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A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories

Jessica Koch

University of Southern Maine, jesslouko@gmail.com

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A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Jessica Koch

2020

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

May 20, 2020

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Jessica Koch entitled *A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



Tobias Buckell Advisor



Elizabeth Hand Reader



Justin Tussing Director

Accepted



Adam-Max Tuchinsky Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories is a collection of speculative fiction short stories that engage with the theme of lost and found connections to the self and to others.

This collection explores grief, heartbreak, joy, closure, and madness through the eyes of women, men, children, and animals in settings from the fantastic to the mundane.

Each story presents this theme in a distinct way with characters that interact with their own loss or gain uniquely. The collection focuses on the human psychology of the narrative while weaving in speculative elements to emphasize and create a deeper understanding of that psychology than could be explored in straight fiction.

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Preface

What follows is a collection of short stories entitled *A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories*. The included stories share themes of found and lost connection. Some stories focus on the connection to the self while others focus on the connection between families, siblings, or friends. Each story explores the deep relationships humans engage in with ourselves and those closest to us.

I chose this theme because it is a universal human experience and one that I am deeply interested in exploring the nuances of. The idea of cultivating connections with others—family, friends, love interests—and what happens when those connections are severed is particularly interesting to me as a writer.

This is also a collection of speculative fiction. Within these stories are strange island beasts, genetically engineered birds, river goddesses, animalistic machines, and others. Speculative elements allow each piece to explore the theme more deeply—to bring them alive with strange, wild, and often beautiful things.

This theme emerged—as most things do—from my own experiences and the experiences of those close to me. Within my family I have been witness to addiction, arrests, cancer treatments, and life-threatening accidents which can all be represented as a loss of self. Thankfully, I have also seen the recovery from all of those things as well: finding the self. Additionally, I have my own experiences with mental health treatments which has also felt like a loss and recovery of self.

All relationships are complicated, aren't they? As a writer, I am most interested in platonic relationships between families and friends. Though some of my stories include significant others in some way, most are not the central relationship or conflict of the story. In my experience, the things that keep people together outside of sexual and/or romantic attraction are far more interesting and worth exploring. Not that there's anything wrong with romance or sex, but haven't those already been explored enough?

Going deeper than that, I am particularly interested in relationships between women. I think there's a significant lack of representation of women generally, but specifically relationships between women that are central to the story and don't have anything to do with men.

Many of these stories about women were influenced by my own personal experience: falling out with my best friend, fighting and making up with my female cousins, watching my grandmother reunite with her sister she hadn't spoken to in twenty years or more. I wanted to read more complicated female relationships, so I wrote them.

Before writing any of the stories in this collection I would have told anyone that asked: *I don't write short stories*. I would have said: *I write novels*. Except, I hadn't written a novel, either. And I still haven't completed a novel, but I have written over twenty short stories in the past two years since beginning the Stonecoast MFA program. Two of those stories have been published as of writing this.

The stories in this collection were all written between 2018 and 2020 while I was attending the graduate program for popular fiction. While writing them I moved three times, quit my job, went through a six-month interview process for my next job, left a

three year long relationship, started dating again, attended my brother's wedding, lost two members of my extended family, held my best friend's daughter for the first time, and watched as our world made decisions from Brexit to acquitting Donald Trump in an impeachment trial. And as I write this, and as I continue to revise these stories before they appear in the final version of the thesis, I am sitting in my apartment under Covid-19 stay-at-home orders. 22,000 people have died as I write these words. And more will surely follow.

It would be impossible and illogical to say those things haven't impacted these stories. Even the revisions are different for having experienced the world as it is in this moment. The world is imploding with loss, grief, tragedy, but also occasional joy, even if brief. Some of these stories wound up more hopeful in the end because that joy snuck through the cracks. And I think it's important to acknowledge that.

The genres here range from second-world fantasy, straight literary fiction, weird fiction, science fiction, to cross-genre, and slipstream. I wanted to understand how this common theme could be implemented across the spectrum of speculative fiction.

The first story in this collection is "The Mountainview Motel," which follows a son in the aftermath of his father's death. His father owned a motel along the logging roads of northern Maine and his son, Eli, must decide whether to take over the motel or shut it down. However, his father was doing more than just running a motel.

This story was partly inspired by my Mom's stories of driving up the Golden Road—which is a 96-mile mostly dirt logging road that stretched from Millinocket to the Canadian border. I also drew from my own experiences spending summers in those

northern Maine woods and wondering how and why people live up there for their entire lives.

From a literary perspective, this story—and many of the other stories—was inspired by classic fairy tales by Lord Dunsany and the more modern work of Kelly Link. There’s magic in the sparseness of their details, especially regarding the speculative elements, that I think works really well for this story.

In her story, “The Summer People,” Link writes of creatures living in a house, but doesn’t offer a description for them at all: “Back down the hall, Ophelia stopped in front of the first door. She seemed to hear someone or something. Music perhaps? A voice calling her name? An invitation? Fran’s poor, sore heart was filled with delight. They like her! Well, of course they did. Who wouldn’t like Ophelia?” (Link 19). The only interaction the characters have with the “summer people” are off-page or indirect. But like many of Link’s pieces, this story is not centered around the fantastic, but rather the people that interact with it.

I was definitely inspired by Link’s work when I wrote “The Mountainview Motel” and other pieces in this collection like “Night Animals in the Desert”. I wanted to keep the speculative elements light and not in focus—sort of blurred just at the edges of the story—so that the characters were truly central, rather than the fantasy.

“The Shell” is the first of two flash-length pieces in this collection. This is one of those stories that started with a line that I thought of and then couldn’t get out of my head: “The first time I saw the ocean, an old woman on the beach gave me the shell.”

And from there, I wrote a story of grief and of joy. It's a simple story that came from the urge to write something about loss that wasn't *depressing*.

The old woman in the story at the end of her life is alone, but she isn't *lonely*. She doesn't long for anything anymore and is able to let go of things that once gave her comfort because she no longer needs them. This is an aspirational piece of work for me as it touches on my own—and surely most people's—fears about loss and loneliness.

“The Beast of Sasanoa Island” is the oldest piece in this collection, written during my first semester at Stonecoast in 2018. This one has also seen extensive revision and has been fully rewritten about six times.

This was also one of the first finished short stories that I ever workshopped. I still remember that one of the participants of my workshop said it was unrealistic that a twelve-year-old would be in a kayak by herself in the ocean, even though that part of the story was actually based on my own life experience. It just goes to show that sometimes pulling from your own experience can cause that “truth is stranger than fiction” effect for some readers.

I still let Yumi have her own kayak though.

“The Beast of Sasanoa Island” was inspired by the work of Hayao Miyazaki, in particular the films *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*. I wanted to try writing something that had that strange, dream-like, modern fairy-tale feel.

As a said, I also pulled heavily from my own life for this piece. The setting is an ocean-front cottage on the mid coast of Maine where my Dad grew up and where my

grandparents lived until they passed away. I spent nearly every weekend of my childhood at their house on the ocean, boating and kayaking to islands in the bay, swimming and fishing off their dock. I knew that I wanted to bring that place into my work.

Now that the house has been sold and we no longer visit the area, it exists in my mind like a dream would. Half-forgotten, slipping away with each year that passes. It is now distinctly a childhood memory. The kind of memory that if not revisited, rekindled, every so often will fade away in time. So, there's a lot of personal meaning behind the setting of this piece and it remains one of the most personal pieces in this collection.

“Sweet Water” is a story about a river goddess and the dark truth of the magic she uses. This is the first story appearing in this collection that is second-world fantasy. When I was just beginning to seriously write, I always wrote second-world settings. I was so mesmerized by the world-building and the creative rule-breaking that goes into creating entirely made-up worlds. My older work used to rely so heavily on the setting that the characters and plot became secondary elements, only pieces that were moved around an interesting world.

The setting of “Sweet Water” is not the focus of the story, but it does help add depth to the piece by creating conflict and magic that are important to the character arcs within the narrative.

This is also the only piece that uses a framing narrative device where the outer frame is in third person perspective and the story within is in first person perspective. Writing a story with a frame is incredible tricky, as I found out. In revising this piece, I had to make sure that the frame was as important to the story itself as the inner portion.

The story “Fur and Feathers” was published in *Metaphorosis Magazine* in November of 2019. It began its life as a flash fiction piece about a man slowly transforming into a tree. Both the original short piece and the final short story are from the perspective of his young daughter, known as Little Bird, who soon learns that all humans will eventually face the change into a plant or an animal.

Though I liked the short piece, it felt unfinished. There were new themes and other storylines beginning to emerge from the narrative that felt too confined by its length.

Over the course of many drafts, I found that I wanted the framing of the story to be the relationships between the three women who were left behind: a mother and two daughters. I wanted to explore what happened to them in the aftermath of the father’s change.

In the final version, I was able to bring in more of the outside world, to hint at the collapsing society just beyond the woods and to deeply examine conflict within this family following a tragedy.

The story was inspired in part—of course—by Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* and also by contemporary weird fiction in the vein of Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*. It was also inspired by conflicting perspectives on the fear of death and the acceptance of change, explored through the eyes of a child.

“Four Graves” is the second flash-length piece in this collection and is about a dog who loses his family to a horrible illness. The original version ended on a very somber note but as I was revising the stories for this collection, I had a change of heart about

the ending. During my time at Stonecoast, I wrote a research paper about post-apocalyptic narratives, so this little story was inspired partly by the reading and research I was doing during that time. Some of the books that I read for that paper included Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* which influenced this piece thematically more than any others.

Obviously, there are themes here that are very relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic. When I wrote the piece, there was no happy ending—the dog died on the graves of his family—and the sickness was never elaborated on. However, I revised that story in March of 2020, just as the pandemic was reaching the U.S. While the sickness in this story is decidedly *not* Covid-19, I did give the characters face masks to indicate some kind of potentially contagious virus. But I also decided to give this story a more uplifting ending. Future pandemics are likely, probably inevitable, but hope is also eternal.

“When the Last King Dies” was based on the real-life games that my best friends I played growing up. The woods outside my house were particularly dense and interesting with giant trees, rock cliffs, swamps, and more. I wanted to play with the concept of that fantasy world blending in with our own, as well as the ways in which children grow up and lose those imaginary places.

The setting of this story is very personal, and I drew from a lot of my own childhood memories to make it come alive. The somewhat post-apocalyptic setting is meant to contrast the forest of the fantasy and also the way the protagonist thinks about her life now compared to her childhood.

The story “Desert Animals at Night” grew out of a nearly completely different story that I wrote in my second semester at Stonecoast. Laura is a character that I so badly wanted to write, and so this story went through eleven complete rewrites and smaller revisions in between before becoming the final story included here.

The story was inspired by a short story collection I read in my second semester called “Things We Lost in the Fire,” by Mariana Enríquez. The stories take place in Argentina and use supernatural themes to explore socio-political turmoil from very close and personal perspectives. As I read through Enríquez’s book, I was struck at how post-apocalyptic her stories felt, even though that was not explicitly what she was writing. There was something special in her work that I wanted to capture: bleakness, desperation, and the darkness of psychological distress.

Without giving too much away, “Desert Animals at Night” was my most challenging piece as well as the one that stretched me far out of my comfort zone. I like to write flawed characters—people with realistic issues and shortcomings—but Laura has a genuinely fractured psychological hold on the world. She is obsessive and broken with desires that aren’t necessarily relatable. But I also think that’s what makes her story interesting.

“A Scrapper in the Ash” is the longest piece in this collection. It is also my most ambitious second-world fantasy story, and I had a blast writing it. This story connects to the themes of loss, but also of finding a new family along the journey that Nyiv takes.

The setting is a war-ravaged, post-machine world where Nyiv is a thief selling illegal mechanical parts on the black market. At the beginning of the story, she has been captured and enslaved and must escape her captor.

The mix of science fiction and fantasy elements is what drew me to this world. The cross-genre blending of technology and magic is what made this piece so much fun to write—and hopefully equally fun to read.

“The Engineering of a Bird” is a story that has had many lives as other stories (as stories often do) before it came into its final form. This story definitely falls into the “finding self” category, with a character who tries to become one thing but becomes something else entirely and embraces that unexpected outcome. This is one of the few stories in this collection that does have a romantic interest, but Mags is obsessed with being desired by her ex-husband, not with loving him.

It took a long time to get this story’s tone and trajectory right. I liked the concept of biological and genetic engineering that had some mysterious and unexplained importance to the characters, but when I started writing, I had other ideas in mind for where the story was going. I wrote draft after draft until I had nearly ten versions in a folder on my computer.

I thought about putting the story away and not including it in this collection, maybe making it into something else later, but I sat down with it one last time and reworked it again. Stories like this one are a testament to the struggle that sometimes happens when writing. Sometimes I do decide to walk away from stories—it’s not the right

time, I'm not the right person, I'm not the right person *right now*—but sometimes it's just a matter of pushing through it one more time.

As a whole, this collection spans many genres and styles of my own writing, but each piece contains the thread of the overall themes of family, connectedness, and loss of both. Some of the stories are experimental in character and structure, others are from a very personal perspective.

Going forward, I plan to submit many of these stories for publication in the second half of this year, as well as begin more serious work on a novel that I've had in progress for many months. Writing these short stories has helped me develop and hone my storytelling ability, and I hope this translates into longer work. I also will continue to write (and hopefully publish) new short stories in the meantime.

I'm really proud of this collection, as it represents the growth and maturity that I've seen in my writing over the past two years. It wasn't until I compiled them that I realized how much work I've done in such a short amount of time (and I had to cut many stories out that didn't fit the theme for this collection). So now I can say that I *do* write short stories, and here are eleven of them.

I hope you enjoy this collection.

A Sky Too Close to the Ground: Stories

By Jessica Koch

The Mountainview Motel

Your funeral was small. Just me and Reverend Clark standing out in the cold above the barely thawed ground and the hole we placed your urn in. It looked so small down there. All you ever were—your thoughts, dreams, bad decisions, good memories—all reduced to literal ash and dust.

Mom sent flowers from California, “with love.” An arrangement that was an explosion of greenhouse roses and lilies, colors so vibrant they looked fake, like tropical birds clashing with the dead yellow grass and gray sky. You would have hated it. It was almost like she was there, bright and loud and always out of place up here, like she never left at all.

An only child will attend lonely funerals. Mom said that to me once, like it was my fault that she left right after I was born. It was probably for the best, don’t you think?

“It’s good of you to come up and take over the motel, Eli,” Father Clark said as we walked back toward the church across the street from the cemetery. “Not sure it’d stay in business without you. And Lord knows we need it up here.”

“I’m only here until I can hire someone to run it,” I replied. “I can’t stay.”

“Ah, well.” He cleared his throat. His eyes were bloodshot and his neck raw from razor burn. I imagined him dry shaving stubble after a long night of drinking. You told me once that he was an alcoholic, which didn’t surprise me.

“No offense, father, but I can’t imagine living up there. I don’t know how my dad did it for most of his life.”

We paused at the base of the stairs leading into the modest church. Angry clouds gathered over distant trees behind the white steeple.

“I believe God kept him going.”

“He never spoke much about his faith,” I said. Not only that, but you openly cursed it the second the car door shut after leaving the church every Sunday. Why you still went after Mom left, I guess I’ll never know.

“You’re right—that’s not an easy life. I’d like to think the Lord kept him company. Regardless, he sure had something keeping him going up there.”

You and I both know what that was. The thing we fought about every time you called, every time I visited. And the reason I stopped visiting years back. Because I couldn’t make you give up on those creatures, on the motel, move closer to me and Abby. Maybe you’d still be alive if you had. You’d have been closer to doctors; they might’ve caught that heart attack sooner.

I felt a raindrop on my cheek.

Father Clark nodded once, looking up to the sky. “I’ll pray you find someone to take over the motel. Drive safe up there, watch out for those truckers.”

#

You died in early May, when there were still patches of snow lingering under the shadows of the evergreen boughs where the sun never reached along the hundred miles of dirt logging roads that lead to the Mountainview Motel. What a misleading name. The only view from any of the twelve rooms was the parking lot out front. You’d have to hike out

nearly eight miles to catch a glimpse of anything that could be earnestly described as a mountain. Not that it mattered much to the clientele: loggers looking for a soft bed and a hot shower and the occasional stray tourist looking to experience the true Maine wilderness. But you were kind to them all. You knew that hospitality was not exclusive to fancy hotel chains with their own brand of soap.

I couldn't go more than thirty miles per hour on that single-lane road as it snaked through the thick forest. I carved around potholes and frost heaves that gnarled the rough road as though a monster had come through and taken a bite out of it. Each blind turn sent my stomach dropping with the thought of an eighteen-wheeler stacked high with timber barreling toward my sedan. Or a moose, just standing in the rain waiting for me. Both outcomes were equally bad.

It was the first time in nearly thirteen years that I found myself driving along the old road. It hit me then, in the car, as I rounded another anonymous corner of pines, their branches skimming my window like fingers reaching out from the forest, that for the first time I wasn't driving to see you, but the emptiness you left behind.

#

The motel was dark when I arrived. My headlights flashed against peeling green paint on brick siding as I pulled in. Two other cars sat in the lot: Harriet's gray sedan and a nondescript black truck with severe window tinting.

I turned my car off and looked down at my phone. Six messages from Abby, plus a missed call. But no voicemail. She wasn't the type to leave voicemails. I turned the

phone off without reading the texts. I had lost cell service on the road somewhere on my way up, so it was useless to me anyway. I'd call Abby later.

I got out of the car, rolling my stiff shoulders as I ducked out of the rain and into the front office. A bell chimed as I stepped into the warm, dimly lit reception room. It smelled like it always had before: of old books and cheap air fresheners. It made me miss you even more.

"Is someone there?" The back-office door swung open and Harriet peered at me from over her thick reading glasses. You used to say she looked as much like a grandmother as anyone ever should. And yes, her gray hair was cropped short and permed and she only wore clothes that looked like they were bought at a Goodwill thirty years ago. But that was where her grandmotherly resemblance ended.

"Holy shit, Eli, I wasn't expecting you 'til tomorrow. God, you haven't aged a day. Such good blood in the Hastings men."

"I should have called."

"Damn right. We're all booked up. No room for you." She chuckled dryly as she slipped behind the reception desk and flipped open the ledger book. "Sorry I missed the service. Someone had to keep this place open today."

"He would have understood," I said. "Hey, who's got that truck outside?"

Harriet looked up. "Russell Crane," she said flatly, as if I should know.

"Who?"

She turned around to the key box that hung on the wall behind the desk. “He comes every year or so. Or he did, a while back. It’s been a long time actually.”

“What’s his business?”

“None. He just likes the place I think.” She handed me a room key. “Though your dad never seemed to like him much.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “Your dad had his opinions and I have my own. He thought the man was odd, but he seems harmless to me. Room five all right with you?”

I took the key. “Thanks. Hey, are there any applicants for that posting?”

“Lord, no.” She laughed. “You know I’d do it if I could stand the hours but I’m not getting any younger.”

“Well, let me know if anyone calls.”

“Will do. It’s good to see you, kid.” She winked at me and closed the ledger with a heavy thud.

I got my bag out of the car and as I walked down the row of doors to room five, I noticed a light on in the last window at the end of the motel. A dark figure leered from behind the curtains, watching me.

I don’t think I like Russell Crane either, Dad.

#

I woke to the sound of a door slamming and watched through the peep hole as Russell Cranc, a middle-aged man with a gray beard and dark hair, blurred and distorted by the lens, walked across the parking lot and vanished into the thick trees. He had a hunting rifle slung across his back.

I know you would have told me to follow him into the woods. It's what you would have done.

Instead, I spent the day cleaning out your RV.

I walked around to the back of the motel and waded through the sea of overgrown grass toward the faded yellow thing you called a home, propped up on cinder blocks, never again to see the freedom of the road. It was like another death, this one slower as the grass and vines will eventually grow up around the old caravan, reclaiming it for the bugs, the birds, the earth.

As I opened the door, the smell of wildflowers bloomed in my nose. I stepped inside to find that the floor, the bed, and counters and shelves, were all covered in freshly picked flowers. Violets, trillium, lupine, forget-me-knots. I lifted my boots to find crushed petals underneath. They left them for you, didn't they?

I brushed away the flowers as I worked, leaving them in little piles on the floor. I threw away your clothes, your bedding, your cracked dishes, the food you will never eat. As I looked around the sparse room, I wondered what you would have wanted me to keep. Your books on hunting and fishing, that photograph from your wedding day that was still taped on the fridge, your tattered baseball caps that hung on the back of the door

in a clump? I took the photograph and folded it along the middle so that Mom was tucked behind where I couldn't see her. You looked so happy. I put the picture in my pocket.

I also found your gun, loaded, under your bed. I took that too.

At the back of your closet, I found that box. Full of broken wings and little bones. You were going to bury them when the ground thawed, I think. I buried them for you. I left the wildflowers as I found them.

As I walked back across the clearing toward the motel, carrying a trash bag full of things you once loved or needed, I thought about how you were so much more than those things you left behind.

#

After I showered the dust and sweat off, I wrapped myself in a towel and, using the bulky corded phone on the side table, called Abby.

“Did you get my texts? Why didn't you text me back? I was worried about you.”

“Sorry, no. There's no reception up here. Everything is fine.”

I heard her sigh on the other end of the line. “I'm sorry I couldn't go with you.” She genuinely meant that, but her words sounded a thousand miles away. “How was the service?”

“Small. But nice. My dad would have appreciated it I think.”

“And the motel? Had anyone taken that job yet?”

“No. I might just have to close the place for the season and figure something out next year. Sell it maybe. It’ll leave Harriet in a lurch but I’m sure we could pay her part of her salary to watch over the place and make sure the pipes don’t freeze and that no one breaks in over the winter.”

“That sounds like a reasonable plan. The sooner you come home to me, the better.”

Against the quiet static between our breaths, I heard a scraping sound coming from outside.

“Hon...I’ve gotta go. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Miss you,” she said, but I was already pulling the phone away from my ear. I placed it back in its cradle and walked to the window.

Russell Crane dragged a heavy and full black garbage bag across the parking lot. When he reached his truck, he lifted the bag and heaved it clumsily into the back and then returned into his room. His light came on and illuminated the pavement beneath his window.

I waited and watched as the forest around the motel darkened. After spending so much time in the city, I forgot how dark the night can be. How dark it’s supposed to be.

Eventually, Russell’s light went out. I waited longer, waited until I was sure enough that he was asleep. And then I turned on the flashlight on my otherwise useless phone and crept out toward the truck.

Russell's window stayed dark as I approached. I leaned over the side of the truck and shined my light on the bag. It wasn't moving. You and I both know what was in that bag. I didn't need to open it, but I did anyway. Moth-like wings, still dusty. And their little bodies curled up, paws obscuring their faces. But I didn't need to see their vacant black eyes to know they were dead. At least a dozen, all shot through, dark green blood pooling at the bottom of the bag like garbage juice.

What will they do now that you're gone?

I thought I didn't care, that it didn't matter.

I retied the bag and lifted it out of the truck bed, hefting it over my shoulder. I walked it into the woods, following the modest beam of my phone light along the path that you would have walked every day. It led me deep into the woods.

At the end of the path was a tree. An old pine, larger than the ones around it. I emptied the bag out at its base, laying all the little bodies on the bed of moss and ferns and watched as paws reached out from under the boughs and pulled their brothers and sisters back home.

#

I stuffed the black garbage bag with actual garbage and put it back in the truck. The next morning I watched Russell Crane check out and drive away, down the long corridor back to wherever he came from.

"I think I get why your father didn't like that man," Harriet said as I walked into the reception office.

“Me too.” I sat in a stiff armchair by the window next to a rack of outdated brochures. “Listen, Harriet, I think I need to shut things down for a while.”

She sighed, swiping dust off the reception desk. “I figured as much.”

“I’ll try to find someone to run it soon.”

“No, no, I understand.” She walked out from behind the desk and sat in the identical chair opposite me. “Your daddy was a special man. It takes someone like him to do this work. To care about people...about everything...the way he did.”

I nodded, losing my gaze to the forest out the dirty window.

“And you...you have Abby and that fancy city job. You have a life out there.”

Harriet squeezed my knee.

#

I spent a few days more at the motel, helping Harriet clean the rooms and lock things up. After I sent her home on the last day, I locked the office and went back to my room to pack up my things. It was nearly dusk, and I wanted to get on the road before it was too dark. I could be back in Boston before midnight. I could be back with Abby. I pulled out my phone and scrolled through the messages she’d left me days before. *Did you make it? Where are you now? When did you last change the water filter? Miss you.* I stopped scrolling.

I carried my bags out to the parking lot but put them down in the dirt. My car was covered, in wildflowers like a veil. The same kind that were scattered in my father’s RV. I picked up a daisy from the hood and held it in my palm.

Dad. What will become of this place without you?

What will become of it without me?

The Shell

The first time I saw the ocean, an old woman on the beach gave me the shell. Half of a white clam shell, or maybe an oyster shell, I don't know. It was white with little ridges like the sand dunes at low tide. It was beautiful and it was mine.

The old woman must have been over a hundred years old. She looked older than my grandfather who was only eighty-six. The hair on her head was wispy and colorless and the creases of her skin looked like dried riverbeds. She wore funny clothes for a beach, too. A suit, like the one my dad wore to work. Something about her was familiar, though. She looked a little like my mom. The eyes were the same, but I hadn't seen my mom in a long time so maybe I was just imagining that.

I wasn't supposed to be outside alone but when I saw the sun rising over the water, spilling golden light onto the waves, I had to go look. I took the motel room key card from the table by the door and left my Dad asleep inside.

I walked down to the water, watching the orange glow rise over the endless horizon. It was the first time I'd ever seen the ocean and I couldn't believe how long and large and flat it all was. The waves slid over my feet as I sank into the sand. I tasted the salt air on my tongue.

I was alone for a while, and then I wasn't.

“Beautiful morning,” the old woman said, who was abruptly beside me, her own bare toes wiggling in the sand. She held shiny black shoes in one hand, her other dug deep into the pocket of her trousers.

I wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. But I wasn't supposed to leave the motel room either and it was rude to ignore people.

“Are you here on business or pleasure?” she asked.

I didn't understand. When I didn't answer she laughed softly. Her laugh was like my mom's too.

“Sorry, bad joke. Are you here with your family?”

I nodded. “My dad.”

“What about your mom?” she asked.

“She's dead.”

“I'm so sorry to hear that.”

It was something I was used to hearing, and so I said what I always said: “It's okay.” Even though it was very much not okay. It had been a year, but I still heard my dad crying every night in his room on the other side of my wall, which always made me cry too.

“My mom died too,” she said. “When I was about your age.”

“Did you ever forget what she looked like? The woman who talks to me about it said I might forget so I should keep pictures around.”

The woman was quiet for a moment, watching the waves, then said: “A picture isn’t enough, is it? It did get hard after a while, to imagine her the way I did before. Her smile, the way she dressed—she just got blurry, like she’d wandered away and got lost in my memory. I thought if I could just find her again...”

She trailed off. I was crying.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry.” She knelt in the sand, so her face was level with mine. The waves lapped at her pants, darkening the fabric.

“Here, I have something for you that might help.” She pulled her hand out of her pocket. Her stiff fingers unfolded and in her palm was a white shell, the size of my tiny fist. It didn’t look like a shell that had come from this beach. “Hold it up to your ear.”

I knew this trick: hold a shell up to your ear and you’ll hear the ocean in it. She was just trying to distract me. I did it anyway. I plucked the shell from her hand, brushed the hair away from my ear, and held it close.

I heard the dull roar of ocean waves like a hollow echo.

“It’s the ocean,” I said, handing the shell back to the old woman.

“Listen again.” She put her hand over mine and brought it back to my ear. The sound of that other ocean returned. I closed my eyes so I could hear better.

Over the roar of the wind and the sea, I heard a faint voice. A woman singing.

“I know this song,” I said. It was a French lullaby my mother used to sing.

I kept listening until I realized I knew the voice, too. I cried again and the stranger used her sleeve to keep the tears from falling into the sea. When the song was over, I tried to give her back the shell, but she closed my fingers over it.

“You keep it,” she said. “I don’t think I need it anymore.”

She got up and left. Alone again, I watched the tide go out and listened to my mom sing.

I kept the shell in my pocket, always, and held it up to my ear each night. After a while I did forget what she looked like, but I always had her voice.

When I was old, I went back to that motel by the sea, where my dad had taken us on the anniversary of her death. “We’ll go see the ocean,” he’d said. “Your mother loved it so much.”

I woke to the sunlight streaming through the blinds, a fiery glow that filled the room in warmth. My bones felt old and stiff, like a ship wrecked on shore but I wanted to see the sunrise over the sea again. Maybe for the last time.

Outside there was a girl standing in the waves, with her back to me, watching the sun rise over the endless horizon beyond. I walked toward her, carrying my shoes in one hand and clutching the shell in my pocket with the other.

The Beast of Sasanoa Island

“What’s that one called?”

Yumi pointed to an island in the bay, a shadow of dark green and densely packed pine trees that rose sharply from rocky ledges like a dragon’s spine on fire, backlit by the rising sun.

Her grandmother walked unevenly over to the window, every other step aided by a cane. Even at twelve, Yumi stood several inches taller than her grandmother, who had always been slight, at least as far as Yumi could remember, but only in stature. Yumi remembered her father saying Grandmother Li was “crazy for someone so small.”

The old woman squinted, peering out past the trees to where Yumi’s finger led. “Oh, that’s Sasanoa Island.” She smiled down at Yumi. “When I was your age, my mother—your great grandmother—told me stories about a monster that lives there.”

Yumi blinked. “A monster?”

“Yes, a terrible monster that devours anyone who sets foot on the island. That’s why no one lives there.” A dozen other small islands were scattered along the cove with docks hitched to their rocky shores, sailboats and skiffs bobbing sleepily in the water, and houses nearly hidden, tucked in the shadows, their windows like eyes peering out from amongst the trees, wide and fearful. But Sasanoa, farthest from the shore, was a dark void against the sky and the sea.

“Have you ever seen him?” Yumi was old enough now to be suspicious of her grandmother’s stories.

“No, but some nights I hear him howling out there, looking for food. If you listen really hard at night, you’ll hear him too.”

“That’s just the wind.” Yumi’s mother walked past with yet another cardboard box, raindrops of sweat shimmering on her brow. “Don’t scare her with that nonsense.”

“I’m not scared,” Yumi said, even as she felt her palms dampen with sweat.

“Of course, it’s all just a silly story.” Her grandmother winked at Yumi and then turned to her daughter, who was now unwrapping mugs from packing paper in the galley kitchen. “Do you need help, Hana?”

“No, Mom, it’s all right.” As the words left her mouth, a dark blue mug slipped out of the crumpled brown paper in her hands and hit the floor with a loud crack, shattering into small pieces that exploded across the floor like a firework. She dropped the paper back into the box she was unpacking and put her face in her hands.

Yumi had only seen her mother cry once and that was last week after her father’s trial. She always told Yumi that crying was okay, that sometimes the bad feelings have no other way of getting out. When Yumi saw her mother, sitting on the entryway floor of the apartment they shared since moving out of the house, she sat next to her and repeated the mantra back to her in hopes that it would make her feel better.

Yumi's mother wiped her face with the flat of her fingers and took a deep, slightly hitching breath before turning to get the broom. As she swept up the broken pieces, Grandma Li asked, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she replied flatly. "It was one of his anyway."

Yumi leaned against the windowsill and watched the world around the little blue house awaken. It was all so unlike the city. Instead of sirens wailing along the streets, birds chirped cheerfully in the woods, and the rumble of cars was replaced by waves lapping at the shore. The yard was surrounded by thick trees, ancient gods casting long shadows across the lawn. Were these sentinels bound to protect her or was she an intruder on their land? She wasn't sure.

A few minutes later her mother's hand glided across the top of her head, fingertips gently brushing through her black silk hair. "How about you and I take the kayaks out today? It looks like it's going to be beautiful on the water."

#

The sky lightened to a brilliant blue as the morning aged, cloudless and clear, and the ocean stretched out under their kayaks like glass. Yumi was sitting in a child-size red kayak, stout and small, like Yumi herself. Her mother's kayak was an elegant blue, long and narrow, and the two floated along together, occasionally pushing forward with a dip of the paddle. Yumi didn't really understand how the two-sided paddle was supposed to work. She watched her mother's effortless dance, up, then a subtle turn, and down again on the other side, while Yumi clumsily twisted the paddle, too far, ending with the flat side skimming the surface of the water.

Yumi's cries of frustration were met with her mother's endless patience. "It takes practice." The natural light made the scar across her temple look like a white gash on her otherwise tan skin, but her smile made it seem like she forgot about it for now, so Yumi tried to as well.

Despite the slow progress, the outgoing tide carried them away from shore. Being out on the ocean felt like being in another world, disconnected from the little blue house, from the land, from everything solid and known. Yumi watched over her shoulder, trying to keep their house in sight as it slowly shrank in the distance, like the memory of a dream just after waking up. She wanted to reach out and grasp it before it vanished.

Above their heads, the sky stretched to an endless horizon, an unfathomable distance beyond. And below, she couldn't see anything through the hazy green darkness.

"What kind of things live in here?" Yumi asked.

"All kinds of fish," her mother answered, "we'll have to go fishing sometime."

Yumi didn't like the sound of that, she'd gone fishing with her father once before and hooked a poor mackerel in the eye. It came out of the water crying blood.

They skimmed the shore of the nearest island, watching through the trees as chipmunks and squirrels bounded along fallen pine needles and swaths of bright green moss. The island had one house, a little white cottage near the far end, and a man sat on the porch reading a newspaper. A big black dog was curled up in a patch of sunlight and lifted its head lazily, barking once, like an old man's cough, when he saw the two kayaks.

Her mother waved; the man waved back. The dog settled his head back down and his eyelids, heavy with mid-afternoon drowsiness, drifted closed again.

With the open ocean to their right, the wind picked up. The air was warm, but a shiver trembled down her spine. Sasanoa Island slid into view as they passed the cottage. It was closer than Yumi thought, a dark shadow ahead of them, swallowing the light.

“Let’s head back,” her mother said, digging her paddle into the water and turning the nose of her kayak around the bend of the island.

Yumi tried to follow her. But a gust of wind roared, bowing the trees, shaking birds loose from their perches. She looked up as purple storm clouds formed, darkening the sky.

“Yumi—”

A wave rose and fell into Yumi’s kayak, soaking her lap and flooding the cockpit. Yumi strained to push the now heavier and sinking kayak toward her mother, who was now paddling back to reach her daughter.

A flash of lightning arched across the sky followed by a low growl of thunder.

The wind howled.

Her mother reached out with her free hand to hook the end of Yumi’s kayak, but another wave crashed into the side of the little red vessel, tipping it over. Yumi screamed and slipped under the surface, swallowing a breath full of salt water.

The dog barked.

Then darkness.

#

Her mouth tasted like salt and blood. Gentle waves lapped under her, rhythmic and slow. Rough stone scratched her skin.

Yumi's eye flung open and she sat up in the shallow water, coughing. The salt taste turned sour as warm water gushed from her lungs.

Little breaths, in and out.

She scrambled up the shore, out of the frigid ocean.

She felt the presence of the island before she saw the dark trees looming over her, before she noticed the unsettling quiet, before she looked behind her to see how hopelessly far from the shore, from the little blue house, she was.

The storm was gone. The sky had lightened to a gray haze and the wind softened to a ghost, tickling her bare arms and rustling her hair. The world was washed in an eerie blue, like the light just before dawn. It felt like a different day, like time had picked her up and left her somewhere else.

"Mom," she yelled, her voice hoarse and strained.

She stood on the edge of the shore, the island to her back, eyes frantically searching the horizon for her mother's blue kayak, or her own. But there was nothing. No boats on the water, no dogs barking, no birds sailing across the sky. Just the quiet of waves

swooshing at her ankles, the slow breeze whispering in her ears, and then the snap of a branch behind her.

Yumi spun around and stepped backward, wading back into the ocean to get away, as a shadow emerged from the pines.

#

It had been a decade—nearly to the day—since the last human set foot on the island. A man, the beast recalled, with a large motorized boat that crashed through the waves. The man's eyes were narrowed on the horizon. He was unaware of the fragility of his bones, his spirit.

He tasted like ash, like a fire burned out, only fueled by hatred.

The presence he felt on the shore now was light and soft, not like the man's, and not like the birds with their sharp talons digging into the rocks on the shore, the bark of the trees, the skin under his fur.

Then a voice called out, young and strained, crying for her mother.

#

The beast that emerged from the woods resembled a deer but was not like any deer Yumi had ever seen before, not even in her books about mythology and magic. He was easily twice the size of a normal stag with hooves as large as a horse's and sleek brown fur that reflected the ghostly blue light.

A twisted crown of golden antlers adorned his head.

“Hello, little one,” the beast said, mouth unmoving, and continuing to approach the edge of the water.

Yumi felt a scream rising from her belly but die before escaping her lips. She stared at the animal, wondering if she was dreaming, wondering if the thing about not feeling pain in dreams was a lie; the cold from the ocean burned her skin and made her bones ache.

“Why are you here?” The beast stopped at the edge of the water. She didn’t like the tone of his voice, or the way he looked at her with his bottomless black eyes.

“You’re the monster my grandmother told me about.”

“Tell me, what stories did you hear?” He tilted his head to the side, just a little, the light catching on his antlers.

“That you eat people.”

The beast chuckled and said: “The simplest version of the truth will suffice.”

Yumi shivered from the cold and from fear. She decided she probably wasn’t dreaming but she still hoped this wasn’t real. “Are you going to eat me?”

A wave rose and fell on the shore, higher than the ones before, and crested gently over the beast’s hooves. Yumi heard a sputter, like the sound when drops of water fall on stove burners, and the beast recoiled, taking several quick steps backward.

“In time, little one. I imagine you’re not going anywhere.” The beast turned away from her and she watched him disappear into the darkness of the woods. Stillness settled into the trees, as if he had never been there at all.

Yumi hugged herself and noticed for the first time that her life jacket was missing. She looked out to the other islands in the bay and wished she had washed up on any one but this one. Never a strong swimmer, she knew she would drown trying to cross the impossible length of ocean that churned between her and the closest land.

Why had no one come for her yet? Where were the rescue boats and helicopters with beaming floodlights? Far across the water, she could just barely see the dock that floated in front of their house. There was no one there, either. No lights illuminated the houses scattered among the islands. Every single one seemed vacant. The whole world seemed vacant.

And it was starting to get dark.

“Mom! Grandma!” She screamed as loudly as her exhausted lungs would allow.

“No one can hear you, little one.” The beast’s voice echoed from deep in the forest, distant and yet impossibly close. “Come out of the water, I promise I won’t eat you tonight.”

Yumi didn’t believe him but she couldn’t stay in the water, either. Her fingernails were turning purple and her teeth chattered uncontrollably. What she really needed was a fire, both for the warmth and for the smoke to signal for help.

Cautiously and as quietly as she could, Yumi waded out of the water and back onto the rocky beach. She stopped when her feet were solidly on the shore, listening and waiting for the rush of the beast charging through the woods, breaking his vow to leave her be. But nothing happened. The cooling air offered little reprieve from the water, she was soaked through, her clothes, her skin, her hair, all dripped with the chill of the ocean.

Where she stood wasn't really a beach, but rather pockets of sand in between the jagged rocks that lead up to the edge of the trees. She wandered up the shoreline. Now that she was closer to the trees, she could see that they were not ordinary pine trees. Fear melted into curiosity as her legs carried her closer and closer to the tree-things.

#

He had never seen a child before.

The beast wished he had waited out the girl on the shore and eaten her right there, none of this nonsense of allowing her to stay, of giving her hope that she would be rescued. It was something in her eyes, he convinced himself, she looked at him with fear—yes, fear—but something else, something none of the others had.

It would be easier to eat her while she slept.

While she couldn't look at him with those eyes.

#

Yumi pressed the flat of her palm against the bark of the young tree. Warmth flourished under her touch. Then a distinct thrum, like a pulse. Reflexively she pulled her hand

back. All the trees appeared to breathe, in and out, slowly in unison. It would be unnoticeable from the passing boats in the water, it would look like the wind rustling through the pines. But from this close, Yumi could see the bark expand and compress with even breaths like sleeping giants.

With her fingernail, she peeled back a small piece of loose bark, wanting to know what was underneath. As it broke free, a bead of dark red sap swelled to the surface. No, not sap, blood. Yumi yelped and stepped backward, tripping on a root and falling onto the ground.

She tucked her knees to her chest and laid her head on her knees, feeling like she might throw up. The sky darkened more with each passing moment and Yumi imaged she was back home, her real home, in her cozy bedroom with the floor length windows that looked out onto the city street ten floors below. Even on the darkest night, the room glowed with the soft warm light from the city. Her father had called it “light pollution” but Yumi thought that was a cruel way of describing something so comforting.

A glimmer of light caught the corner of her eye and her head shot upward, looking out toward the water. A beam of light scanned the surface of the water, a boat trolling along the uneven waters. Yumi jumped up and ran to the edge of the water, waving her arms and screaming, “Hey, over here! Hey!”

Yumi held her arm over her eyes to shield it from the light as it approached. It was so close now she could nearly see the faces of the two figures that stood on the boat. “Yumi!” An unfamiliar man’s voice called out into the night. It was gruff and muffled, like he was wearing a scarf over his mouth.

“I’m here!”

The light left her face and scanned up the rocks along the island’s shore.

“Yumi!” the man shouted again.

“I don’t see anything.” It was her mother’s voice, also muffled.

“Mom, I’m right here!” There was no way they couldn’t see her; they were looking right at her.

“Let’s try the next one,” the man said, sounding deflated.

“No!” Yumi ran into the water, tripping over a large rock, and landing on her chest as the water unsettled and displaced around her body. She tried to swim after the boat as it turned away, the motor speeding up with a splash and the light dropping off the last rock at the edge of the island.

Yumi treaded water, little waves lapping at her lips. Why didn’t they stop? Why couldn’t they see her? “Please...help me,” the words came out as a whimper, a cry for help to the God or Gods who never listened when she prayed before.

She watched the boat disappear around the bend of another island, the muffled voices yelling her name growing quiet and then fading to nothing.

“Am I dead?” she asked the woods when she climbed back onto the rocks, soaking wet again. The trees continued their light breathing. Maybe in response, the beast began howling in the dark. It wasn’t the deep and hungry growl of an unfed beast, but rather haunted and hollow.

Scattered beneath her feet were fragments of rocks, high enough on the beach that they had not been tumbled soft by the ocean, their edges were coarse and sharp. Yumi reached down and picked one up. It looked like a broad knife, all blade and no handle. *Don't fight back.* She recalled the words her mother used to whisper in her ear at night. *Don't make him angry.* And then whispered: "I'm sorry, Mom."

She followed the ghostly wail into the woods.

The forest woke with her steps. The trees stood more rigidly, holding their breath, watching her. She felt a thousand invisible eyes on her. The forest smelled of must and pine, the salty ocean breeze did not penetrate though their boughs.

Yumi followed a well-worn trail that wound through the trees and led her to the mouth of a cavern, embedded in the root system of a massive, dying tree. The tree did not appear to be breathing like the others, and its pine needles had nearly all dropped to the forest floor beneath the opening of the cave.

The howling stopped when she did, and the silence rang in her ears as a shadow stirred in the depths of the cave. The beast emerged from the darkness, stepping toward her. Yumi held her ground, even though she was afraid. The warmth of his breath surrounded her, trapping her.

"Brave little one," he said, "I admire your spirit." She clutched the sharpened rock behind her back, its edges digging into her soft palms.

“I’m not going to let you eat me.” She hated how her voice cracked, giving away her fear. As the beast took another step forward, she thrust the stone blade out in front of her, gripping it with both hands as though it were a greater weapon.

“Is this the grand weapon you have brought to my island to kill me with?” He asked, nudging the blade with his big black nose, nearly knocking it out of her hands and proving it an ineffective weapon against him.

“I didn’t come here to kill you,” she said, lowering the weapon, “I was in a wreck in the storm.”

The beast huffed, and his eyes narrowed. For once, he seemed unsure of what to say.

“I just want to go home.”

The beast seemed to regain his composure. “Stay the night, but if you’re still here in the morning, I will eat you.” At that, he turned away from her and walked back into the cave. It wasn’t very deep and her eyes, now adjusted to the darkness of the woods, could see him curl up on the ground only a few feet from the opening and lay his head down.

Yumi was paralyzed to her spot, afraid that if she turned away, the beast would wake and follow her. But eventually, he settled into deep, even breaths and she was certain he was asleep.

She looked around, the trees all appeared to slow their breathing as well, and the entire island seemed to drift slowly into a collective sleep.

#

That night the beast dreamt of the first men. The ones with the angry, curved knives that slid into the space between his skin and bone. The ones that burned half the island before he devoured their souls and laid them to rest within the trees, so they could witness the hatred of humanity until it finally won.

#

The beast howled in his sleep. It scared Yumi, but not because it was frightening, but because it reminded her of her mother crying on the floor in their apartment. She ignored the voice in her head that screamed for her to go back to the shore, to wait and see if the boat passed again, and instead walked into the cave.

It was not a large cave and the beast took up most of it. Yumi knelt in the moist dirt and placed a hand on his flank, gently stroking his wiry fur.

“Shh,” she hushed, “it’s alright.”

The howling slowed until it became a quiet whimper. He did not wake. Yumi continued to comb his fur with her fingertips until her eyelids dipped, weighted by sleep.

#

When she woke she was alone, her face buried in the dirt of the cavern floor. Her eyes drifted open. The beast stood outside but facing the cave entrance.

“You never cease to surprise me, little one. Your bravery is commendable. But so is your stupidity: you will die, like all the others.”

Yumi sat up, squinting against the harsh morning light pouring over the beast, setting his golden antlers aglow. She crawled out of the cave to face him. If this was her death, so be it.

It was then that she noticed the mats in his fur, disturbed patches that grew against the rest of his gleaming coat. And sections of his antlers that looked as though they had been sawed away, and the distinct scar near his shoulder, about the size of a quarter.

“The others...they came here to kill you.”

“Yes, little one.”

“Why?”

“Humans are full of greed and cruelty, you want what is not yours to take.”

The beast towered above her. Yumi stared up at him, at his scars and the haunted sadness in his eyes. And then she lurched forward, throwing her arms around the great beast’s neck. He went rigid at her touch and recoiled, dragging them both back several feet, but she didn’t let go.

“I’m sorry about what they did to you,” she said, burying her face in his fur.

He stopped.

She sobbed then, heavy tears sinking into his fur.

“Why are you crying, little one?”

“I wish I could stop you from hurting ever again,” she continued, “I wish I could make all the bad people go away.”

“Why would you wish that for me?” He sounded genuinely confounded by her outburst.

She drew back from him and wiped her nose on the sleeve of her shirt, which was now covered in a film of clear snot, layered on top of dirt, layered on top of salt, dried from the ocean.

“Because no one deserves to be hurt like this.”

The beast lowered his head and Yumi placed her hand on his nose. It was cold and wet on her skin and he breathed warm air against her palm.

“Little one,” he said, “little one, why have you come here?”

“I don’t know,” she said, almost a whisper, “maybe to help you.”

#

She rode out of the pines on the beast’s back, fists gripping hard at the fur on the nape of his neck. He stepped into the water, sending a cascade of waves away from him.

They swam together across the bay to the shore, the morning mist hovering over the calm water like a blanket. He pulled her up to the dock that floated in front of the little blue house. It all looked the same as it had the day before, even though it felt like years had passed.

“Do you promise you will come again, little one?”

“I promise.” It was a promise she intended to keep.

“Goodbye for now, then.”

Yumi ran up the ramp toward the lawn, toward the house. At the top of the platform she stopped and looked back, expecting to see the glint of the beast’s golden crown as he swam back to his island home.

But he was gone, as if he had never been there at all.

Sweet Water

“Will you go to the river, Freja? They asked this of me, but it was not a question. Not really. What would have happened to me if I had said no? Well, I wouldn’t be here telling you this story, child. They will ask this of you, too.”

The child, Wen, looks up at the old woman who sits in a wheeled chair beneath the willow tree. Its tendrils branches like fingers sweeping her white hair. She doesn’t seem to mind. Or perhaps she doesn’t notice. A dark veil covers her face. A sign that the woman is already dead to the village. When the people speak of her, they only do so in past-tense whispers, as if she is nothing more than a ghost.

The elders told Wen that the old woman could no longer speak, that she has no tongue. But that was a lie. Wen wonders what other lies she has been told.

The woman is missing both of her legs, one of her arms, and one of her eyes. Wen’s mother would tell her it is impolite to ask about those.

“They told me I was a goddess,” Freja says. “Did they tell you the same?”

Wen nods. “Yes.” *Was that a lie, too?* she asks herself.

Wen follows the old woman’s gaze as it wanders back and forth, looking beyond the willow tree to the river. There are children playing in the water, the current laps at their legs like a thirsty dog, tasting their summer skin.

“I was once the reeds growing from the silt at the bottom of the river. My hair the algae flowing in the water. My legs rooted grass under its current. But now I am just an old woman, rooting only to this chair.”

The children cup their hands and drink.

“I can’t almost remember the taste,” the old woman chuckles. “It’s not sweet anymore, is it?”

“Not since my Grandma was little. Not since...”

“I left,” Freyja says. “It used to taste like sugar cane sucked from the stalk. Or like honey, maybe. It’s hard to say now.” The woman’s eye refocuses on Wen and her expression shifts, as though she is just seeing the girl for the first time. “You are not supposed to speak to me, you know. Where are your parents?”

The girl looks over her shoulder, back toward the village. “Home. I told them I was I was going to swim with the others. And I did that already, so it wasn’t really a lie.”

“It’s not good to lie,” the old woman says. “But I won’t tell anyone.”

“My mom said you left the river because you didn’t want to help people anymore. Is that true?”

“That’s a simple answer, isn’t it? Easy. Clean. But the truth isn’t simple, child. It rarely is.” The old woman leans forward, as though she wants to whisper in Wen’s ear.

“Is it truth that you seek? Or did you come to me for comfort in your fate?”

Wen looks through the veil, into the socket of Freja's missing eye. "I don't know."

"Do you want to hear the rest of my story?"

"Yes."

#

The river had been dormant for more than a hundred years when I was born. A baby girl birthed on a new moon on the summer solstice was said to be the daughter of the gods, a rare gift for the earth.

After I bled for the first time, I was taken to the river. I was twelve. The entire village came to the shore to watch my mother and I wade into the water. I wore a flowing white silk gown that bloomed like a lily in the gentle current. My mother dipped her fingers into the river and drew a line down my forehead, over the bridge of my nose and my lips. And I licked the sweet water from her fingers.

She had said I should not be afraid, but I was.

"It's all right," she whispered as she lay me down in the water, pressing my shivering body under the surface. I thought it would feel like drowning, but instead it felt like breathing morning air after a frost and my body dissolved into the river.

My mother visited the river often at first. She would dip her bare feet into the water while I pushed little waves against her ankles. She sang the old river songs that her own mother used to sing.

After a time, her belly began to swell.

One day, she brought a small bundle to the river and cried as she unwrapped the blankets, dipping an infant into the water. The little boy was impossibly small and impossibly still.

“Please,” she cried. “Please help him.”

I washed the river water over the boy, but there was nothing I could do, the river could not heal him. He was already dead.

“I’m sorry,” I said. But I don’t think she understood.

My mother left with his body clutched to her chest.

It was the last time she came to the river.

Time passed, though it was difficult to tell how the minutes flowed into months and years. Many others came to the river in that time. Some were so sick, they crawled to my shores. Others came to mend their broken bones and bruises.

I think it was many years later—long after anyone who had known me as a human child was dead—that the woman came to the river. Her name was Illish and she was dying. Her skin was gray, her dark hair was falling out, and when she coughed, blood came up from her lungs. Still, I thought she was more beautiful than the willow flowers in spring. More beautiful than anyone I had ever seen.

She lay in the shallows at the edge of the river and prayed for my help. So for three days I washed the healing water over her body, singing my mother's river songs for her.

On the first day she slept in silence, waking only to cough and spit up blood, which I took away on the current. She was such a delicate, lovely thing. I watched her chest rise and fall like little waves and counted every breath. The slow ones, the ones with too much time in between them, the ones that caught in her throat and became coughs. The count didn't matter, it only mattered that there was another breath after the last.

On the second day, her eyes opened. They were a deep green like the moss in the riverbed. Her lips parted and she told me her name.

"I've never heard a name like that before," I said. I wasn't sure if she would understand my words. Not everyone knew how to listen. But Illish did.

"I'm from far away, from a place where most people have forgotten about this river. But my mother told me stories about you. She said that if I was ever sick, I should come to this river and it would heal me." Her skin was flushed. "Will you sing me another song today?"

I sang to her while she slept, pushing and pulling the water over her warm skin, washing away the fever.

On the third day she did not cough at all. She sat up, looking weak but less sickly. She drank from the river with shaking hands. “My mother said you were human once,” she said, the sweet water dripping down her chin, her neck, her chest. “Is that true?”

“Yes, I was human. A very long time ago.”

“You must have been beautiful,” she said as she lay her head back down on the grass beside the river, most of her body still submerged. Her loose dress swayed gently underwater and her gaze drifted out, past the river, past the trees, to a place beyond, as though she could see something that was not really there.

I became fixated on her fingers that were intertwined with the long grass. I imagined them sweeping into my hair, climbing down my neck. Her eyes slowly closed. I watched her as she slept, more intently than before, at the way her wet dress clung to her chest, the way her lips parted, the way her shoulders glistened with water droplets. I wanted her to touch me the way she touched the grass beneath her hand.

I gathered myself in the reeds and pulled up the roots that became human legs once more and I stood, taking the form of myself as a young woman, naked, long hair dripping wet, the current rushing past my skin.

But something was wrong. My legs never came up through the silt, one of my arms was still a tangled river plant, one of my eyes a blue stone in the riverbed.

She woke as I lowered myself into the shallows beside her, placing my head on the grass near her hand. Her deep green eyes narrowed as she reached out toward my face, perhaps wondering if she was dreaming. Warm fingertips brushed my cheek.

“Is that you?” she asked.

I nodded, placing my hand over hers, feeling her warmth spreading into my skin.

“You are beautiful,” she said, exhaling a long breath. “What’s your real name?”

I told her my name in a human tongue that felt slow and clumsy.

“Freja,” she repeated. “Will you stay with me for a while?”

I sang to her again, this time in a human voice that sounded strange to my now human ears. It reminded me of my mother’s voice, and for the first time in a long time, I missed her.

Illish slept again until the dark surrounded us.

“Do you do this with all of the people that you heal?” she asked when she woke, the curves of her face illuminated in the dim moonlight.

“No,” I said. “This is the first time.”

She pressed closer to me. I felt her breath against my lips, I felt the warmth emanating from her body on my bare skin.

“Do you miss it?” she asked, reaching out, her fingers drawing a line up my arm, across my collarbone, and resting on my neck.

“Miss what?”

“Being human?”

I pressed my palm against her side, feeling the stability of bone under her skin, like she was made of earth and not water.

“I didn’t think so,” I said. “But now, I’m not sure.”

“Have you ever thought about leaving this place?”

“I can’t leave, I am the river.”

Illish shook her head. “I see a woman. One that has sacrificed herself, her own life, so that others can live instead.” She brushed her hand over the skin where my legs should be.

“I can’t,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say. I had never thought about myself that way. I was the daughter of gods, not a human woman. I was born only for the river. I thought about the little boy—my brother—that I could not save. Why should I get to live when others do not?

“Aren’t you lonely here?” she asked, her voice low.

“No,” I said, “there are always people who come to the river.”

“Not that kind of lonely,” Illish said. She tilted my face toward hers and kissed my cheek, tasting the sweet water on my skin. Her lips found mine and she pressed herself into me, her tongue slipping into my mouth, flooding my body with her human warmth.

I wanted to stay in her warmth forever.

We slept together under a swath of dark sky as the constellations turned above our heads.

In the morning, mist rose from the river and the sun burned the sky with an orange glow to the east.

“I have to go,” Illish said. Her lips brushed against mine as she said the words.

As she stood, I felt the cold seeping back into my skin, her finite, fragile warmth slipping away, the river pulling me back.

“You could come with me,” she said.

“What?”

“Come with me.”

“If I leave, I’ll die.” My breaths were short; my heart was beating so hard I felt it pulsing in my head. Feelings that were too human, too uncomfortable. “And people that come here to be healed will die, too.”

“Everyone dies, Freya, with or without the river. Even you,” she said. “You have already given enough, don’t you think? How much is left of you to give?”

“No...I’m the daughter of the gods, I can’t die unless I leave the river.” But I did feel so fragile, so cold now.

“That’s what they told you because you were just a little girl,” she said quietly.

“This isn’t magic, Freja. It’s a sacrifice.”

I looked down at my reflection in the rippling water, expecting to see a divine being, a goddess, but instead I saw a woman. Just a woman.

#

“Did you leave with her?” Wen asks. Darkness is beginning to descend on the valley.

“I did.”

“Did you love her?”

“Yes, child, I did.”

“And then what happened?”

“We were together for a time.” The wind rustles the willow tendrils and the old woman’s hair. “And then she died.”

“What?”

“Illish was very sick, you see,” the old woman said. “The healing from the river only gave her a little more time.”

“She should have told you.”

“She didn’t have to, I already knew. The river always knows.”

“Well, if you had stayed, couldn’t you have healed her again?”

The old woman looks at the child and says: “Yes, but she was right of course. Everyone dies eventually.”

“That’s a sad story,” the girl says, her gaze falling to the ground.

“There has been sadness in my life, yes, but also great happiness.”

“Do you wish you had stayed as the river?”

“I don’t think I wish for anything, child.”

The two are quiet for a long time, listening to the rippling of the current, the wind in the leaves. The other children have gone home.

“Is it true, what the woman said about a sacrifice?” the girl asks quietly, breaking their silence.

The old woman nods slowly, thoughtfully.

“What if I don’t want to go to the river?” Wen asks.

“Then you should run.”

“What?”

“Leave this place and its lies and deception.”

“Why did you come back here if it’s so horrible? How do I know you’re not lying to me too?”

“I came back, child, because I hoped that one day, you would come ask me to tell you the truth. I came back hoping to break the cycle.”

A moment of silence hangs between them.

“Wen, where are you?” a man’s distant voice calls from the village.

Wen stands. Tears forming beneath her eyes.

“Will you go to the river, Wen?” Freja asks.

“Wen!” The voice is closer now.

The girl stares beyond the willow branches, toward the river, toward the village, toward her father calling her home.

“No,” she says softly. And Wen runs. Past the willow trees, past the river, past the village, past her father calling out to her in the darkness. She runs and runs until the darkness catches her, and she vanishes into the night.

Fur and Feathers

Dad was the first in our family to change. It was slow in the beginning: one morning he woke to find the skin on the back of his hand had hardened and darkened overnight. When I asked about it, he told me it was just dry skin, and I believed him because I was only twelve at the time and didn't know what I know now.

As weeks passed, the dark patch grew. It spread up his arm, across his chest, climbing over his collarbones and up his neck. He tried to hide it under heavy layers of clothes, but I noticed other changes too: his movement was slower and stiffer than before, and his arms grew so long that his fingers could nearly touch the floor when he was standing up. His legs changed too, widening and beginning to curve outward at his knees.

Late at night I could hear his bones creaking like a tree in a storm.

My twin sister Becca said it first: "It's the change." She whispered it to me while we lay in our room, our breaths close and our fingers tangled like branches underneath the protective blanket fort that Mom had helped us build earlier in the day.

"Like the guy in the woods?" I asked, recalling the man from the spring before.

She nodded, her face only illuminated by a yellow lamp glow diffused by the sheets.

"Are you scared?"

She kept nodding.

“Me too.”

She squeezed my hands even tighter and we fell asleep holding onto each other.

Growths sprouted from Dad’s arms that budded with small green pods, unfurling into baby leaves which he tugged out like weeds until his fingers became so stiff that he could no longer bend them. After that, Becca and I would sit with him every night, pulling the pods out with our nimble fingers because he said it might help stop the change. And as we did so, he would try to peel the bark from his skin, spilling blood onto the living room floor.

But every morning there were more green buds than we had pulled the night before and the bark grew back over his raw skin, harder and darker. I asked him if the changes hurt and he said “No, Little Bird.”

Mom was quiet during his change. She wouldn’t pluck the leaves or cut away the bark like Dad asked her to. I would go to her, crying, and show her handfuls of baby leaves curled up in my palms like dead moths, and she would take them from me and bury them in the garden.

I heard them arguing, late one night when I couldn’t fall asleep. I got up and tiptoed down to their room and pressed my ear against their door.

“No,” I heard Dad say.

“There’s a spot by the garden—” Mom said.

“I’m not going to sit outside like a damned animal.”

“You can’t stay in the house anymore.” she said. They were both quiet for a few moments and then Mom said: “I’m so sorry, love.”

“Me too,” Dad said. “I didn’t expect this to happen so quickly.”

“It’s all right.”

“I’m not sure that it is,” he said. “I don’t know how you can be so hopeful about...about all of this.”

“Because we’re going be together again someday. All of us. I promise. Can I at least show you the spot in the yard tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

And then they were silent.

But by morning, Dad’s legs had grown off the bed, becoming roots that dug through the floorboards into the earth beneath the house, and he could no longer be moved from the bed. In the days that followed, his arms continued to lengthen, Mom had us open all the windows in their room so they could grow outside of the house.

For many nights after that, while Mom made him soup, because it was the only food he could swallow, Becca and I would climb out onto his branches and pull the little leaves until there were none. But soon his arms split into more branches and those branches split into even more and we could no longer reach all the leaves.

One night, Becca said she didn’t want to go into the room anymore because she was scared and because nothing we were doing was working. I went without her. Dad

had risen from the bed until his head was nearly touching the ceiling. He couldn't open his eyes anymore, but he always knew it was me.

"Little Bird." His voice was coarse and quiet.

"Hi, Dad."

A small silence followed as I walked toward him.

"Little Bird, where is your sister?"

"She's right here." I lied.

"I love you both."

"We're right here," I said, placing both of my palms on the bark of his trunk.

That was the last night I heard him speak. After that, he rose quickly, up and up, widening as he grew until he broke through the roof. His roots thickened and snaked through the hallways of the house. Bark covered his nose and his mouth until all that remained of him was the outline of his face in the trunk of the tree.

#

It wasn't until months later, in summer, that Dad's elm finally stopped growing at an unnatural speed. Our little house was in bad shape. Half the roof was gone, the foundation damaged, and most of the rooms overtaken by enormous roots and branches.

A heavy storm passed through in late August and rain poured in through the cracks, and flooded parts of the house. Mom moved another bed into the room I shared with Becca, where the roof was still intact, and the three of us slept there from then on.

Days after the storm, when the flooded lawn had mostly dried up, Mom strung up a tire swing on one of Dad's lower branches for us. She said we should spend time with him, talk to him. He would want to hear us, she said.

"But he's gone," Becca said to me when I climbed onto the top of the tire, with the rope between my legs, and held on tight. "It's just a tree."

I wondered whether Mom or Becca was right. Becca pulled the tire back and let it go, pushing it forward as it swung back. We were both quiet, looking up as I swung and Becca pushed, watching the elm tree's leaves rustling in the light wind. Mom was on the roof now, repairing the damage by hammering planks around the tree's trunk and patching holes. I hoped Mom was right. I was pretty sure I could feel him still there, like he was standing just behind the tree, watching us.

I noticed Becca had stopped pushing the swing. I looked down to see her staring across the yard at two figures that had emerged from the woods and were walking toward us.

The smaller figure, a little boy who was maybe four or five, started running and stopped a few feet away from the base of the tree that grew out of the side of our house, his head craned backward, his jaw slack.

"Wow," he said in a long breath.

“Jordan, come back here.” The other figure, a woman, waved a frantic hand at the boy and he rushed back to her side. As he ran, I noticed that the back of his neck was covered in a slick, black fur. I reached around to the back of my own neck, where my fingers met only soft, naked skin.

Mom stopped hammering when the woman shouted.

“Isn’t that...” I started to say.

“Yeah,” Becca said.

Mom climbed down the ladder that was propped up against the house and crossed the distance of lawn between her and the visitors.

“Lovely day,” the woman said, looking uncomfortable, her gaze flitting between the tree, Becca and I on the swing, and Mom.

“Sure is,” Mom said. “It’s Kate, right?”

“Yes, Katherine, but...Kate is fine, yes. And this is Jordan.”

“Ah, right. Hello Jordan. How are you?”

The little boy burrowed into his mother’s shirt.

“Sorry for the intrusion. We were picking mushrooms in the woods and saw the...” She pointed up at the tree. “Is that...”

“My husband, yes.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Mom said nothing for a moment, taking off her thick work gloves, and then said:
“Thank you Kate, that’s very kind.”

Kate rubbed her son’s back with one hand and tugged at locks of her frizzy red hair with the other. “I was also wondering if...you tried...was there anything that helped?”

“Helped with what?”

“To slow the change.”

“No, there was nothing that helped.” Mom shifted her eyes to the boy. “Is he changing? Is that why you’re asking?”

The woman gasped and pulled the little boy to her belly, covering his ears with her hands. “Don’t say that in front of him.”

“Doesn’t he know what happened to his father? Families tend to change faster after the first. Surely you knew this was a possibility.”

“Well, aren’t you afraid for yourself? For your daughters?” Kate stared at us, concern carving deep lines across her forehead.

“It’s nothing to be afraid of.” Mom wiped sweat from her brow.

“Jesus. You’re one of those nuts, those radicals, aren’t you?”

“I’m a realist, Kate. You moved away from the city too.”

“It was my husband’s idea,” she said, raking her fingers through the hair on top of the boy’s head. “He said they would take Jordan away from us, that they wanted to do experiments on the children.”

“And he was probably right. They tried to take my girls, too. That’s when we left.”

Kate was crying now, sniffing and holding her son so close I thought he might burst apart. “He’s too young. It’s too soon.”

“It’s better this way, don’t you think? He’ll be with his father and you, well, you’ll probably change soon too. And then your family will be together again. Don’t you want that?”

“Stop it!” Kate shouted, her voice strained and her face turning pink. “I’m going to figure something out. I hope for your daughters’ sake that you do too.” She turned away, leading Jordan back home through the woods.

Mom climbed back on the roof, and the hammering resumed, Becca began pushing the swing again. “She’s wrong.” Becca said quietly, almost to herself.

“Kate?” I asked.

“No, Mom.”

#

A week later, we heard a gunshot. It bellowed through the woods as birds scattered from the trees like dust in the wind.

“What was that?” Becca asked, pulling the spoon out of the stew she was supposed to be stirring on the stove.

“Stay here,” Mom said and ran out of the house, leaving the front door wide open and swinging on its hinges. I got up from the table and ran after her. Becca yelled after me to stop, but I kept going, following Mom’s long shadow against the setting sun along the lawn toward the trees.

We took a straight shot through the woods toward the neighbor’s house. Branches reached out like fingers scratching at my bare arms as I ran. It was almost too dark to see more than a few feet ahead in the thick of the trees but I could hear Mom’s labored breaths and leaves crunching beneath her feet ahead of me.

The trees broke into a clearing where Mom stopped. A little white cottage sat in its center and Kate stood with her back to us, backlit by a flickering porchlight with moths hovering around it, her hair loose and wild in the breeze, a pistol in her right hand. And beyond her to the left, little Jordan, lying face-down in the grass, a red stain swelling, soaking the back of his shirt. Even from a distance, I could see that his arms were now covered in the same black fur I had seen on his neck.

I had never seen a dead person before. Something about Jordan’s body leaking blood all over the lawn made me sick. It looked unnatural, like he had been broken and opened up. I felt bile crawling up my throat, but I swallowed it back down.

Mom looked back when she heard me coming up behind her. “Stay here,” she said sternly. I nodded and tucked myself behind a tree, looking out from behind its branches. I couldn’t stop staring at the boy, lying so still in the grass.

“Kate,” Mom said, walking forward. The woman spun around, looking like a frightened animal with wide, bloodshot eyes and a mix of sweat and tears dripping down her face. “What happened?”

Kate looked down at the gun in her hand and then back up to my Mom. “I had to.”

“It’s all right.” Mom walked carefully closer.

“No, it’s not. I was going to leave with him, but it got worse and...” She looked back at her child. “I just couldn’t lose him like that. I couldn’t lose him like...” For a moment, the wind lowered to a whisper. A branch snapped at the edge of the woods and a giant boar emerged from the trees. He was enormous, much larger than the other wild boars I’d seen in the woods, with coarse wiry fur and beautiful white tusks that curled up over his snout. I thought to myself that he must be their king.

I knew that Kate’s husband had changed the spring before. We had all woken up in the middle of the night to her screams and pounding fists on our door. She had followed her husband into the woods that night, near the end of his change, and found that he had become a boar. Dad made her tea and Mom wrapped her in a wool blanket while Becca and I sat at the edge of the stairs, listening to her cry.

The boar sniffed the blood and nudged the boy’s shoulder with his snout. When Jordan didn’t move, he nudged him again, harder this time, but the boy remained still. The boar threw back his head and bellowed, a guttural, mournful sound that made me shiver, even in the warmth of the summer night. Then he looked straight at Kate, who visibly shook under his gaze.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. But the beast turned away and walked back into the woods the way he had come.

When he was gone, the pistol slipped from Kate’s hand and dropped into the grass at her feet. She didn’t look back at us or down at her son, just followed the boar into the woods, where the branches and the darkness swallowed her whole.

#

“When I was little, people used to die in their human bodies. And we would dig holes like this and put them into the ground so they could decompose and return to nature.” It was the next morning, and Kate had not come back. Mom was digging a hole in our neighbor’s yard, shoveling clumps of grass and dirt over her shoulder.

Becca and I sat cross-legged nearby in the grass, our knees just barely touching. I was plucking blades of grass and splitting them in two with the edge of my thumbnail, trying not to look at Jordan’s body.

“Now, if we’re lucky, we return to nature in a different way.” The sun was high and sweat was dripping off Mom’s sun-tanned skin. Cicadas buzzed in the woods all around us.

“What did people used to die of?” Becca asked.

“Sickness and old age, mostly.”

“But Jordan didn’t die of either of those things,” I said.

“No,” Mom looked over at the boy who was now wrapped in the blue rocket ship sheets we had found on his bed. “Jordan died a very unnatural death.”

“Why don’t we just die of old age anymore?” Becca asked.

“We do.”

“So, Dad is dead then?” I looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand.

Mom stopped digging. She thrust the tip of the shovel into the dirt and leaning into it. “Your Dad is a tree, and that tree might live for hundreds of years. So, no, he’s not dead. But one day, he will die, just like all of us.” She started digging again. “Death is the natural end of all life. We humans used to think we were so separate from nature. We polluted our rivers, our oceans, we let toxic gas into our atmosphere. We made chemical weapons to make each other sick, to kill each other. The change ended most of that.”

“Where did it come from?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. There are a lot of theories, though. I suppose the one I like the most is that Mother Nature is reclaiming us, so that we can no longer cause harm to her or her family.”

“Who is she?”

“The earth, the trees, the sun, the stars, the grass in your hand. All life and all that fuels life.”

“When will I change?” Becca asked abruptly.

“I’m not sure anyone knows, Becca.”

“You told Kate that families change faster.”

“Typically, yes. But it’s not a certainty.”

“What will I be?” I asked.

“Oh, Little Bird. You should be a bird, don’t you think? Then you can fly.”

I nodded. I liked the sound of that.

“I don’t want to change.” Becca said with an edge to her voice. She stood up, brushing the dirt from her shorts.

“It’s the natural cycle of life, Becca. We are born, and grow, and change, and die. It’s not something to be afraid of. That,” she pointed at the little heap of body on the lawn, “that is what you should be afraid of.”

“Dad said there were experiments in the cities where they were trying to find a cure,” Becca said. “He wanted to go, he told me so, but it all happened so fast...” Becca hadn’t told me this before.

“We moved away to keep you both safe from all that. It’s dangerous there. People are desperate and will do anything to try to stop the change.”

“Well, maybe they’ve figured it out.”

“They haven’t.”

“How do you know? Maybe Kate was right. Maybe you *are* nuts.” Becca’s fists tightened.

“Kate was very confused and hurting very much, Becca,” Mom’s voice remained calm. “You have to understand—”

“I think I do,” Becca spat and turned away from us, away from the grave, and ran back through the woods toward our house. I got up, unsure if I should follow her.

“Let her go,” Mom said. “She just needs some time.”

When the hole was finished, it was as deep as Mom’s chest. She carried Jordan’s body into the grave, delicately placing him into the earth below, like she was tucking him into bed. Then we buried him together: Mom with the shovel and me with fistfuls of dirt. At the edge of my vision I thought I caught the shadow of a boar standing in the shadows of the trees, watching us. But when I turned to get a proper look, nothing was there.

Kate never came back. Their little white cottage sat empty and alone, decaying like a corpse with each passing year. Every time I saw the boar in the woods after that, I wondered if he ever saw his wife again.

#

Just after our thirteenth birthday, Mom showed the first signs of change. Her eyes darkened with an inky blackness, like her pupils had been punctured, spilling out into the soft blue of her irises and eventually flooding the whites of her eyes.

Becca cried and begged her to bring us back to the city, where she could get help. But Mom said no, that it was her time, and that we shouldn’t be sad.

Her change happened quickly. The skin on her arms and face grew dusty yellow fur and she began to shrink in size nearly every day. Two slits appeared on her back just inside each of her shoulder blades. The thin translucent membranes that grew from her back felt like delicate tissue paper pressed between my fingers. The fractured morning light that came through the wings reflected a kaleidoscope of colors on the floor and walls of our bedroom.

Her black eyes grew so large they covered her cheeks. Her nose disappeared and her mouth became a thin line, low on her chin. We couldn't understand her when she tried to speak, but she would hum a low, droning song to us at night as we fell asleep.

I woke early one morning, about week after her change started, and saw her by the window in the bedroom, hovering just off the ground, her naked toes skimming the floorboards and her wings beating so fast they were nearly invisible. Becca was still fast asleep in her bed.

Mom was humming that familiar song, which must have been what woke me up, but the sound was growing louder and less melodic. It was fractured, like more voices with different pitches had joined the chorus. Her body shook and I watched as she burst apart, like an explosion of shattering glass, into pieces that swarmed together into a dark cloud.

Hundreds of bees circled the room together, dancing and swirling around me. They landed on my arms and in my hair. I could feel their tiny insect legs tickling my skin. They didn't sting me, but I wasn't really afraid that they would.

Becca woke screaming and flailing her arms, swatting at the bees. “Stop,” I said, grabbing her shoulder and holding her still. “It’s just Mom.”

#

We were alone after that, and while we knew how to take care of ourselves, how to tend the garden, collect and sanitize rain water, and forage for edible plants in the woods, Becca wanted to leave, to go to the city before winter settled in to see if they had found a cure. I didn’t really want to go; it didn’t feel right to leave our family behind and the cities sounded dangerous. But she was my family too and eventually I agreed to go with her.

Becca spent the next several weeks packing bags and making food for us to bring on the road. Every night she leaned over maps of the country, tracing routes with her fingers, a flashlight propped between her head and shoulder.

“Do you remember if the neighbors had a car?” she asked me one night as she made notes on one of the maps.

“I don’t think so.” We didn’t, either. The car that we’d come in years before was rusted out in the front lawn and propped up on cinder blocks, one of the tires now swinging from Dad’s branch.

“It’s going to take at least five days to get out of these woods. Then we should be able to find the highway and we can hitchhike the rest of the way.” She sighed and rolled up the map. “We’re leaving tomorrow, okay? It’s starting to get cold; we can’t wait any longer.”

“All right,” I said.

#

The next morning, I knew that something was different. Everything in the bedroom was drenched in an eerie white light. Snow fell softly past the window. It hardly ever snowed this early in the season and I wondered if it was a sign that we shouldn't be leaving. I wandered downstairs, stepping over the backpacks in the hallway that Becca had packed for us, to the base of the elm tree. I sat in between the roots, listening to the gentle hum of the bees, half asleep in their hive in a hollow in the tree where Dad's mouth had once been.

I leaned against the trunk, closing my eyes and hoping that Becca would sleep for a while longer, absorbed in dreams where nothing had changed yet.

I thought about Kate, lost and wandering through the woods around her old house. I imagined that her hair had grown long and turned white, that her pale skin had sagged away from the bones of her face, that her teeth had gone brown, rotted, and fallen out, leaving holes festering in her gums. I imagined her calling out in the darkness for her husband, for her son, but no one would answer. I didn't want to be her, to grow old like that, to rot away on my human feet and be buried in the dirt.

I began to hum Mom's song, like a disjointed lullaby. I would go with Becca as far as I could, but I knew I would return. I hoped Becca would too. And as I lay in Dad's arms, listening to Mom sing, I traced my fingertips along the edge of the gray feather that had grown from my wrist sometime in the night.

Four Graves

The sickness took them in late December, like a cold winter wind that got in through the cracks in the walls. I dragged their bodies down the long staircase and out onto the lawn, one at a time, and buried them behind the house. I dug the baby's grave last and nudged his fragile bird-boned body down into a final embrace of cold dirt and darkness. Four graves in a neat row—swathed in blankets of dirt. Like children sleeping under the earth.

The house—no longer warmed by their fires and their laughter—descended into a cold darkness. I slept outside with them at night, even in the snow, because I couldn't bear the quiet inside. Because I couldn't bear to sleep all alone. But the quiet was everywhere. I laid my paws on little Jenna's grave and I imagined I could feel her breaths rising and falling with gentle dreams, like I used to.

In the day, I walked around the neighborhood, looking for the others. The other children that used to play on these lawns, the other couples that curled up in frosty windows, but every window was dark, every house as empty as my own. I wondered if they left or if they were still inside the house, with no one to bury them.

The days passed in that quiet. The angular halls of the house no longer echoed kind words and laughter, only the sound of my own overgrown nails as I wandered in and out of the hollow rooms. I ate the mice and squirrels that came in through the walls looking for warmth. The winter lasted longer than usual. My ribs pushed against my insides. My skin stretched taut and thin over my bones. My fur matted, falling out in patches.

For a time, the graves vanished under deep snow.

When I couldn't sleep outside anymore, I slept in Jenna's bed. Her unmade sheets still smelled like her. Like fruity shampoo and bubblegum toothpaste.

In early spring, a fox burrowed through the cellar window and came up the narrow stairs. I was napping in the bed, dreaming of warmer days. I woke when he scurried into the bedroom.

His ears twitched and his black nose frantically sniffed along the cracks in the floorboards.

I barked at him, but he just looked at me, curiously, then scampered out of the room. I followed him down the stairs and out into the yard. He sniffed along the edge of the lawn where the snow was finally melting and pawed furiously at the yellow grass right above the graves.

I lowered my head and the fur on my haunches rose. I bared my teeth and growled. The fox ignored me, just kept digging deeper and deeper until I saw the unthawing hand of the little girl, white fingers reaching up through the dirt. I lunged at the fox, clamping his scruff in my jaw, my teeth easily crushing through his jugular, my mouth filling with his sweet, warm blood.

And when it was done, he was a heap of fur laid in a pool of blood in the dirt. I replaced the dirt around the little girl's grave.

I buried the fox, too.

Then I was alone again, in that awful quiet again. I lay down on her grave and closed my eyes, thinking maybe I would never get up again.

I woke to the sound of footsteps, the smell of something new in the air.

“Wait, Cassie.” A little girl in yellow shoes ran across the lawn toward me. A woman trailed her from behind, looking out of breath. The bore wore light blue masks that covered their noses and mouths.

“I told you I heard a dog,” the girl said, reaching out.

“Don’t touch it!” The woman shouted as she caught up to the child. She took deep breaths, a hand on her mask, looking down. “It looks sick.”

I cowered. I had no energy left to run.

The little girl crouched, turned her head to look at my eyes.

“No. He’s just scared.” She reached out again and placed her hand on my shoulder. I flinched at her touch but then she swept her hand through my dirty fur, humming, just like Jenna used to.

“I think his family is all gone, Cassie. These people didn’t make it through the winter.” The woman looked around, eyes wet, and pulled a shawl closer around her shoulders.

“We can’t leave him here,” Cassie said, now gently stroking my soiled paws.

“Cass...” The woman said, but then looked down. Tears fell slowly down her cheeks, vanishing under her mask.

“Please, Mom.”

The woman wiped away her tears with the palms of her hands. “Okay, all right. We can try. But he might not come with us. This was his home.”

The little girl leaned down and whispered in my ear: “Please come home with us?”

Her mother took her hand. “He’ll follow us if he wants to.”

They began to walk away.

“Come on,” the little girl pleaded, looking back. “Come on boy.”

I had to stay with my family, didn’t I? They needed me.

“Come on.”

I had to protect them.

“Please.”

Her eyes were just like Jenna’s. Wide and bright.

“Come!”

They were almost at the end of the driveway. Their shadows small and fading in the dusk light. Soon they would be gone, and I would be alone again.

I stood on quivering legs and looked down at the graves that I had dug for my family. Maybe I had already done all that I could. Maybe this family—this little girl—needed me more.

I ran. I ran faster than I thought I could. And when I reached the little girl, she cried and wrapped her warm arms around me.

“Good boy.” The mother ruffled the fur behind my ears. “Let’s go home.”

When the Last King Dies

“Who is the King?” my sister, Alice, asked. We were out in the woods behind our house, waiting for the bell to ring that would tell us it was time to come inside.

“Dad?”

“No,” she shook her head which was adorned a band of twigs tied together with red hair ribbons on top. “I am the King.”

She broke a branch off a nearby tree and made me kneel in the dead leaves on the ground. She touched the branch to one of my shoulders and then swooped it over my head to the other. “For your service to the Kingdom of Pines, I knight thee Lady Nora.”

“Girls can’t be kings,” I said.

“Do you want to be a knight or not?”

Of course, I did. “But girls can’t be knights either.”

“If I am a king, then you are a knight.” Her eyes sparkled with fire in the golden dusk light. “Am I your king?” The wind picked up the dead leaves, swirling them around us like a small tornado and I thought it must be a sign.

I bowed my head. “You are my King.”

“Then you are my knight.” She smiled and lifted the branch from my shoulder. “Rise, Lady Nora, and receive your sword.”

I stood. Alice offered me the stick. It was a birch branch, thin and frayed at the end where she broke it off the tree, but when it touched my hand, it transformed into a glittering long sword with garnets inlaid on the hilt. I almost dropped it because it was so heavy in my small hands.

“How did you—”

“Do you swear to serve and protect your King until the end of your days?” The circle of twigs and ribbon in her hair changed too, twisting into a golden crown.

“I swear it.”

The bell rang just as the sun dipped below the trees. The sword dissolved in my hands, becoming a simple birch branch again, and Alice’s crown turned back into a circlet of twigs and ribbons.

Our childhood days were spent in those woods, protecting our kingdom from the swamp demons that lived in the muck and ferns, fighting the first witch in the battle of the plains, seeking council from the spirits of the moss lands, and drinking the magical sap of the oldest tree in the forest. Alice was a good and just King and I was her most loyal knight, sworn to protect her with my life. Each night after the bell rang, we would place the branch and twig circlet in the crook of large tree where no one but us could find them: my sword and her golden crown, hanging off its hilt.

#

I swear to protect my king until the end of my days,” I whispered as I watched the trees slip by the passenger side window as the truck rattled along the abandoned roads, bringing me home for the first time in ten years.

“Did you say something?” The driver, Lewis, asked.

“No, sorry.”

The closer we drove toward the center of town, the denser the fog became. I was almost grateful that what would have been the most familiar drive of my childhood was now almost unrecognizable.

“What are you here for, anyway?”

“Collecting some family heirlooms.” It was a lie, but an easy one, and the one listed on my application to enter the area. Best to stick to the story.

“That seems like what most folks come back so,” he said. “Though there are the crazy ones who come just to gawk or ghost hunt or whatever. They aren’t technically allowed but it’s not hard to slip through the government’s...*rigorous* approval system.” I almost laughed, having filled out the single form that got me in here. How much background checking did they do? Probably next to none.

The GPS on the dashboard warned of the driveway up ahead.

“This the one?” Lewis asked.

“Yeah, that’s—”

“Shit!” He swerved the car abruptly to the left as a shadow emerged from the trees and bolted across the road in front of us. He hit the brakes and the car jolted to a stop just before the edge of the road. We both slammed into the back of our seats and watched the shadow disappear into the trees beyond us. “Jesus. I’m sorry...that hasn’t happened in a while.” Lewis put the car in reverse and straightened it out and as he pulled the car back onto the road.

“Goddamn giant bears,” he said. “we’ve been trying to track them for a while now, but they are impossible to catch. I hope it goes without saying that just because the air won’t kill you anymore, doesn’t mean it’s safe here.”

“I know,” I said.

There could be more blood bears out there, after all.

#

“What are we doing out here, Alice?”

It was late summer and the forest was beginning to darken, the bell would be ringing soon, and we were marching farther into the woods, farther away from home. I clutched the hilt of my sword tightly in my fist, comforted momentarily by its weight which soon, with the sound of the bell, would lift away from me.

“We are going to get my crown back,” Alice replied.

“I said we could just make you another one.” It was silly that she insisted on going after the crown when it would be simple to get more sticks and string and make a new one.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she said somberly, as though some magic would be lost with a replacement. Maybe she was right.

I sighed. “How do you even know where it is?”

“Those crows that took it belong to Yar, the blood bear.”

“How do you know that?”

Alice whipped around and I nearly bumped into her. “Because they had blood on their beaks and talons.” She wiggled her fingers in front of my face as though her own hands were covered in blood.

“Gross.” I took a step back.

Alice looked up at the sky through the arched tree boughs. “We have to hurry, Lady Nora. We don’t have much time.”

The blood bear, Yar, lived in the moss lands below the cliffs that split the forest into upper and lower halves. We didn’t visit the lower forest often. Within it resided the bog, moss lands, and the edge of the river that marked the end of King Alice’s domain. It was where the real monsters lived.

We scaled down the cliff faces using strategic rock formations and trees that grew out of the side of the granite as holds. Eventually we reached the bottom. The lower forest felt completely disconnected from the sun-drenched upper areas. This place was damp, cool, and dark from the thick tree cover. The air tasted like the swamp.

“This way.” Alice slipped through the tall thin trees with ease and grace. I ran after her, making sure I was always within reach. I had sworn to protect her, after all.

We heard the crows before we saw them. We followed their bleak cries into the moss lands, where the earth was covered in deep green and the trees were sparse and straight, each the same as the one next to it, like columns that rose into the sky, holding the canopy of leaves above our heads like a ceiling.

The giant black bear loomed before us, his clawed paws sinking into the moss, blood pooling into his cavernous footprints. Alice walked toward the beast and stood fearlessly before him, her tiny frame engulfed in his shadow. I wanted to reach out and pull her back, but she knew what she was doing, I had to trust her.

“Will you not bow before your king?” Alice bellowed. The bear stood still, looking down at her. “I’ve come for my crown.”

“Yes, I hoped that you would.” The bear’s mouth didn’t move but his voice echoed across the moss lands. The crows began cawing wildly.

“Where is it?”

The bear took a heavy step toward Alice, who didn’t flinch when he bent his massive head down, breathing her in. “In time, my King. In time. First, I need something in return.”

“Why should I give you anything? You stole from me.”

Yar huffed. I took a step toward them, keeping my sword at the ready but not quite in a threatening position as the crows circled above us, still frantic.

“You would never have come here if I hadn’t sent the crows to steal your crown,” he said.

Alice was quiet for a moment, considering his words, then replied: “What is it that you want?”

The bear turned his body a half-step and lifted his back leg, so we could see that it was caught in the menacing grip of an iron trap shaped like the head of a swamp demon, the bear’s paw in its open mouth and its nail-like teeth puncturing the fur. Blood poured from the wounds like a river leaking through a dam about to burst. Alice rushed under the bear and cradled his leg in her arms.

“Can you remove it?” Yar asked.

“I can try,” Alice said, examining the contraption for a release. “Lady Nora, can you come help with this?”

I looked up. There were small breaks in the branches where stars came into focus. We had minutes, maybe, before the sun set and the bell rang.

“Lady Nora!”

Alice tried prying the thing open, blood sliding down her arms to stain her white shirt while Yar growled in pain. What was the point? I wondered. It minutes this would all be over, and we would be on our way home to eat dinner and do our math homework.

“Nora!”

I shook my thoughts away and rushed over, putting my sword down on the moss, and sliding my fingers in between the trap's teeth where it was warm and sticky.

"On three," Alice said.

"One," I started.

"Two."

"Three." We both pulled at the trap, forcing its jaw apart. It took a while but eventually the thing snapped and fell open in two pieces.

Yar lift his paw away and turned toward Alice. "Thank you," he bowed his head. "My King."

Alice reached up to touch the bear's muzzle. Just as her fingers brushed against his nose, the bell rang far in the distance. The weight of the sword lifted from my hand as the blood bear and his crows dissolved into the misty air.

We found her crown of twigs resting against a nearby tree. Alice placed it back on her head and smiled. "Let's go home."

#

It was all the same as I remembered it. The house, the driveway, the barn nearly falling over in the backyard. I'm not sure what I was expecting until I was there, staring up at the windows that used to be my own. I did not expect it to be so familiar. Though the dirty windshield, it was like seeing an old home movie on a faded television screen, like it existed somewhere held in time.

“We have to limit visits to an hour. Otherwise, the radiation could be a problem.” He handed me a plastic bag like the ones police on TV shows use to bag up evidence at crime scenes. I guessed that was kind of what this place was.

My whole family died here when the plant exploded, though my sister was still considered missing, with so many others whose bodies were never recovered. I was away at college in Michigan when it happened. That phone call changed my life.

I walked toward the front door, as I had a thousand times as a child. I felt that deep weight pulling on my lung as my fingers wrapped around the doorknob. This was where my parents’ bodies were found. My dad in the kitchen, making tea; my mother in the study correcting term papers. I swallowed. I wanted to remember this place as it was before and not what it had become over the years of decay and abandonment. I wanted to turn around then, go back to the truck, and ask Lewis to take me away.

My grip on the knob tightened. No. I came here to do what the police, the army, and their packs of dogs had failed to do all these years: find Alice. Because I knew what they couldn’t know. I twisted the knob and pushed the door open, stepping into the house for the first time, and the last time.

#

“The old kings are buried in the roots of the elder tree,” Alice said, placing her hand on the trunk of the massive tree. It was so big that Alice and I could both wrap our arms around it and our fingers wouldn’t touch. The old tree was deep in the middle of the forest, nestled into a ravine.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Because I can feel their spirits inside.” She took my hand and pressed my palm against the red bark. “Close your eyes.”

“I don’t feel anything.”

“You’re not even trying, Lady Nora.”

I closed my eyes and breathed in the warm summer air. I was turning seventeen in five days. I had just graduated high school. And despite the very real feeling of the sword in my hand and the bark under my fingers, I was beginning to wonder how much any of this mattered. I had a college acceptance letter sitting open on the kitchen table: another world was calling to me, a very different one than that our childhood games.

Alice was going to be nineteen that fall. She had never even applied to college. She was working at the local grocery store part-time and spent the rest of her time here in the woods.

“Yes, I think I can feel them now,” I lied.

“See?” Alice smiled. “So, when I die, you are going to bury me here.”

I pulled my hand away from hers and stepped back from the tree. “Why are we talking about this?”

“Just promise me that you will.”

“No,” I said. “Don’t you want to be buried with Mom and Dad? Or what if you get married or have children? They won’t want to bury you out by this tree.”

“I am your King and I demand it,” she said.

“You’re my sister,” I said, “not a King.”

Alice silently stared at me, betrayed.

Sensing a shift, I looked down to the thing in my hand which was no longer a sword, but just a simple birch branch. And when I put it in the crook of the tree that night, it was for the last time.

#

It wasn’t my house anymore. Nothing about this place, everything covered in white sheets, reminded me of the home I grew up in. I was relieved in a way, but also disappointed. I put the plastic bag down on the counter and walked outside, through the back door.

I stood at the edge of the woods, looking into the break in the trees where Alice and I always entered the morning before our next adventure. I wanted this time to be like all the times that came before. But it wasn’t.

The birch branch was still there in the crook of the tree, untouched, as if it had been waiting for me to return all these years. The twig crown was gone, however.

I reached in for the branch, wanted to feel it in my hands again, one last time. When my fingers brush it, the branched changed. I pulled it out of the tree and held it out in front of me, feeling the familiar weight of the sword in my hands.

“Hey! Put that back. It does not belong to you.”

My arm went limp, nearly dropping the weapon. I turned to face a young woman, wearing her glittering golden crown on her head.

“Alice...” I took a step toward her, but she reflexively took a step backward. She looked exactly as she had the day I left for college.

“Who are you? How did you find this place?”

“Alice, it’s me. It’s Nora.”

“Lady Nora is gone,” she said, still backing away from me.

“I’m not, I’m here.”

“She left many years ago.”

“But I came back.”

“You’re not Lady Nora.”

I knelt in the leaves, thrust the tip of my sword into the ground, and bowed my head. My voice shook as I said the words: “You are my King, and I am your knight. I swore to protect you until the end of my days.”

I looked up as Alice took a hesitant step forward, her head tilting back and forth, studying my face. She reached out and walked her fingers along my hairline, down my jaw, and cupped my face in her palms. “Lady Nora,” she said finally. “Where have you been?”

I clasped a hand over hers. "I'm so sorry that I left," I said, my eyes welling with tears that threatened to spill out down my cheeks and into her hands. She put her arms around my neck and pulled me closer. She smelled of the night air and silty moss, as though she was part of the forest now.

"You're here now," she said.

I pulled back and looked into her eyes. "I'm here now."

She was quiet for a moment, and then said: "I would like to show you something."

I followed Alice into the woods, away from the house, along the path that hugged the edge of the cliffs for a little over a mile. The heavy fog was lifting from the forest.

As I watched Alice weaving her way gracefully along the path, stepping over fallen logs and ducking under low-hanging branches, her crown glowing in the light, my head started feeling light. I knew what I was seeing must not be real: it was probably the poison gas filling my head with hallucinations, and I would die out here in the woods. But maybe it was real enough; maybe I could stay here and protect Alice like I was always supposed to, like I promised her I would.

I knew where we were going before we set foot on the path: the elder tree. I saw its red bark through the green of the pines as we got closer, ascending into the sky, so high that its top could not even be seen from the forest floor.

We climbed down the rocks into the ravine where the giant roots of the tree rose from the ground like tentacles and grappled onto the rock walls around them. Alice led

me to the base of the tree, where a small opening led underneath the roots to a small cavern.

She pointed to the opening and I knelt in front of it, peering through the child-sized opening. In the darkness, leaning up against the side of the cave under the roots, was a human skeleton. Its bones pure white, the clothing rotting away in patches and hanging off its rib cage. I looked at Alice, who stared me.

“Do you know who that is?”

I looked at the bones and saw the circlet of twigs and red ribbon adorned on its head. “Of course,” I said. “It’s my King.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“A chemical accident, ten years ago.” I turned around to face her.

“No, that wasn’t it,” she said quietly. “Do you remember the first witch?”

I thought for a moment. It was a name I hadn’t heard in a long time. “She tried to take the kingdom,” I said, remembering one of our earliest adventures. “We fought her at the plains, at the edge of the woods, and you banished her from the forest.”

“Yes.” Alice walked to the skeleton and knelt before it, staring at the empty sockets where her eyes used to be. “When you left, she came back, knowing that I was vulnerable. Unprotected. She used the sap of the elder tree for one of her spells. It was only supposed to kill me, but...”

“It killed everyone else, too,” I said.

“Do you remember what I asked you before you left?”

I nodded. “You asked me to bury your body in the roots of the elder tree, like all the Kings that came before.”

“Will you help me?”

Together, we dug a hole in the ground between the roots with our hands. Piece by piece we carried her bones into the grave and reassembled them so that her arms were crossed against her chest.

I placed the twig crown on her hands and then we buried her in the earth.

“I’m so sorry, Alice. I was supposed to protect you.”

Alice’s expression was somber in the fading light. “But you did. For a long time. And then you left because you don’t really belong here.”

“I want to stay this time.”

“You can’t. The first witch’s spell is still cursing this forest; it will kill you if you stay.”

“What is a knight without her King?” I asked, feeling the tears coming back to my eyes.

“Someone with another life that will miss her if she doesn’t return.” Alice took my hand and laid it on the trunk of the elder tree. “Do you feel that?”

I held my breath and waited. My fingers hummed and I felt the tree pulse, like a small heartbeat under my fingertip. I closed my eyes. I saw Alice, standing on the edge of the cliffs, looking out across the lower forest, her golden crown glittering in the sun.

“Thank you for keeping your promise, Lady Nora.” she whispered in my ear.

When I opened my eyes, Alice was gone.

#

I walked out of the woods alone, leaving the branch in the crook where it belonged.

Inside the house, I picked up the plastic bag and walked slowly toward the front. This time, I saw what I hadn't seen before. My mother's art still hung on the wall—the watercolors of the garden in spring—the book my father was reading still lay open on the kitchen counter, the page dog-eared marking his spot. I thought about picking it up and bringing it with me, but I couldn't bear to touch anything, to change anything, about what had been before. I wasn't here to change the past.

I left the house with the empty bag and climbed back into the truck with Lewis. He looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “You didn't take anything?”

I looked down at the empty bag in my hands but said nothing.

“Are you ready to go? We need to get back before dark.”

I nodded. “Yes, let's go.”

He started the engine and pulled out of the driveway and back out onto the main road. “I'm sorry you didn't find what you were looking for,” Lewis said.

I watched my old house and the forest beyond disappear into the rearview mirror. From the dark trees far behind, a giant bear emerged with Alice on his back, her crown glowing in the waning light.

Desert Animals at Night

Laura does not have a reflection in the rearview mirror, but what she can see is the dead body of her best friend, Gwen, splayed across her truck's backseat, quickly setting into rigor mortis. Oh, and she's lost in this desert. No GPS signal. Terrible map reading skills (not that she has a map. Who keeps a physical map in their car these days?)

Honestly, quite the pickle.

The dead body is more of a problem than the lost reflection (which happens from time to time). Literally *being* lost might be the even bigger problem ultimately, but Laura needs to focus on one thing at a time. And the body, well, that just seems like a good place to start.

If she had a signal on her cell phone (and it wasn't dead) she would definitely call the police. Definitely. She isn't sure what she would tell them, but that would be the right thing to do. You know, if she could.

As it is, she needs to get the body out of the truck before it starts to decompose. The sun is so hot, her air conditioning has been broken since 2004, and Laura doesn't want to find out what happens to a dead body in a hot truck. She knows, logically, but she doesn't want to be around when it happens. So, she'll bury Gwen in the desert somewhere, leave a marker or something, and lead the police back here later. Come up with something to tell them in the meantime. Not the truth, obviously. But something. Sure. That's a good plan.

Laura parks the truck along the side of the barely visible “road” that winds through the desert parklands. The truck just barely fits in between two large cacti that look like giants with their needle arms held up as if to say *stop, to venture further is certain death*.

She walks behind the truck to the other side, noting her own absence in the harshly tinted windows. It’s always a little unnerving but it bothers her less than it used to. Probably because it happens more often now than it ever has. Even when she *can* see her reflection, she is just a translucent body, barely visible even in the best of mirrors. Like a reflection on the surface of the ocean. Immaterial; whatever self she once had now lost in the waves.

With a yank, she pulls the door open.

Gwen’s mouth is crusted over in blood. It clings to her lips like dried lipstick. All brown and cracked. The shade flatters her milky skin, though. Laura remembers that she wore a color just like that to their senior prom. And that midnight blue dress with glitter and sheer lace that cut down the middle of her chest in a deep v, exposing half of each breast like crescent moons hung over the night sky.

Laura doesn’t really know what she looked like at prom. She knows she wore a gold dress, because she could look down and see that much and because she picked it out (Gwen told her she had buy that one). But that was the first day that her reflection was completely gone. She and Gwen were getting ready together—at Gwen’s aunt’s house because she had one of those big dressing room mirrors where you can see yourself from

every angle—and when they stepped up together to admire themselves, there was only Gwen.

Gwen didn't seem to notice Laura's absence in the reflection, she was only looking at herself. In the mirror, Laura pretended she *was* Gwen. She twirled as Gwen twirled, like the ballet dancer, that dark blue skirt blooming beneath her. She pressed her lips together like Gwen did as she applied that brown lipstick. She blotted the pink blush across her cheeks. Tossed her heavy golden curls back over her shoulder and teased her fingers through them. Her hair bounced and caught the light like the sun.

And Laura was beautiful. For once.

#

Laura has a snow shovel in the bed of the truck. She's from New England, she always has a shovel, even in the desert. To be honest, she just never thought to take it out of her truck when she moved to California with Gwen. It won't be very efficient at digging in the desert, but it has a metal-lined edge, so it'll probably do the job.

Gwen goes—went?—to Stanford. Stanford rejected Laura. When Laura got the letter in the mail, Gwen convinced her to move with her anyway, enroll in some local community college, do well, and then transfer next year. But Laura wasn't doing well.

And besides, the two of them were growing apart now. Gwen has new friends that invite her to party every weekend, rigorous classes that keep her up late studying and ignoring Laura's texts. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

That's why Laura asked Gwen to come on this little road trip for their spring break. Just like old times, she said. But it wasn't like old times. It would never be like that again.

It's getting dark, but Laura wants to wait until it's actually dark, just in case. She sits in the back of the truck with Gwen's body, watches the sun lower over the orange arches of the southwestern canyons, and misses the snow-lined pine trees of home. There so much space out here, it's unnerving. Unnatural. You shouldn't be able to see so far into the distance...the sky should never be able to touch the ground.

She runs her hands through Gwen's curls—being careful around the hole the bullet blew through the back of her head—and pulls out strands, braids them, wraps them around her wrist like a bracelet. Delicately, she slips the little gold rings off Gwen's stiffened fingers and puts them on her own.

Gwen has three ear piercings: two on her lower lobes (the same as Laura because they got them done together in middle school) but also a new one that Laura hadn't noticed before. A diamond stud in her upper cartilage. She must have had it done recently, as the area is still red and a little swollen. Why didn't she ask Laura to come with her to get that done? Did she do it alone?

Laura pops the backing off the stud and takes it out of Gwen's ear. She flinches a little at the imaginary pain of taking out a fresh piercing but, of course, it doesn't matter to Gwen. She can't feel it.

Laura inspects the placement of the hole in Gwen's left ear and lines up the dull post accordingly on her own. She wishes she could use a mirror for this, but she can't, so

she stabilized the back of her ear with her other hand and stabs the earring through her skin.

It stings and then heat spreads through her ear. She fans it with an open hand until the pain calms down and then puts the backing on and twirls the jewel in its new home.

It burns but it feels so good.

#

The desert is more alive at night. The nocturnal creatures come rustling out of wherever they hide during the day, the stars pierce through the inky black sky, and Laura finally drags Gwen's body out of the truck and across the sea of sand, illuminated only by the yellow glow of the old truck headlights.

And she begins to dig.

When the hole is just deep enough, Laura rolls Gwen's body down into it. She falls on her back, wide open blue eyes staring up at Laura. No, through Laura. Even dead, blood smeared across her cheeks, she is beautiful. More beautiful than Laura has ever been, she thinks, though she is starting to forget what she actually looks like now.

Laura throws the sand back into the hole. She covers Gwen's face first, her features quickly obscured by the sand which sticks to the patches of blood.

A black snake slithers out of the blackness and slides into the makeshift grave. It twists itself around Gwen's neck, pushes its head through the hole in the back of her skull, and emerges from her parted bloody lips, tongue flicking.

Laura ignores the snake and buries them both.

Problem solved.

#

Laura sleeps in the truck that night, still parked between the cacti, stretched out across the backseat in the dampness of Gwen's blood, in the remnants of her warmth.

It smells like her perfume. Like night-blooming jasmine.

And Laura dreams of Gwen in that dress but this time it really is made out of the night sky. She dances alone in the desert, backlit by the truck's headlights, sand swirling around her in a storm of dust kicked up by her bare feet.

And then Gwen isn't really Gwen at all, but a black snake that winds up Laura's leg and wraps itself around her neck.

#

Before the sun rises, Laura strips out of her dirty, bloody clothes. Naked, she digs another hole next to Gwen's and throws the clothes in, making them disappear into the desert, too.

Back at the truck, she looks in her duffle bag for something to wear. She tosses through the clothes; nothing seems quite right. Next she pulls open Gwen's bag. Everything is neatly folded and clean. Her delicate thongs, lace bralettes, billowing silk tank tops of every color. When they were kids, Gwen and Laura always used to swap clothes. Gwen wouldn't mind. Especially not now.

Laura slides one of the thongs up her legs. Perfect fit. She pulls the bra on over her head, slipping it over her modest breasts. She could never fill out a dress like Gwen did, but the bra fits as well, to Laura's surprise. She picks out a yellow top and a pair of jean shorts. It all fits just as it should.

She takes a step back away from the truck and sees that her reflection has returned to the dark windows. Still blurry and faded, but definitely there. Her face is the hardest to make out while her body is beginning to look more solid. The closer she gets to the window, the more distorted her features look.

Inside Gwen's bag is her makeup kit. Laura takes it and sits in the driver's seat with the door swung open. She can fix this.

First, she puts on the strawberry flavored lip gloss that Gwen always wore. It makes her lips tingle as she presses them together the way that she always saw Gwen doing. The candy-like flavor makes her tempted to lick away its sweetness.

Next, she sprays herself with Gwen's perfume, which surrounds her in that haunting scent, that cloud of jasmine, Gwen's scent. It consumes her.

When Laura pulls the visor mirror down, her face is finally in focus. And she smiles. Because it's not her old face staring back.

#

Laura drives through the desert for a couple of hours, back the way they drove in, until she sees what looks like the main road. Another car passes as she idles by the park's exit and she follows it. She doesn't need that map or that GPS. Though she wonders if she

would ever be able to find where she buried the body ever again. Probably not, if she's being honest. People don't bury bodies out there that they expect anyone to find, even themselves. (Isn't that kind of the point?)

Even if she did, what would she find if she unburied her body? Would it still look like Gwen? Would it still *be* Gwen?

As the woman who used to be Laura, who is now Gwen, drives down the desert road, she wonders who she really killed out there. Was it Laura or was it Gwen?

As the sun rises in the low sky, she catches her new reflection—the one she was always meant to have—in the rearview mirror, and decides, in a way, it was both.

A Scrapper in the Ash

A man named Nox keeps my soul in a glass orb around his neck. It shines brightly, pulsing, a glowing blue star. I can't survive too far away from it, so I must follow my new master like a starving ghost. As children we often try to guess what color our souls are and assert, as if we are certain, that we know our color. I used to say my soul was green, like the moss that clings to the Ash trees. It's strange that though we say we want to know, no one actually wants their soul ripped out so they can find out for sure.

Today, Nox is bartering organs for machine parts at the dark market, hidden in the shadows of Om. Most buyers favor the dark market of Om over those in Lyshire and Iren because Om has little, if any, adept enforcement of trading laws. If it exists, it can be sold in Om: the Ash scrapper's mantra. I don't know what value the parts have to him or what he's doing with them, but I know that they are machinery. The kind banned after the war. Not that legality matters here.

Rain pours down on the market and pools on the tops of tents, bowing their fabric under its weight. I'm used to the nearly constant rain in the Ash. But today it's cold—the coldest day of the year so far—which makes the rain less tolerable. Winter is just weeks away. I should be migrating south by now, to the Dunes. I miss the warmth of the sun on my skin.

I stand outside the trader's tent, just close enough to hear the conversation. But Nox doesn't want me too close. There's another trader's stand to my right and her table is messily littered with trinkets from the Ash. Some valuable, others not. But I doubt she

knows which is which. I've been watching her closely because she isn't watching anything closely at all.

As she turns away, distracted by a stream of water pouring from the back of her tent, I reach down and swipe a brass pendant with a winding mechanism from the corner of her table. I wrap the chain around my remaining fingers and slip the piece into my pocket and as I do, I feel that familiar thrum in my chest, the adrenaline surging. My body tingles with chemical lightness. I almost forgot how good it feels.

The market is busy, but no one is paying attention to the slave woman. They can see the distinct blood red scarf—the mark of a slave in Om—wound around my neck like a noose, covering my nose and mouth.

People push against me as they make their way through the rows of colorful tents and crowds of rain-soaked peddlers, musicians, slaves, and beggars. It's as though I don't exist, which is all right with me. I've spent most of my life trying to disappear, to not draw attention, though it was never quite this easy before I was soulless.

My less than brilliant plan to get back my soul so far hadn't worked. Each time Nox brings me to the market, I try to steal something mechanical, something small that he won't notice curled up in my fist, something that can be taken apart and made into a lockpick. But I've already snapped, bent, and otherwise destroyed countless picks trying to unlock the room where Nox sleeps. The catch is that I'm actually horrible at picking locks. Before now I never had much cause to break into locked places.

But today, I have another plan. I saw him as we were coming into the market, sitting under his matte black tent, only a few tables down from where I am. Aika. Arms

crossed, hood up, pupil-less white eyes cast in deep shadow. Probably watching for thieves like me. He only comes to Om every few months and I've been waiting and watching. Because he has something I desperately want.

#

As a child, I lost two of my fingers to pickpocketing. One of the generally acceptable punishments for the crime, and the more reasonable one. I lost the first—my little finger—to a man with a golden timepiece that I didn't see was chained to his jacket. He used a polished silver blade that he kept in his other pocket and when he flipped it open and its edge caught the moonlight, I suddenly wished I had picked that pocket. It was a really beautiful knife.

The man let me pick the finger, which was more generous than required. But he could see that I was young, clearly an orphan, and that I still had all of my fingers at the time. I think he felt bad for me. I extended my right hand and pointed to the finger. He held my palm against the stone wall of a tavern and cut. I clenched my jaw so tightly I thought my teeth would crack but I didn't scream.

I lost the second—my ring finger on the same hand—to a noble woman who had guards watching her every move. That was a mistake I never made again.

Ironically, fewer fingers made me a better thief. I could reach into pockets and bags with my entire hand and not be felt.

I took to the streets because the orphanage didn't suit me. My daily life was consumed with chores and caring for younger or sicker children. Most nights I would climb

out of the window, making sure to not wake the other children sleeping in mattresses along the floor, and return just before sunrise, before my absence would be noted. I would steal a few things: food to eat or small things rich people wouldn't miss, and then find safe sleeping under eaves where I could see the night sky and feel the crisp air in my lungs.

I left treasures from my excursions under the children's pillows. They called the mysterious gift giver "Myaka," the Ash God of generosity and healing. I never corrected them.

I spent two years sneaking out into the night, learning how to steal, how to climb the tall walls and terraces of Om, how to balance along steep rooftops, and most importantly: how to disappear.

And on the night of my fifteenth birthday when I was finally old enough to be sold to a wealthy family as a slave—or worse—I did disappear.

I snuck out of the orphanage and onto an early morning train headed west to Lyshire. I clung to the railing of the last car as the city of my childhood and my once certain future vanished through the trees of the flooded Ash forest.

I became a scrapper in the Ash. A damn good one. But it wasn't an easy life. After a few years I was wanted in Iren for illegal trading, and they don't just cut off fingers for those offenses. Irenian Guards stalk most of the other cities these days, too. Overreaching, the way I see it. But I learned how to evade them.

It was Nox that I didn't anticipate.

I know now that it was my own stupidity and hubris that got me into this mess. Specifically, two very bad decisions. The first was losing a month's worth of uns playing Kalum in the pubs in Lyshire. All the money I was saving to take a ferry to the Dunes was lost over a single bad hand. I was bluffing, of course. I really thought I had them. The second bad decision was deciding that to make up for the loss, I would go to Viren.

Viren sits at the outskirts of the Ash where the clear forest pools turn to murky bogs. A town lofted on stilts above the mud. Now entirely abandoned, it's said to be a haunted place, cursed by the ghosts of the souls who died there during the war. But abandoned and cursed meant that sane scrappers avoided Viren. It also meant that there were probably untouched machines there just waiting to be scrapped. And I'm not the superstitious type.

But Viren was not what I expected. The damage from the war was obvious. Many of the buildings were half gone, their insides exposed like mutilated corpses. All the windows I could see were dark. And it was so quiet. Worse still, the war machines that clung to roofs stilts, or sat submerged below the town were just empty husks, picked clean by scrappers who had the same idea I had, probably many years before.

A sour stench stung the air as I climbed up the rickety wood stairway that lead into the town center; like the dead animals I sometimes found in the forests, swollen and soft from sitting in the water.

I made my way through the town as it began to rain, feeling defeated, looking for a safe place to rest for the night. It was too dangerous to traverse the eastern road back to

Lyshire in the dark. Besides, I had just spent several consecutive weeks in the congested, stuffy city. I wasn't exactly in a rush to go back.

But there was still the issue of the smell. And as I wound my way along the wooden pathways, going deeper into the town, it only intensified. Clearly something was very wrong.

I pulled a hunting knife out of my belt and flipped it open. I crept through a narrow gap between two buildings, my back sliding along the wall, and stopped just at the edge where the street opened back up.

I leaned out and looked down the row of houses. Nothing. I leaned back and sighed. There was probably a dead animal rotting in the bog under the town.

I was just about to put my knife away when a shadow shifted in the alley. I stared into the darkness, blinking away the rain. And then I saw him: a man dressed in black moving quickly toward me.

Here's what I should have done: lunged forward, taking him off guard, and plunging my knife straight into his chest.

Instead, I hesitated.

Instead, I backed up as he moved swiftly toward me.

"Hey," I shouted at him. "Stop."

But he was already reaching for me, knocking the knife from my hand, grabbing my shoulders and pulling me toward him. He whispered words in my ear—words I didn't know, words I barely remember. And my world went black.

I woke, screaming, in a little house at the edge of Viren, surrounded by rotting human bodies, as Nox tore my soul out through my mouth.

#

“Show me what else you have,” Nox says from under the trader's yellow tent. He's bent over a glass case, looking closely at things I can't see from this angle. A greasy trader hovers over his shoulder. They're going to be a while.

I probably won't get another chance, so I step to the side, pushing through the crowds, which all seem to be moving against me, until I reach Aika's tent and fall against his table, my palms flat on the bare wood surface. Aika knows better than to show what he has for sale to passersby, even in the dark market.

“Ah, Nyiv. Long time.”

I take a few deep breaths as rain drips from my hair and look over my shoulder. Nox hasn't moved. I tear the scarf away from my mouth. “I don't have much time, Aika. Do you still have that key I sold you?”

He lifts his chin so that his yellow eyes catch the light. “Key?” His eyebrow arches slightly and the corner of his lips curve into a smirk.

“Don't play games with me. You know what I'm talking about. This is serious.”

“I can see that,” he says and leans his elbows against the table. “You’re looking a bit...pale.”

“Do you have it or not?”

“I don’t.”

“Liar.”

“I sold it just this morning to a woman from Iren. She was very pleased to have found one. A key that unlocks anything. Such a rare item. Wouldn’t you agree? I sold it for quite a profit.”

I slam my fist against his table. “Do you have *anything*?”

“Is it a magic lock?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then just pick it.”

“I’ve tried.” I feel my face flush with embarrassment.

“Did you use two picks?”

“What?”

“Use two picks. One to hold the tension, the other to move the tumblers.” I stare at Aika as he micks the motion with invisible picks. He shrugs and drops his hands. “Just some friendly advice.”

I push the scarf back up over my face and make to leave.

“Nyiv, wait.”

I turn back and Aika is holding a small black dagger. “Take it. It’s not much. But if you’re with *him*, you might need it.”

His white eyes are usually unreadable, but now reflect genuine concern.

“Thanks.” I tuck the dagger between my shin and the tongue of my boot and then return to the yellow tent.

“It’s a fine specimen,” I hear Nox say as I resume my place. He is still turned away and does not appear to have noted my absence. The sound of gears whirring stings the air. “And it works.”

“Indeed. A girl brought it in from the bog this morning. Haven’t seen one like it for a few years.” The trader’s voice is gruff and slow. He chuckles dryly. “She didn’t know what it was, told her it was next to worthless.”

“You’ll give me a good price on it then, considering.”

“Like hell I will,” the trader growls. “Sixty uns.”

“That’s far more than it’s worth.”

“To anyone else, maybe. But not to you.”

“Forty is fair.” Nox’s voice hardens to a less friendly tone.

“For a collector, sure. Perhaps someone else will want it for their museum. Or, perhaps, you could just give me this.” I creep toward the opening of the tent just as the

trader reaches out for the orb around my master's neck. "I haven't seen anything like this since the war. I could use some good help around here. And some warm company if you know what I mean." But before his pudgy, oil-stained fingers can touch it, Nox grabs his wrist and twists his arm just so. The trader lets out a little cry, like a child.

"Okay, okay." The trader squirms. "No need for that kind of behavior. How about fifty?"

"Forty."

"Forty-five."

"Forty." Nox squeezes harder and beads of slick oily sweat slip down the trader's red face.

"Fine," The trader says finally, breathlessly. "What is it that you're building anyway? It must be almost done."

He lets the man's arm drop but ignores the question. "Nyiv," he calls for me, and I step into the tent. "Pay the man."

Nox shrugs a canvas sack off his shoulder and hands it to me. I lower it to the ground between my feet and untie the it carefully. Steaming mist rises from the inside carrying with it the scent of raw flesh. I reach in and pull out a heart, the size of my hand, still warm and dripping blood. The trader looks down at it, hungrily, and then back up, shaking his head.

"Nah. That's only gonna fetch thirty these days." He crosses his arms over his chest. "You'll have to throw in something else."

Nox says nothing for a moment while the viscous drops of blood slide off the organ, down my wrists, and into the dirt below. "I'm not sure you understand," he says finally. "This is a child's heart."

The trader's eyes widen, and he leans in close to the heart, looking as though he might devour it. "You can't be serious."

The trader straightens up. "How do I know that isn't just a Norix heart or something?"

"It's human. I assure you. Smell it." I knew that it was, in fact, a Norix heart. I helped Nox kill the beast just last night.

The trader leans forward and sniffs the heart then begins a careful scan of all angles of it. Nox waits patiently while he does so.

"Is it true, girl?" Spittle flies from the trader's mouth.

For a brief moment I consider telling the truth, thus denying Nox this deal out of anger and spite. But I swallow and nod.

Eventually, the trader says: "Alright, it's a deal."

I gently transfer the heart to the trader's cradled hands. He takes it like a wounded bird and brings it close to his face. His long serpentine tongue slides out of his mouth and licks a little bit of blood off the organ. "Very nice."

Nox picks up the machine part from the table, ignoring the trader, and drops it into a pocket on the inside of his coat. It's so small, just a little metal box, no larger than

the palm of my hand. *What is it that you're building anyway?* The question lingers in my head, an echo of my own thoughts. *It must be almost done.*

#

I keep as close to Nox as his own shadow as we sift quickly through the emptying streets. Darkness descends on Om and the market is closing. He moves with fluid ease around merchants packing up their carts, children drawing with sticks in the dirt, and beggars reaching out for any passersby that look like they might carry some coins.

Om is a labyrinth of narrow, winding streets and occasional dead ends but Nox has memorized paths in and out of the depths of its belly. I had my own ways once too, but different ones.

A beggar girl catches the edge of my scarf and makes me stop and turn.

"Lady," she says, "I'm so hungry." The girl is hardly seven. She's barefoot and wearing dirty clothes that hang limply from her emaciated frame. She reminds me of the children from the orphanage, the ones I grew up with. But I doubt this child has anyone leaving gifts under her pillow at night.

I squeeze the pendant in my pocket and feel its sharp edges cutting into my palm. It's not worth much, but it would buy her a warm meal tonight.

But then a hollowness comes over me as my soul's presence slips away. I feel lightheaded and weak, as though I might faint.

"I'm sorry," I stammer at the girl. She looks up at me with crystal blue eyes that pierce me from behind a mask of freckles and dirt. "I'm so sorry."

I tug my scarf from her hands and turn away. Nox is gone. I stumble forward into a run toward the next corner of the street. The tall walls on either side create deep shadows that obscure the stones beneath my feet and the rain pelts at my face as I run, making it hard to see. But around the bend, I see that he has stopped and is waiting for me.

Once I catch up to him, my head regains its weight and I feel grounded again. My soul glows like a beacon against his dark coat. I want to reach out and take it from him, but I know how quickly he could snap all the bones in my hand.

“Keep up,” he says and frowns.

Out of breath, I only nod.

Nox lives at the edge of Om, in a residential district now mostly abandoned due to damage it sustained during the war. It used to have a real name, but it has been forgotten with time and it now simply called the Ruins. Many of the homes here are collapsed into piles of debris. Those that are still standing are occupied by illegal factions and others that even the guards in Om do not abide.

But Nox found an empty house when we arrived in the city. It was once a stately manor home, likely owned by a noble family. But now it is dusty, decaying, and crumbling. The second floor is mostly gone. The grand staircase in the main room now leads nowhere, only to the dark gray sky beyond.

Oddly, some of the family portraits still cling to the walls as though the old tenants stubbornly refuse to give up their home. The colors are faded, making their faces

gray. They reminded me of the colorless face I see in the mirror now. I suppose that paintings are just reflections of things that once were, soulless and fading away.

Nox quickly vanishes into the library on the left, which he uses as his bedroom, and where I am not to follow him. The heavy wooden door slams behind him and the lock clicks, echoing in the great emptiness of the house.

I take the door on the other side of the entryway that leads into a parlor or living room. It's difficult to piece together what the rooms used to be now that they have been ransacked and ruined by thieves looking for anything that might be worth an un.

But for now, it is my room. With its cracked and leaking windows, peeling wallpaper, and hearth stained by soot. I get a fire going and sit on the cot mattress on the floor in front of the fireplace. After so many years of sleeping on the thin orphanage beds and even more nights sleeping outside, the cot mattress is perhaps the most comfortable bed I've ever called my own. Though it's a small comfort in this cold and dire place I find myself in.

I look over my shoulder to make sure my door is closed and fish into my pocket and pull out the pendant. The gold chain swings and catches the light of the flames. It's a pretty little piece. The face is a black with gold inlay of flowers that I can't identify. They don't look like anything made in the Ash. It has a small lever attached to the side, which is also gold. I wonder how far the pendant has traveled to end up in Om. I wind it up a few cranks and listen as it plays a soft, unfamiliar song.

The hollow tings of the pins inside the music box fill the room. It's been a long time since I heard music like this, this melancholy, haunted sound that feels precious and

private. A message from a loved one long gone. I wonder what it would be like to have something like this—even something so small and abstract—from my parents, for once to not feel so alone in this place. So for a moment I pretend it is from them and the familiar grief sweeps over me.

Both of my parents died in the war. I was too young to remember them, so they are only imaginary ghosts in my head. Like the other soldiers, their souls were taken from them too, to power the machines to fight the war. But when the machines died, so did they.

When the song ends, I turn the pendant in my hands until I see how it is put together. *It's a shame*, I think, as I slide my fingernails between its edge and pry it open, laying it out like a gutted animal on the mattress.

As the fire burns and the quiet settles back into the room, I lean over the pieces of the music box, picking and pulling and sorting. The song repeats in my head over and over, more distorted and fragile with each turn, a half-forgotten dream.

After a couple of hours, I hold my new lockpicks up to the waning firelight. The pins that once made music are now reformed into two prongs. I tuck them into my pocket.

Out in the hallway, I step lightly to the library door. Through the heavy wood, I can hear nothing, which means Nox is probably asleep. I slid the lockpicks into the keyhole, doing as Aika suggested. I hold the bent pick to keep tension while I rake at the tumblers with the other. I feel the mechanics of the lock moving around inside the keyhole.

The tension pick loosens in my hand and I start to turn it in the lock. As I do, the pick in my other hand snaps with a sharp crack, cutting open my palm. I curse and let the other pick fall to the floor and bring my hand up to my mouth. The taste of blood blooms on my tongue.

Then the door swings open and Nox's dark silhouette fills the doorway, looming over me.

"The great Nyiv Initai, scrapper of the Ash, can't pick a simple lock."

I spit blood out of my mouth. It splatters on the floorboards. He isn't wearing my soul around his neck. "Where is it?" I say through clenched teeth.

He steps sideways and beckons me into the room. "I'll show you."

Remnants of a fire glow in the ash of the hearth, warming the room with an orange glow. The library walls are floor to ceiling shelves—all empty. Nox's mattress is pushed into a corner and there are two chairs on either side of the fireplace facing each other. One is empty. But the other is not.

Sitting in the chair is a child, not more than five years old. But she isn't actually a child at all, at least not entirely. She is partly made up of a girl's body but the rest of her is machine. At least half of her—including half of her face—is missing and in its place is an intricate web of gears and delicate parts. Her head is slumped forward, as if she is sleeping.

"Stay here." Nox says sternly as I enter the room. He sits in the empty chair across from the girl and I stay where I'm told.

Nox reaches over and flips something on the back of the girl's head. A high-pitched hum fills the room at first but fades as quickly as it started. The exposed gears begin turning. She lifts her head and opens her eyes—one human, one machine.

A blue pulsing light starts radiating from the cracks between parts in her chest.

I take an unintentional step forward but Nox snaps his eyes my way and holds his hand up. "Not another step." He turns back to the girl. "What's your name?"

"Cyra," she says, seeming confused that she knows the answer.

"Good, good. How do you feel?"

A long pause. Finally, she says: "I don't know."

"Think about it a little longer," Nox says. I hear a metallic scrape and a click. "How about now?"

"Good."

"Excellent. Does anything hurt?"

"Hurt?"

"Are you in pain?"

"No." The child's voice is so soft it's almost a whisper. She seems scared.

The gears click and whir in her body. "Now, do you know my name?"

The girl suddenly turns to me, as if she just realized I was standing in the room.

"Who is she?"

“No one,” Nox says. Rain thrashes as the windows.

Another long pause and she turns back to him and says: “Noxus.”

“Yes, but who am I?”

“My father.”

“The memory chip appears to be working,” he says. “That’s a good sign.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Part of your brain was destroyed when you...” he paused. “When you died. The hippocampus, the part that stores your memories. I had to find you a new one.”

The girl is silent. She stares at Nox, looking uncomfortable.

What is it that you’re building anyway?

My pulse pounds in my head. I feel my breaths getting shallow.

What is it that you’re building anyway?

What is it that you’re building?

What is it?

I think I know. Things start coming together in my head. The war machines, the soldiers, the stolen souls. Nox and his old magic.

“What is this?” I ask.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“But all those other people in Viren...you killed all those people.”

“I was waiting for the right soul to come along. A blue soul to match the one she used to have. A rarity, really. Took a long time. But then you just walked into Viren, like a little bird landing in my web.”

“What happened to her?”

“You killed me.” The girl says to Nox, matter-of-factly. “I remember now. You took my soul for that thing...the big monster.”

“It was the only way to win the war.”

“But the war was lost,” I say.

“Indeed.”

“I don’t understand. Why did you do this?”

“Of course you don’t understand,” he says. “You don’t have any family, do you?”

Nox slides off the chair and to his knees before Cyra. He tries to pull her into an embrace, but she resists. “Stay away from me!” The mechanics in her vocal cords screech as she screams.

I realize I have a moment now, perhaps my only one, where Nox is vulnerable. A lot of things happen all at once. I leap forward, yanking the dagger from my boot, Nox turns when he hears me running across the room and puts up his hands to defend himself, to push me away, but I don’t hesitate this time. I dive into him, knocking him down, his back smacking against the floor. He tries to throw me off, but my dagger has already

found the flesh between his ribs and I burrow it deep, straight into his lungs. The blade slides in easily, almost satisfyingly.

I shove the blade backward, making the cut wider then pull it out of him. Blood pours from his side as I stand and take a few steps back. Nox sits up and crawls to the fireplace and leans against the bricks, holding his side. Red gushes between his fingers and spills to the floor. He tries to speak but his words come out as gasps and blood seeps from his open mouth.

Cyra stays seated and watches intently, a confused expression on her half face.

I've never killed anyone before. I thought it would feel different. I thought killing Nox would feel gratifying. I wanted my revenge and I got it. In my head I saw myself stabbing him over and over again, one wound for every other person he killed in Viren. But as I watch him slump to the ground, reaching out for his daughter with bloody fingers, I pity him. Maybe he was right, maybe I would do anything for my family. I don't know. But I guess right now I am just killing for myself. And I don't feel good about it.

I wait until Nox stops breathing. It takes a while but eventually his coughing gasps end and his breathing becomes shallower and shallower until it's imperceptible. His eyes glass over, staring through Cyra.

The warmth of Nox's blood seeps through my shirt.

"Is he gone?" Cyra asks.

I nod. "Yes, he's gone."

Her eyes shift to me. One blue, like my own, and one made up of little gears swirling in her eye socket. This is the part I didn't think through. How to get my soul back. I watch the blue light ebb and flow with her breaths.

I squeeze the dagger in my hands. She's so small. It would so easy. And then I can walk away from all of this and go back to my old life.

Oil leaks from her mechanical eye and real, human tears from the other.

Her life was stolen from her. Like mine was stolen from me. It wasn't fair. The dagger slips from my hand and clatters to the floor.

"Will you come with me?" I ask. "If you come with me, we can both live."

As long as I'm near my soul, I can live without it. But she cannot.

"Yes," she says.

I lift her from the chair, pulling her up. She's so light in my arms. I carry her out of the room, down the hall, and out the front door, and start walking through the Ruins, leaving Nox's body to rot in the old house. As the rain washes away the blood on my skin, Cyra rests her head on my shoulder. And for once, I don't feel so alone.

Small Comforts

It's Saturday morning. Three weeks after Mom's funeral. I went back to school on Wednesday and everyone looked at me like I was the ghost. They made me see a counselor after school which I guess I have to keep doing for a while. She was nice but I don't really want to talk to her about Mom. Or Emily.

I wake up, like I always do, before the sun rises, waiting for the first light to reveal Emily sitting on her empty bed like it used to. But like all the mornings since Mom died, the room is dark and empty. The light that eventually comes through seems cold. Dust particles float in its path.

Dad comes in later and sits on the edge of my bed. He has a book in his hands.

"This was your mom's." He hands it to me. It has a blank leather cover and a gold ribbon hanging out of the bottom. I don't recognize it.

I open the cover and flip through some of the pages. They feel rough under my fingertips like the pulpy homemade paper I made in art class last year. Mom's swooping handwriting covers every page in red ink.

"What is this?"

"A journal." He coughs, clears his throat. Dad's eyes are red—from drinking all night or crying maybe. Probably both. He tries to smile, but it fades quickly. "I just thought you might want to read it."

I let the cover fall shut in my hands with a soft clap. “I don’t want it.”

“Why not?” Dad scratches at the burgeoning stubble along his neck.

“I just don’t.” I try to hand it back to him, but he pushes it into my lap.

“You will want to read this someday. Just keep it.”

I look down at the book. My eyes blur, filling with hot, angry tears. A storm rages just beneath the surface.

I throw the book, as hard as I can, out my open bedroom door. It hits the hallway wall and falls to the floor, splayed open like a dead bird.

Dad sighs, squeezes my foot through the covers, and gets up. He retrieves the book and places it on Emily’s bed. “In case you change your mind.”

“I won’t,” I say and roll over, not letting him see the tears that cascade down my face and are absorbed into my pillowcase, like so many before them.

#

I used to see my dead sister, Emily, in my room in the early morning. I’d wake before my mom came into my room, before the morning birds sang outside my window, just as the first glow of sunlight streamed in through my window.

Her face shimmered in that golden light.

The first time I saw her, I thought I was still lost in a labyrinth of dreams. In my sleep, I often thought she was still alive, still asleep in the bed across from me, breathing

softly. I could feel her presence there, like part my own body, always aware of her. And every time I woke up and saw the stripped bed with its naked mattress, her blankets folded, and pillows stacked too neatly at the end of the bed, I wished so badly I was still asleep, lost in my mind, in that place, whatever it was, that now stretched like an abyss between us.

We didn't speak. It just wasn't necessary. I don't really know how to explain it but all that was between us was shared with our lips closed. With a look, a nod, a turn of the head. If I got up and reached out to touch her, she would disappear until the next morning. So, I was always careful to never touch her. But sometimes I did lie on her bed, like I used to after I woke from bad dreams, and she would lie beside me and pretend to stroke my hair.

So, when Mom died, just a year after Emily, I thought now I'd see them both. Now I would have my mom and my sister watching over me in those small, sacred morning hours.

But Mom never came. And Emily never came back.

#

Dad told me to tell the other kids at school that my mom died in a car accident. Which is technically the truth, but not all of it. She got drunk and drove off the Penobscot River bridge. But it wasn't an accident.

I heard Dad talking to my grandpa the night after it happened.

"She sold her soul to the devil," my grandpa said. "He made her do it."

“Rachel was just depressed, Dad. Nothing mysterious about that.”

“She abandoned God. Abandoned you. And Ella.”

“She didn’t abandon us...” Dad said.

But she did. She should have gotten more help if she needed it. She left us here, without her, and took Emily with her.

#

It’s the last day of school for the year. Months since Mom died. I stopped counting the exact days a while ago. This is also my last session with the school counselor. I’ll be in high school next year and I never have to see her again. I shouldn’t be so mean, though. She really is nice.

“Over the summer I’d like you to try to reconnect with your mom,” she says.

“How am I supposed to do that? She’s dead.”

“Well, you can help keep her spirit alive by...well, for example...reading her favorite book. Or learning to cook her favorite meal. It will be helpful if you can keep some parts of her with you as you grow up. Does that make sense?”

“I guess.”

At home, I drop my backpack on my bed and move the journal back under Emily’s mattress. I put it there every day when I get home and every night when I go to bed, it’s back on my bedside table. I know Dad is moving it, even though I haven’t caught him in the act. I think he does it when I’m in the shower.

A few weeks ago, I asked him to stop and he pretended to have no idea what I was talking about. He seemed upset that I would accuse him of skulking around in my room, so I dropped it. He's been spending so much time in his office and sneaking around the house with a bottle of Orloff under his shirt as if I don't notice, I didn't want to push him on it.

After I get out of the bathroom, sure enough, the journal is back. I lean out into the hall and look down toward Dad's office. A dim light beams from under the door and I can hear faint midi music coming from one of his old computer games.

Back in my room, I stare down at the book. I'm sick of looking at it, sick of this game that Dad and I are silently playing, sick of the constant reminder of Mom.

I bring the journal downstairs, light the propane fire in the hearth, and toss the book on the open flame. It lights quickly, its pages curling like dying insects, the edges flaking into embers that float up the chimney.

I turn the gas off as the book burns.

The fire will eat the rest of it. I go back upstairs to bed.

#

I wish I lived in the world of my dreams where Emily and Mom are alive, and Dad isn't so sad all the time. Sometimes I wish I was dead, too. Because maybe then I would be with them, wherever they are.

Can't Emily hear me crying at night?

Why did she leave when I needed her the most?

#

Dad fell asleep in his office. I found him in the morning slumped over his desk, breathing deeply, snoring lightly. I put a blanket around his shoulder and left him to rest.

I went downstairs to find something to eat. The only thing left was a single frozen waffle, which was a little freezer burned. I brushed off the dusting of crystalized ice and popped it into the toaster.

While it was warming, I couldn't help but glance over to the fireplace, expecting to see a pile of white ash, remnants of the journal. For a moment, I almost feel sad. But then I see that the book is still there, lying on top of the fake stone logs, singed around the edges, but still whole.

Not possible. I run over to the hearth and pick up the book, flipping through the unharmed pages, Mom's handwriting intact, ink even darker than before, as though stubbornly resisting the fire.

"All right, Mom." I sweep the ash from the book's cover. "You win."

#

That night, long after Dad has gone to sleep, I nestle into bed with the journal on my lap. I start at the end. There are only four words on the last page.

I'm so sorry, Ella.

I flip forward and read from the beginning. Mom writes the way she spoke. I can almost hear her voice reading the pages out loud to me. All her fears, all her wants, frustrations, angers, griefs. All of it is spilled like blood in red ink across these pages. Each passage traverses the space between losing Emily and losing herself.

But there's something else, too. In between her journal entries are other things—other notes—either in languages I don't know or gibberish. I can't tell what they are. But there's one, around the midpoint of the book that's been dogeared, and above it says *Read Aloud*.

So I do.

The words spill off my tongue, meaningless to my ears, but somehow feel right as they escape into the room. As I say the last word, there's a finality to its sound, like the end of a poem or a song.

And then I see Emily, sitting on the edge of her bed.

She smiles and looks at me and I know she has missed me as much as I have missed her. I want to rush to her side, to embrace her, but I know it will only end things too soon.

"It was Mom," I say, holding up the book.

Emily nods.

"Every time you came...it was her?"

Emily gives me a look that says *please don't cry*. She lies down across the bed and pats the spot beside her.

The sun rises on us as I sleep and warms my bare skin. And when I open my eyes, Emily was gone. But I know I will see her again.

I tuck the journal under my pillow, where it will be safe, and wonder what other, wilder magic Mom hid between its pages.

The Engineering of a Bird

Far away, the aviary burns and Margaret—Mags—sits at the bar and flicks a lighter open and shut, open and shut until the woman next to her grabs her wrist and pins it to the damp bar top.

“Cut it out. You’re driving me nuts.”

Mags clicks the lighter closed one more time, for effect, and then places it next to her half-drunk whiskey sour. She shrugs her colleague’s—her friend’s—hand away.

“Dan loved birds.” Mags twirls her glass. The ice cube slowly melts into the piss-brown, watered-down excuse for a drink. “Loves,” she corrects herself.

“Probably not those birds.”

Mags smiles. She can’t help herself. “All birds,” she says. “He was always so smug about it, too. He thought birds were so much better than other pets.” Mags drinks, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, drops the glass down too hard. “I just wanted a cat. But can’t have birds *and* a cat. But he never got any birds, either.”

“I know.” Sahra nods. “I hate him too.”

“I don’t hate him.”

“Well, you should. He’s living in your house with your things and that pretty new wife of his.”

“You really think she’s pretty?” Mags looks up at herself in the wall-length mirror mounted behind the bar. Even in the dirty low light she can see her dark, sunken eyes, paper skin, dull hair. Colorless.

“I meant it disparagingly. He only cares about looks.”

“Beautiful things.”

Sahra sips her wine. “He’s shallow, is what I mean.” The Malbec leaves a pink stain on her upper lip. “And anyway, we’re supposed to be celebrating. Forget about Dan for a minute.” Sahra raises her glass and tips it towards Mags. “To the end of another biological atrocity.”

Mags clinks her glass with Sahra’s, and they drink.

“That one seemed different than the others,” Mags says as she swirls her finger in the circle of condensation where her glass had been.

“How so?”

The smell of burnt feathers clings to her clothes. She can’t get the screeches of dying birds, dying half-birds out of her head. She rewinds time and sees the aviary standing, the glass reflecting back a low golden sun. And then she is inside again. And there are the birds, perched above her head on high branches with their blue and yellow plumage. Colors so bright they almost look like they give off their own light. There’s a woman sitting in the garden. But she’s not just a woman. She stretches her arms—no, her wings—out wide to either side of her. Mags reaches out toward her as the woman’s feathers alight and she opens her mouth to scream.

But then Sahra's voice cuts in.

"Mags, what do you mean?"

And Mags is back in the bar. She takes another sip of her drink, buying herself a moment. "I don't know. All the others were...disturbing. Wrong. But this one was something else." She wanted to say *beautiful*.

"It wasn't any different, Mags. Illegal and messed up is what it is. What they all are." Sahra downs the last sip of her wine and shakes her head. "Besides, we're not paid for our opinions on the matter. We're just the muscle." She taps the lighter with her index finger, then digs into her jacket pocket and pulls out a twenty. "This one's on me. I'm gonna go home." She crinkles her nose. "And take a shower."

Mags watches her leave. The bar is mostly empty now, except for the bartender and a couple sitting in the corner booth giggling flirtatiously, maddeningly.

Her reflection stares back at her from beyond the wall, a mocking patron, as if she's saying: *this is all you are, all you'll ever be*. But Mags ignores her and takes the last sip of her drink, which is mostly water and just a hint of sweet lemon.

She leaves, coat pulled close, a secret in her pocket.

#

Far away, the aviary smolders and Mags stands in her bathroom looking at the same reflection in a different mirror. The toilet runs, the shower head drips through the duct tape, people yell somewhere in the distance, sirens follow.

Harsh white light casts shadows on her face from above. Limp, uncoiled curls stick out at odd angles from her head. Her eyes are a weak shade a brown. Her nose is too wide, her smile too crooked. No wonder Dan doesn't love her anymore. She looks old. Old and ugly.

There's a pill in her hand. The capsule is half blue, half yellow. She places it on her tongue, and it seeds her mouth with bitterness. She swallows it.

Her bed is pushed up against the window, so she can watch the city from her tenth-floor perch. She crawls onto her blankets and props herself up against her pillows. She likes being so high up, where the people are small, but the sky is big.

She scratches an itch on her shoulder that burrows up from under her skin, where her fingers can't reach.

All night the itch spreads across her skin like the fire through the aviary, and Mags rubs her arms and stares down at the midnight people as they wander clumsily, drunkenly from bar to bar. As if their only purpose is to numb themselves so they can forget. She wonders if Dan is down there, forgetting her, or if he's sitting up in bed, thinking about her. Waiting for her to come home.

#

Far away, the aviary is just smoking ruins and Mags wakes on wet sheets soaked through with sweat and blood. Evidence of change. Her body hums, her skin burns, her temples throb.

In the same bathroom mirror, in the new morning light, Mags sees color where gray skin used to be. Plumes of soft feathers cascade in layers down her arms. Her eyes are a soft yellow, hair softer, cheekbones and nose sharper and more angular. She feels lighter.

Her phone buzzes next to the sink with a text from Sahra, but Mags ignores it.

She smiles. She is beautiful.

#

Far away, police walk through the ash of the aviary and Mags is standing outside Dan's townhouse, her coat hiding her wings. Her old townhouse. It's still morning and the streets are mostly empty. But on the way, she passed an elderly woman walking two dachshunds. The dogs barked, the woman stared, but of course they did.

Mags knocks on the yellow door. She picked out that color, painted over the ugly pea soup green that was there before. Dan hated yellow. But he never changed it. Not even after the divorce.

No one answers. Mags scratches a single talon along the face of the door, peeling back a strip of yellow paint. It curls and falls, revealing the ugliness underneath.

The door opens. Dan adjusts his robe around himself in the dark doorway and squints outside. He isn't wearing his glasses and is nearly blind without them.

"Mags?" His voice scratches out like he just woke up. He can't see her yet, not clearly. "Jesus, it's early. Why are you here?"

“Can I come in?”

“Uh, sure.” He lets the door swing open. “Let me go grab my glasses, hold on.”

Dan rushes down the hall in his socks and slips against the wall, knocking a framed picture off it. He swears, and then disappears into the kitchen.

Mags steps into the foyer and looks up the stairs. She wonders if the woman is ever here. Maybe they broke up. Wouldn't she have come down, too?

Rummaging sounds come from the kitchen. Papers tossing, chairs being moved. Dan swears again. He can't find his glasses. That's so like him.

Mags admires herself in the oval mirror that hangs by the door. She shrugs off her coat and lets it fall to the floor. This is what he wants. This color, this beauty, this is what she was missing before.

Dan reappears in the hall and walks toward her.

He unfolds his glasses as she unfurls her wings. He pushes them up the bridge of his nose.

He looks up. Stops.

He looks at her. Really looks at her for the first time in years.

She stretches her wings to their full width. The tips skimming the walls on either side of the entryway.

He does not smile. “What did you do, Mags?”

#

Right here, Mags is sitting on the edge of her open window. The phone buzzes in the bathroom again. For the fourteenth time. Someone is trying to call her.

And then, for a little while, there is silence.

Dan told her to leave, told her to never come back, told her to get help. But she doesn't need help. She *is* beautiful, even if he can't see it. Can't understand it.

Someone rings her apartment. The box on the wall chirps, lights up. Then a sound fills the space, harsh and static. A voice calls out from the speaker.

"Mags? Mags are you home?" Sahra's voice is strained, worried, on the edge of cracking. "Dan called me. Why aren't you answering your phone?"

Mags clutches the windowsill. The wood cracks and splinters under her talons as she leans over the edge and looks down. She isn't sure if she would fly or fall.

"Mags! Please answers me."

It's a long way down but the cold wind rustles her feathers. An invitation.

"I know a doctor who can help, please."

But Mags doesn't need help, she needs this chance to start again. She stretches, spreads her wings, holds her breath, and falls.

"Mags'?"

Silence.

The phone buzzes again and again and clatters to the bathroom floor.

Far away, Mags flies over the remains of the aviary.

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