd gone two full shifts without sleep by the time I came to. Before sucking down a tube of protein gel and collapsing in the top bunk, he told me not to bother with the controls. Said he'd set the ship on full automatic, both the navigation and the research functions, had covered the portholes with blankets, and he gave me a long bit of bungee and told me to play with Nemo, to not look out the windows, that it would all be over soon.

But there were a variety of items in the med kit that could aid in calming terror, and I catalogued them and figured a rough way of rationing them with a quick glance at *Hyperborea's* mission clock. I kept myself drugged to some extent or another almost all the way through Challenger Deep and would have done all the way back to the euphotic if the ghosts hadn't attacked.

Through the apathetic haze of morphine or Dramamine, I found myself able to revisit the controls. I still knew that what we were experiencing was unnatural, unreal, wrong, still had some sense that my insides were curdling with anxiety, but the pharmaceuticals put space between my thoughts and my feelings. Allowed me to detach, act like a scientist once more. I aborted James' auto functions, ignored the list of readings and samplings we were meant to take, and started focusing exclusively on the ghosts, filming them, taking stills through different filters, transferring that proof to flash drives and discs. These quiet hours, the only sound the drone of the ship's engines and Nemo purring in my lap, while James slept and I documented the dead living again in deep water, were when I developed my hypothesis about the dead descending rather than ascending. Because they *were* the dead, the human dead, they'd said so, self-identified, and I believed them. Maybe they'd tried to float in air, once, sometime way back in ghostly history, but found themselves buffeted by wind currents they couldn't navigate, drifting against their wills into more rarified areas, empty and alone save when another of their cohort blew by. I wondered how they got back down, clawing through air to plunge, finally, into the sea. I imagined the waters of the world's oceans bubbling as though with tiny maelstroms when the ghosts got there and sighed in contentment to find themselves weighty and visible again. I imagined them like scientists themselves, experimenting with depth, scouts relaying messages back up, aphotic to dysphotic to euphotic, saying, *Come down, brethren and sistren. Come down, push deeper. The things here are blind and pale like us. They mistake us for prey and bite but cannot hurt. They mistake us for their own kind and play, and it is fun. We move as we wish to move, here. Come, brothers and sisters. Here, in the deep, we will make our world.*

Sometimes, still, I can think about it like that and pity them, the dead. Then I can understand why they did what they did. They tried to protect their home, their life after death,

and they were happy until we came along to invade their space and remind them of what they had been, flesh and blood with sensation and voice. But sometimes when I try to reconsider these things, I go to push my bangs out of my face, and my hands won't move, and all my goodwill for the dead dissipates like a benthic jelly in air. I catalogue the last things I touched and felt in my hands: The scratchy salt-and-pepper growth of James' beard; the marshmallow softness of Nemo's fur and the cool, wet pinkness of his nose; my own familiar skin; the *Hyperborea's* smooth, cold controls.

James found me, when he woke from his long nap, with the fingers of my left hand poised over the buttons that controlled the still readings, my right hand curled around the camera's joystick, silent tears reflecting off my face. Later he joked that he'd wanted to say I looked like I'd seen a ghost, in those moments after waking, before reality set back in. He said I'd bit my lip hard enough to break skin, and I remember the salty taste in my mouth, but couldn't think of why.

"Katrine? What's wrong?"

"It... They started to tingle at first. Something... something cold and... and sparkly. Like peppermint. Peppermints all over. The way toothpaste feels if you hold it in your mouth. I could feel... I felt my own blood. Really felt it, rushing and hot. It made the peppermints go away, and then it got hot, and then..." I shook my head, shrugged, shimmied my shoulders, trying to show him what was wrong. I couldn't say it. I think I thought if I said it out loud, I'd make it true and as long as it wasn't said, it was something I still had control over.

James probably thought I was still doped up. He sat in the co-pilot's chair, looked at his own hands for a long time, sighed like he was marshalling himself. "*What* is hot and full of peppermints, Katrine?"

“I can’t move them.”

“For fuck’s sake, *what?*”

“My hands.”

I tried. I tried as hard as I had when the movement first drained away. I wanted him to see. Muscles in my forearms flexed and trembled. With a violent sideways jerk, I could fling my left hand from the controls, flopped it, useless, into James’ lap. I couldn’t unwrap my right hand from the joystick. James had to pry my fingers open, and my right hand slid over the *Hyperborea*’s panels to hang heavy by my side. We tried all sorts of things. James could open and close my fingers, make my hands into fists, though he said it was like coaxing rusty hinges. I didn’t feel a thing. I let him prick my hands all over with the tip of a pin, let him massage my palms, and while I could move every other part of my arms at will, everything from the wrist down was gone.

Nemo had been asleep. Otherwise, I believe he would have warned me that a ghost had entered the cabin. They’re almost completely immaterial in the light. I didn’t see it until it was right in front of me, half-sunk in the ship’s dash, its Picasso face close to mine. And I would have screamed, but it raised a limb to brush against my mouth, and, like night terrors, no sound would come out. The lights in the cabin flickered, dimmed, ghost substance willing *Hyperborea*’s controls. It wanted me to see it, wanted me to understand what it did as it lifted both arms in some conjuring, some summoning, ether drawing from ether, gathering dust mites and skin particles, bits of Nemo’s fur, to itself to give itself better form, to give itself hands. The ghost laid its hands on mine. The lightest touch like a shy teenager on a date, and I understood. What the dead touches also dies. It killed my voice when it brushed my lips, and so it killed my hands as it held them. I stuttered all of this out while James alternated hot packs and ice packs on

my hands, and after a few hours, I got a little movement back, but it was crabbed and arthritic, a dull ache. By the time I was ready for my go in the bunk, I could almost make a fist, pet Nemo, even fluff up my pillow a bit, and though each movement caused a hot, sparkling pain to strike from my thumb to my elbow, I'd convinced myself I'd recover in full.

We were nearing the end of Challenger Deep, a few hours left before the *Hyperborea* began her ascent. James and I sat together on the bottom bunk, Nemo curled close by, reviewing our mission dossiers, comparing them to all we hadn't accomplished. I'd like to say we plotted and rationalized, dreamt up things to say to the landed bosses, made sure our stories would corroborate, but we didn't do anything of the sort. These things happen. I've had a lot of time to think since we came back. A lot of time to spin out fantasies of how it could've turned out with the first professor I had a crush on in undergrad, a lot of time to chastise, then forgive myself in a punishing cycle. My face can flush, but my hands stay pale when I think about how Dr. James Anderson was my teacher, my boss, and I was his student, his assistant, and nearly twenty years his junior. Then I remember how much, for how long, I adored him, and I make justifications from biological tidbits. Neurochemistry based on anxiety and exhaustion, adrenaline spikes and traumatic experiences, reminding myself that 'fight' and 'flight' aren't the only two reactions an organism can have. There's also 'feed.' And also, there's 'fuck.'

We'd put the dossiers aside, laid them on top of sleeping Nemo as a joke, and we sat facing each other. James curled and uncurled my fingers, helped me flex them, asked how much of the movement I could feel, if I thought it was getting any better. I'm still not sure why I reached up to stroke his beard or why he held my hand against his face, why I responded to that by kissing him, but there it was, and another new contact was made.

The snippets of conversation went like this:

“Mile deep club, eh?”

“That’s not funny.”

“Is this okay?”

“Yes.”

“Is this okay?”

“Yes.”

“Is this--”

“Stop talking. It’s all okay. Everything’s okay.”

It could have been beautiful. The thrumming of *Hyperborea*’s engines to match the thrumming of our bodies, the search and guidance lights illuming the hidden places of Mariana Trench, the knowledge of where we were and what we were doing making it feel like we were the last two people on Earth. But everything is okay until it isn’t, and I opened my eyes when James rolled me on to my back. I saw the ghost behind him, saw it shrinking, watched it become child-sized, then Nemo-sized, then no bigger than my fist in less time than it would take me to say the words, and I yelped.

And James said, “Are you okay? We don’t have to do this.”

Those were the last words he’d ever say. The ghost plunged into his open mouth and settled in his throat. It curled around his vocal cords, killed his voice. I must have known what it was doing because I lunged for it, tried to grab ghost substance. My hands passed through it--hot and peppermint shooting from my fingertips to my elbows, that rueful second touch--and closed on nothing. We’re dead-infected, Dr. James Anderson and I. The ghosts took his voice, and they took away my hands.

It didn't get better, not with ascent and not with time. James kneaded my hands until I yelled at him to stop. I encouraged him to drink hot tea until he spit it in my face. I would have to tell him to feed Nemo, and he would have to feed me. I could do nothing on the ascent except stare at the readouts, watch as we rose and the ocean became lighter, livelier. With fish and cephalopods, sharks and crustaceans dominating the view beyond the portholes once more, the fact of the ghosts seemed impossible. Perhaps it was something we'd dreamed, the three of us, a nitrogen-heavy hallucination. I would voice these things, try to gesture, feel the living-dead flesh of my paralyzed hands smack against my face, and James angrily scribbled in his log book. I felt awkward talking back to his abbreviated notes, guilty that I could speak. But then, which is worse? He may be mute, but I'm the one who can hardly do for herself. I'd managed to figure out a few basics during our three-day ascent, ways to manipulate objects between my pressed wrists, scooping with my elbows, new chores for my teeth, and I've managed more complex actions since then with the help of new research, prosthetics. If someone had told me, before we dove, that I'd lose my hands down there, I don't know that I could have conceived of it. It's not as bad as I might have imagined. It's also worse than I would have thought.

We quit the ocean so changed. A roar of rushing water as the *Hyperborea* broke the surface, the last few pellets of her ballast slipping from the hoppers to sink back down, down to the ghosts, who will play bocce or dropsies with the bathy's discarded iron. The cheering of the land crew that got louder as we passed through the locks until the final seal cracked, and I have a copy of the picture the over-eager photographer snapped, so I know how we looked, why the crowd grew quiet. Haggard and sick, like the ghosts had taken up residence in our eyes, both James and I stand on the lip of the bathy, with red and distance-stained stares, faces slack and clammy, his suit unkempt and mine only half-zipped. In that photograph, Nemo sprawls clumsily

in the crook of my arm, and I clutch him to my chest, my hands hanging limp by his feet, and I can see the tension around James' lips. The way he started clamping them shut as though he were refusing to speak rather than being unable to.

Crews went into the *Hyperborea* to pull her data. We were trundled off to the medical unit, a standard procedure. James resented having to write the same responses to the same queries again and again, complained to me that his hands cramped with the effort then growing quickly abashed, since I could only wish to feel cramps in my hands. The psych evaluations were foregone conclusions, and both of us are still supposed to see a shrink once a week privately and once together. James quit going to the shrink a few weeks ago. He quit coming to visit me, too.

James kept Nemo, and that seems fair. What good would I be to any animal? I can't feed or pet or play. Still, when James would answer my knocks on his door, Nemo greeted me by curling around my legs and jumping into my lap, purring. He remembered me, remembered what we'd been through, but he'd bring me a mousey toy I couldn't throw or butt his head against the lumps of flesh and bone I still call my hands, become bored with me, wander back to James.

I suppose James got tired of talking about it, or maybe he hated that we weren't colleagues anymore. He could keep his positions, could maybe forget he'd ever spoken, but me? The physical therapist remains unconvinced that my affliction isn't all in my head. Thinks it can be cured with enough talk therapy, enough force of will. I speak to my computer, growing impatient with the failures in voice recognition software, painstakingly making contact with reiki technicians, mediums, self-proclaimed exorcists, witch doctors, a new kind of science for a new kind of mystery. A girl comes twice a week to help me around the house. She cleans up the things I cannot and prepares me half a week's worth of meals at a time. Her name is Stephanie, and I thought we could be friends. But I've learned that neither Stephanie nor anyone else wants

to hear about the ghosts at the bottom of the sea. They pity me that I need to make up such a story to excuse my disability. Or they want to believe, want it too much, and think me a false prophet, and I wonder if I'm obsessed. I'm only twenty-seven years old. I should have a brilliant career and all of life ahead of me, and I did, until Challenger Deep.

One of the last manual sensations I remember with real clarity was that of my own pulse. During our tryst, before the ghost appeared, I'd reached behind my head. I grabbed one of the bunk railings and gripped it tight as my recovering hands would allow. At first, I thought the metal throbbed beneath my touch, that I felt *Hyperborea's* engines reverberating. But then I realized what I felt was my own blood, the beating of my own heart in a long-traveled circuit, intensified by my grasp.

Some nights I dream of hauntless dives. In sleep, I feel again the joy of going under, the thrill of increasing pressure, the awe of species and abyss-scapes hardly understood by man. I dream of working in a lab, adjusting sensitive dials, preserving or preparing delicate specimens. Fur and silk, velvet and sandpaper, mud and Berber carpet and leather and spaghetti, a thousand, million tactile sensations visit me in my dreams. Then I wake, and I have to use my forearm to push sweat-slick hair away from my face, and I don't even have a Nemo to hold, and in those sorts of moments, I wonder how I'll go on, disability checks and empty houses and disaffected Stephanies forever.

But the mind can also grasp a thing. A belief that one's conditions or situation will change. The surety that someone, somewhere, sometime will hear and listen and believe. The hope for a career that can be built despite an inability to do primary research. Faith in vindication, curation, revelation, another life, another lover. Clutch tightly enough, and it seems as if your entire life swirls and centers upon what you've chosen to grab. The blood flows around

this thing, this new heart. It pulses to a new, self-determined beat, a different sort of embrace. It wills. It begs.

Hold on.

Vita

The author was born on a now-defunct air force base in Illinois and grew up in the Florida panhandle. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in philosophy and art history from the University of New Orleans in 2008. She joined the University of New Orleans' Creative Writing Workshop in 2012 to pursue a graduate degree in fiction writing. She is the 2004 recipient of the Quarantee Club Prize for Women in Literature, and her work has appeared in *freeze frame fiction*, *Fur-Lined Ghettos Magazine*, and *The Riding Light Review* under the name K.L. Owens.