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Choir of the Girls: a Peccadillo

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Choir of the Girls: a Peccadillo

A thesis presented to
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The College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Kelly Piggott
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Choir of the Girls: a Peccadillo

by

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Preface

Before I held the tragic mask in one hand and the club in the other, I had your face.

I still have your face, but the specific features of this face have shifted and changed over the centuries and millennia. My sisters and I have adjusted to this era of screens, lights, the old fire mere kindling and changed to electric currents. What was once sung to instruments, told over and over again after the hearth, so much that it had to be burned into the marrow of the bones of our rhapsodes before they could carry on their histories (for Clio), their songs (Euterpe), dances (Terpsichore), the names of the stars (Urania)—now, they have been given to paper, plastic, LED screens, and documents that must be precariously saved before they're lost, whether by a glass of water on a keyboard, a glitch in the system, or a cat walking over your laptop.

It's okay. Such things happen. I'll collect them all, anyway.

I don't know how you are reading this, dear reader, but the medium itself doesn't matter so much as what's inside. Perhaps this is a physical book in your hands, the paper fresh and clean cut, smelling that distinctive smell of warm paper bound together with adhesive glue. A kindle or tablet that lights up as you tap your fingers to the screen. Using the touch pad on your laptop to fully read the artificial pages. It doesn't matter: you're listening all the same.

Before I started carrying the tragic mask, the one to match my sister's, Thalia, comic mask, I had your face and your voice. I was one of many. I'm still one of many and I collect them all. I just happen to be best known for the tragedies.

The stories inside this choir contain little explosions of tragedy, but they themselves are not tragic. Flawed, they all are, but flaws don't curse one to death entirely. Oh, there's death here, not to worry! But death is just one part of the cycle. Eventually, I'll die, too. I'll die when there's

no more voices to collect. However, you're a stubborn lot and refuse to die so easily. The human will and capacity for resilience is why I'm still relevant.

These women, girls and people inside this manuscript are just as stubborn.

They feel anger, love, regret. They prosper, fail, and they fuck. They feel lust, despair, and gratitude. They're born, they live, and they die. Inside, you will learn only a sliver of who they are, but I've collected them all.

A girl who throws up thorns. A specter sitting on a mountain top. A bearded saint and her worshippers. A collector of snow globes that carry the hearts of cities inside the glass. Sisters and their birds of prey. A young girl and the mouth of a hungry lake she lives on. A mother split between her three children. All of them and more, you'll get to see inside. They are just cells in a much larger organism, but so are you. Small, but integral.

I'm best known as the muse of tragedy, but before I took up the mask, I was the muse of the chorus. The choir that watched on the side and sang of the foibles and faults of the powerful, the not so powerful, the weak and the average.

You are the Choir. I am the Choir. They are the Choir. All are mine, and I hold you all.

Lay your head on my breast for a while.

Melpomene.

The Girl With Thorns in Her Mouth

I. Stipule

Isis spat out her first thorns when she was seven, sitting in the principal's office for punching Bradley. Her loose tooth fell out when Bradley smacked her back, slamming into her jaw. The gap where the tooth had once been was warm and tasted like fleshy, stringy copper.

Dad worked in the Loop and barely came home anymore, so Mom had to call off work for two hours to pick her up. Isis waited for her in the principal's office, tonguing at the soft, wet flesh of where her tooth used to be. It was her first baby tooth that she lost, no hint of enamel rising through the pulpy strands of flesh. Her knuckles were scrapped and her upper lip was split open, red and pink raising out of brown skin. She was bleeding from the nose. Blood trickled down the plane of her upper lip, coalesced with the skin that was split open and pooled down her chin, settling at the hollow of her throat. Isis refused to go to the nurse's office. Bradley had gone, wailing and red in the face, with a purpling welt on his mouth where Isis punched him.

She felt good. The blood sticking to her chin and the corner of her mouth was a trophy.

When Mom came through the door of the Principal's office, she looked at Isis with an exhausted pull of her mouth, clicking her tongue. She sat down and wrenched out a packet of tissues to clean off the blood on Isis' face, angling her body so that the drops didn't stain her sleek work pants, one hand curled around her shoulder, fingers like a hawk's claws. Mom's hazel eyes glinted yellow under the desk lamp.

"Why did you hit Bradley?"

Isis frowned, while her Mom continued dabbing her upper lip. "He pulled down my skirt," she said. "So, I hit him."

The Principal pursed his lips, wet gray eyes flickering up and down her outfit: a sunny yellow tank top and a flowing pastel blue skirt that fell to her shins. It'd been in the high 70s well into early October.

“Perhaps,” he started, tone false and light, “Miss Isis should refrain from wearing short skirts and tank tops from now on. It, well, it might make the boys more interested in bothering her if she continues to wear such things. It’s for the best.”

Isis stared at him and the pulpy flesh around her lost tooth churned. A sliver of an ache in her upper jaw, just below the lip of her nose. The tip of the thorn brushed against her tongue. Isis spat at the Principal, aiming for the ugly stubble around his bottom lip. Streaks of red stained her teeth with a grin when the bloodied saliva hit his chin, right below the line of his mouth.

He jolted in his chair, knocking a knee against the bottom of the desk, wiped at his chin and his voice rose. Mom cut his shouts with frantic apologies and Isis drank in her triumph. Isis was given suspension for the rest of the week as punishment. Mom’s fingers dug into her elbow, nails leaving half-moon dents into her skin, as Isis was quickly led out of the office.

Isis looked over her shoulder to see the Principal pulling a carissa thorn out of his chin, holding it between his thick fingers in bewilderment. She swallowed the puddle of blood in her mouth, victorious, when she saw the puncture wound oozing from his chin.

*

“You can’t do that again,” said Mom. After wiping the blood off of Isis’ face, she started applying pale, fleshy colored makeup onto the bruises. Isis shoved Mom’s arm away and rubbed it off. Mom grabbed her wrist with one hand, forcing it down. “Isis, stop it.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know you didn’t.” Biting her inner cheek, Mom exhaled a sharp sigh through her nose and tapped the beauty blender to the darkest bruises. “But you can’t just punch the next person who’s rude to you, and you *cannot* spit at the principal like that.”

Prickles grew on the tip of Isis’ tongue, grazing against her bottom lip. “He said it was my fault!”

Mom pursed her lips. The garage door opened with a groan that shook the foundation of the house. Dad was home. Mom scrubbed the concealer on Isis’ face until her skin burned at the friction.

“Getting angry just means they win,” said Mom. “You can’t let them get to you.”

The pressure of her thumb lessened as it swept across Isis’ chin, a job well-done. Mom’s lips pursed, forehead crinkling.

“We’ll go and buy you some longer dresses and shorts this weekend.”

“But I want to wear *this* one.”

Mom’s teeth clacked together, so hard and loud Isis wondered if they chipped like ice cubes. “Well, you can’t. I’ll buy you a better one, a cuter one.”

“I don’t want another one. I want this one.” The fabric clenched in her palms, wrinkling between her knuckles and her nails pressed into her palm, only a thin layer of poplin separating keratin from flesh.

Mom sucked a breath through her nose, the inhale rippling through the countenance of her face, wind through tall grass that sprung back into place, and she stood. Letting go of Isis’ chin, she stood to her full height as she smoothed down the front of her blouse.

“Get changed. Put on some shorts, leggings, or another dress that goes to your shins, I don’t care. Go change. Now.”

Isis dug her heel into the carpet of the living room. The flesh where her tooth once was shifted, the enamel of the teeth surrounding the hole shuddering. When her tongue brushed against it, there was a sharp tip. “No.”

The garage door groaned and moaned as Mom parted her mouth, her jaw shutting with a sharp sound. Her fingers curled, clenched in her palm, then released before folding together as Dad walked through the doorway, shucking his shoes off on the doormat, the fugue of the rush hour Metra commute fading as Isis rushed to him. Dad rubbed her hair down and kissed her forehead, his smile wavering only when he noticed the peculiar discoloration on her chin.

He looked at Mom and his smile grew hesitant, nervous. “You’re home earlier than normal. Got out of work early?”

Mom put her hand on top of Isis’ head, her palm pressed against the wild waves and curls of her dark hair in a full grasp. The weight of it pressed against her skull, trying to sink her into the tile floor of the kitchen.

Isis’s jaw ached and sharpness pierced through her baby teeth, raising the enamel out of their sockets, a millimeter of movement, as Mom smiled, her mouth wrinkling but the lines of her eyes were blank.

“I finished the case early,” she lied.

When Dad went to change, Mom lowered down to her level and grasped her elbow tight as she told Isis that she wasn’t allowed to go to school wearing the same skirt again, and that if Isis kept talking back to her, she was going to throw it out. She shut down Isis from arguing

about it with a hissed, *we'll talk about this later*, and turned on the stove to heat up the chicken mami. Having been shuffled off to her room and after changing into soft leggings, Isis sat at the table, sullen as she tore at her chicken and only ate some of its soft white meat, chewed at the cabbage, and then fled into her room without saying thank you. She grabbed the skirt that had been folded on the edge of her bed, threw herself onto the mattress, and hugged the skirt into her stomach. Her jaw ached from the grinding of her teeth. Dad knocked on her door not ten minutes after she'd left the kitchen, the sound of the kitchen sink faucet fading as he entered her room and sat next to her. When Isis didn't lift her head to look at him and curled closer into her pillow with a loud inhale that was more choked snuffle than a proper breath, he squeezed her shoulder. A gentle press of fingertips against her clothed upper arm, patient and yielding. Rolling over, Isis put her head on his knee and bit into her cheek before her eyes could burn. When he brushed back her hair, Isis told him that Mom was going to take away her favorite skirt, that she was going to throw it out.

“Why? She's never had a problem with it before.”

The skirt had been his gift to her at the beginning of the school year. It had to be that special blue pastel color because it was the same shade as the Blue Himalayan Poppies at the Garfield Conservatory. They'd been her favorite flower when Dad took her on a day trip there for Bring Your Child to Work Day. Isis had sworn to him, with all of the conviction of a seven year old girl could muster, that she would wear it once every week until the winds turned unforgiving and cold. When she told him, his eyes widened so much he looked like a cartoon character, then he kissed her brow, left her room, and came back with a bowl of her favorite ice cream.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” said Dad, stroking her hair as she ate strawberry cheesecake ice cream. “I want you to know that: you did absolutely nothing wrong.”

He gave her a last kiss on the forehead, smiled, and closed her door behind him with a soft click.

Dad was slow to anger, like a pot of cold water waiting to boil over, but Isis had never heard her parents argue as loudly as they did when she and Dad got back home. Isis didn’t understand what the word ‘lawsuit’ meant, but she heard Dad saying it with a raised, cracking voice over and over. Mom’s anger was a whiplash, aiming so fast the bruise was forming before the pain could register.

“She’s **seven**—“

“And a seven year old boy pulled down her skirt in front of everyone, and because she punched him, they’re going to go after her *more* than they already have. Now there’s a bigger target on her back. It’s for the best that she ignore them and wear something else. It’s better and easier on her—“

Isis’ fingers gripped the bars of the staircase columns at the loud clatter of silver cutlery being thrown into the sink.

“There’s nothing wrong with it! She’s *seven*, it’s eighty goddamn degrees in October, and it goes all the way to her shins! Why aren’t you angry about this?”

Mom laughed and it seized the sinews in the flesh of Isis’ throat.

“Oh, you’re *angry*? Must be easy for **you** to say that—“

Isis didn't stay to listen for much longer. Their voices rose and she curled under the covers, the finished bowl of ice cream sitting on her nightstand, and she forced herself to sleep as tight tension rose in the back of her mouth: shifting just under the first layer of flesh.

Her parents slept in different rooms that night and no lawsuit was made.

Three weeks later, Bradley's friends chased her down the halls during recess, carrying scissors in an attempt to cut the longer skirt she wore. Mom had laid it on her comforter before she woke up: a salmon-pink color, the hems brushed against her ankles with each movement. She ran into the bathroom with her mouth closed firmly shut, jaw clenched hard enough that her molars rubbed harshly against one another as pain stabbed through the bone of her mandible. The boys lingered at the front of the bathroom entrance, feet glued to the ground, before they grew bored and left.

Isis stayed in the bathroom and clutched the edges of the sink, standing atop one of the foot stools. The sink roared and she stuck her head underneath the faucet, cold water soaking her hair. Her nails dug into the white plaster: had they been any sharper, they would've left scratch marks in the paint. Her dark locks coated the white plaster in seaweed rolls.

Coughing, Isis spat into the sink and a cluster of spines sat at the drain, forming a pool of pink in the water. She picked one up and pressed it between her fingers. Isis didn't flinch as blood slipped through the lines of her knuckles and palm. She imagined stabbing the cluster through Bradley's other cheek—to match the bruise on his mouth that had yet to fade.

Her parents had barely spoken any words more than polite greetings to each other in the past three weeks. The last full conversation they'd had beyond asking how their work days had been, had the train ride been long, what should they eat for dinner, had been about her.

Isis watched the sink churn and groan with the rush of water, dots of pink splattered against the white.

She returned to class, and told her teacher nothing about the pack of boys who'd chased her into the bathrooms.

II. Petiole

Dad moved out the year that Isis turned ten. Three weeks after Dad moved out, Josef walked in in. She didn't speak to her mother for two weeks, the ripped tatters of her throat and gums pulsating, stringing themselves back together on sinews of wet flesh. Soon, everything in her home that once contained the touch of her father were gone. The house itself twisted and shifted to suit Josef's needs and accommodations, all which seemed to suit her mother. Within a month, it was as if her Dad had never lived there at all.

On the weekends, Isis stayed with her Dad and escaped the confines of the house that had erased all traces of her father. As soon as her mother dropped her off at the Metra station, she changed in the bathroom, out of the pressed blouse and into the plaid button down and washed out skinny jeans that had frayed holes in the knees, a black skirt over the denim. Isis' father waited for her outside of the terminal and they walked, hand in hand along the river, to his new apartment. He had begun to cultivate a garden on the rooftop of his apartment complex outside of River North. The garden plot was barely more than three foot squared. It thrived in the heat of the light bouncing off of glass skyscrapers. There was a pot of rosemary that she could smell as soon as Isis walked to the top of the staircase, hugging her jacket close to herself from the chill of early spring, smelling baby sprigs of parsley and thyme. Isis had long since outgrown the pastel blue skirt, but using the spines of the glochids, she'd strung the old fabric into a makeshift

scarf that hung comfortably around her neck. Lowering into a crouch, Isis dragged her finger against one of the rosemary leaves, its fine hairs tickling the spiral on her fingertip and oil sticking to her skin.

“It’s cheaper than buying bottles and containers of spices at the bodega,” said Dad, squeezing her shoulder as he gave her the communal hose to pour a gentle spray onto the greens. “Tastes better, too.”

Visiting her father every weekend was the highlight of Isis’ week. She loved spending time with him, helping him tend to his garden, saving dying spider plants and trying out eateries in Chinatown and Greektown. Flowers and gardening weren’t practical to her Mom: to care for them took time, money that could be used elsewhere, and attention that would be better put to use to combat Isis’ growing sullen tirades, where Isis kicked her feet up on the kitchen table, speckles of dirt and grime sticking to her toenails and ignoring her mom when she snapped to put her feet down. Doing just that, Isis would slip onto the couch and stare at the ceiling fan swaying, stark black against the pale beige paint. Spines of thorns tickled her trachea and vocal chords, stopping her from saying anything at all. At the bottom of her closet, buried underneath clothes that she didn’t fit in anymore nor wanted but didn’t care enough to throw out, Isis stacked the jars of spines and thorns she’d vomited out.

At Dad’s apartment, the window over the sink had a creeping juniper crawling along the glass. The bristles danced as Isis dragged her fingers along the edges of the needles, their sharp ends hurting her none.

Sucking in a breath, she smelled the juniper through the faint draft at the bottom of the window. Her throat cleared. Thorns simmered beneath her gums, but the creeping juniper bush swayed to her breath and to Dad's footsteps.

A train roared over the rails and tracks two blocks over and Isis heard her father's heartbeat in its howl. In the wail of sirens, Isis heard herself.

*

Mom was three months pregnant when she told Isis she was going to marry Josef and she was going to be a sister. Isis looked at her mother's stomach and hated the parasite inside. Mom wore a new wedding ring on her left hand and Josef, the man who was not her father, kept touching Mom's shoulders, squeezing them with his bratwurst fingers and Mom sank into his hands as if they were cushions.

She told Dad on her next visit to him. He watered the shoots of rosemary and oregano and told Isis to extend his congratulations to her mother.

Dad switched gears soon after by introducing Isis to Noah, a tall man with a scar on his left eyebrow and a gangly smile, who Dad had invited over for dinner. Noah was a frequent customer at the wine and painting class Dad taught twice a week in Wicker Park. Isis could smell dry paint on his clothes. They worked within the same block of one another in the Loop and went to the same cafe down the street from Dad's building for lunch break several times a week. They became fast friends. Isis barely said more than a word to him, hesitant and suspicious of another unfamiliar man, but Noah didn't press her. Josef often tried to talk to her, invite her out to dinner, to join him and Mom on doctor visits to get X-rays of the baby in her Mom's stomach. For the first few months, he tried to play the role of a father to an empty stage.

When Josef talked about her father, the man who her mother rarely invoked in title or name unless it was in reference to Isis' weekly visits, he often smiled as if there were some joke being told that she wasn't let in on.

"You know, you don't *have* to visit him every weekend," he'd said. "It has to be exhausting to take the train back and forth every weekend, you must get tired of it."

"Not really," she'd said, stiff. "It's fun."

Josef had hummed, rotating the gold band on his left hand. "'Fun,' huh..." His lips twisted upward into a half-smirk that had stuck with Isis ever since, two weeks before. There'd been a hint of teeth, an unkind flash of white bone. "Oh, I'm sure he has plenty of *fun* up there in the big city."

The barely healed wounds in her throat had ripped open with fresh barbs. She hadn't known what it meant, but she knew that Josef was making fun of her father, insulting him. Those little asides, the glances he'd give Mom over dinner when Isis asked about how early the train she wanted to get on was, the grins and smirks, and Mom's disinterest in defending Dad— Isis hated him, how he talked to her as if she was too stupid to understand his inside jokes with her mother and she hated even more that the thing growing inside her mother was of *his* blood.

Noah spoke to her as easily as he did to her dad—easy, self-assured and sincere, but expected no reaction or response in return. He wasn't deterred when she gave him barely more than a nod of acknowledgement, and continued to chatter on to her dad. When Noah acknowledged her, reading her expressions to see if she was listening, it was with curiosity. Even when Dad, under his breath, told her she was being rude and she flushed hot with shame, Noah waved him off and said it was fine. Although she didn't offer more than nods or small noises, Noah bright-

ened at any indication of her engagement. She later softened when Noah revealed the apple cinnamon turnovers he'd made himself after dinner.

“Since there’s only one turnover left, how about we arm wrestle for it?” Noah later said, placing his elbow on the table, hand held out.

Thorns fluttered against the roof of her mouth as Isis stared at his open hand, then sank into flesh as she grasped Noah’s larger hand. His grip was firm, but warm. His nails didn’t graze her skin the way Mom’s long ones did. His fingers didn’t press against her own as if he were trying to wrangle a feral cat in his grip like Josef’s did.

Isis could still recall how tightly Mom held her chin as she applied the concealer on her cheek where Bradley rapped his knuckles against her mouth.

Dad laughed over his coffee when Isis slammed Noah’s arm onto the table and the man groaned an exaggerated noise of pain, pretending that Isis had ripped his arm off. “Your daughter has a strong grip! She could punch my teeth out if she wanted to!”

“Only if you deserved it,” Isis sniffed, haughty. It earned her a laugh as well as the last apple turnover and she felt the thorns in her mouth tremble back into the lines of her throat, unmoving and soft.

*

Isis was eleven when Wyatt was born. He was a spring baby: frost clung to the windows in the morning, the ground wet and smelling damp wood-chips. Green buds dotted the bones of the trees. Isis was still at school when her Mom went into labor and only saw Wyatt for the first time four days later.

“Can you hold the fort while I’m at the hospital?” asked Josef when Isis got home. He hovered by the couch, shrugging on his jacket and gathering his bags. He barely offered her more than a glance over his nose. Her fingers gripped the straps of her backpack, tight enough to turn her knuckles white.

Isis gave her step-father a withering look, but shrugged.

He never invited her to go to the hospital with him, and she didn’t ask. As far as Isis knew, her mother never asked for her.

Josef took shifts in between sleeping at home, work, and being at the hospital with her mom and the new baby. Isis had just stepped off the bus after school when Josef pulled into the driveway six days after her half-brother was born.

Wyatt screamed well into the early morning hours. Isis had heard babies cry before, but they’d always been in public, on the L, the Metra, or in the grocery store: they were bubbles of noise, whimpers— not these howls of inexplicable want that shook the foundation of the walls. She’d never heard them so up close, how piercing they could be, and how freely they could make themselves known. Wyatt demanded that he be known, be heard, and he didn’t care *who* heard him. Isis sat at the edge of her bed and heard Mom and Josef hurry into the nursery. She heard Josef laugh and Mom sang a lullaby to him. He cried and Mom only laughed. “He’s going to be a chatty one. What a pair of lungs on this one. Now settle down, let’s get you back to sleep—”

Isis threw on her shoes and jacket, slipped out her window above the garage and trekked to the trail that surrounded her neighborhood. Isis headed to the stream where she and Dad used to fish for rocks that would crack into pieces of opal and screamed.

The stream was coated with the falling leaves, algae and thorns.

*

Wyatt's blue eyes turned brown when he was seven months old and by that point, the mason jars of spindles, spires and thorns stacked on top of each other in a neat fashion had covered the back wall of Isis' closet. When it got high enough, Isis stuffed her backpack full of the mason jars and dumped them out in the stream. When the rain came, the thorns washed away.

Dad always said Isis had been a quiet little baby. Wyatt more than made up for Isis' absent noise.

Wyatt was always screaming, face red and scrunched with phantom pain, louder than even those yappy poms that snarled at Isis every morning on her trek to the bus stop. His shrieks made her ear drums tremble. He seemed to scream even louder when he saw Isis, trying to crawl out of Mom and Josef's arms to reach for her, cheeks wet and red, only to yowl as Isis rushed out of the room while Mom did what she could to ease his pains and distract him. Wyatt was so small next to her, if she even brushed her hip against his side, Isis was certain she'd crush him and break his fragile little bones.

Wyatt was only quiet when he slept.

When he slept, his wrinkled face softening into relaxed olive skin, Isis contemplated brushing back his wisps of black hair to see if it felt as soft as clouds as she hovered above his crib, elbows on the rails. Spindles rattled underneath the enamels as she reached a hand into the crib. Isis looked at her hand and imagined, in between blinks, the thorns slipping through her arteries and replacing the bones of her fingers, tips of the spindles piercing through the finger pads. They would slice his too soft skin. Too fragile.

Isis had not seen her mother smile so much until Wyatt was born. She'd bought piles of books to foster his lingual and reading development and left piles of possible daycares, future kindergartens, and private high schools in the area that would be best suited to help Wyatt get into the best college possible. Isis was still in middle school and high school was nothing more than a mythical destination to her. She'd go to the public high school. Wyatt's closet was thick and full with clothes that he'd grow into and grow out of, a panorama of colors and fabrics. Isis' favorite clothes were bought by her father and she either hid them deep in her closet or left them at Dad's apartment, clothes she'd change into the moment she got to school. Boys who remembered the bruise on Bradley's face either jeered at her in the halls, avoided her at all costs, or pulled at the strap of her sports bra her mother made her wear, snapping it against her skin.

Girls who didn't know what to make of her shrieked when Isis punched fistfuls of thorns at those boys and the girls who smiled with glee gave her tissues, snacks and soda while she sat in detention or the principal's office. Isis liked those girls: they seemed to know that she only retaliated, never initiated. They seemed to understand in a way that the other girls didn't quite and it was no small coincidence that many were her classmates, who knew her as the girl who rarely spoke but always had good marks on her tests. She admired those girls, envied them—they wore what they wanted, talked back to the boys who spoke over them and shoved them into lockers when a stray hand swiped across their chests. It didn't matter that they were being shuffled in and out of the Principal's office, dumped in a lab room for lunch detention, or barely participated in gym. Isis wondered what their mouths hid, what was buried in their vocal chords.

Mom hated them almost as much as she hated having to get calls from the school administration about Isis getting into fights every few months. The girls who gave her tokens and offerings would wave her *goodbye* and *see you tomorrows* as either Mom or Josef led her out.

“Those aren’t girls you want to make friends with,” Josef had said as they drove away: a boy had put his arm around Isis’ shoulders, tried to curl his fingers around the spot where her arm socket met her chest, and she’d shoved him off his chair as her skin crawled. Mom was in the middle of a legal dispute she was playing defendant for, so it was up to Josef to pick her up and take her home. “You’re too smart for them. You’re too smart for this. Your mother is so busy with Wyatt, why do you keep doing this to her?”

Isis took her hand out of the crib and ran to the bathroom to pull out the smooth, green citrus thorn from beneath the lining of her tongue. The coppery taste of blood pooled in her lower jaw.

Wyatt resumed his wailing an hour later.

That night, Josef suggested giving Wyatt rum to help ease his colic and teething pain as a joke. Isis dumped both bottles in the toilet. Mom took her laptop away for a week. Restricted to only the Chromebook given by the school, Isis retreated to the park and played mindless games on her phone just to get some quiet. In the dying warmth, some of her neighbors and classmates played volleyball while the sand wasn’t yet cold to the touch. They waved at her and Bella, one of the best volleyball players on their middle school team, invited her to play. Isis declined and Bella’s face twisted in disappointment, but smiled when Isis mumbled, *maybe later—can I just watch for now?*

Isis drew a knee up to her chest and swallowed the sharp tips of her softened thorns as the hem of Bella's shirt rose to reveal a sliver of dark brown skin and a muscular abdomen, shining gold from the sun on her brown skin, as she leapt into the air to hit a cross spike. Isis' gut twisted, tight, hot and pleasant. Panic surged against her ribcage. Coughing, she hid the bloody spittle and red rose thorn in the sleeve of her sweatshirt and drew the collar to her chin, pulling at the hood covering her hair.

*

With Wyatt being a costly addition to the household, Josef told Isis that she would have to cut down on her visits to Dad every weekend, and she would have to spend her Saturdays staring at a stupid baby that spit all over himself and stuffed fingers in his mouth because Isis had snatched away all the little bits and bobs before he choked, all the while Josef and Mom went on date nights and dinner parties at Josef's law firm. "Bullshit," Isis spat.

Josef's expression shuttered into a blank stare that restrained his frustration and Mom's rose shoulders with the snap of a rubber band, nose flaring. Thorns rose from Isis gums and urged her to stick one in their eyes.

Mom slapped her before Isis raised her voice high enough. "How dare you speak to us like that," She snapped. "Know your manners, you're not a little girl anymore."

Isis stared at her, cradling her left jaw.

Mom bit her lip and blinked rapidly. Wyatt started to whimper.

Isis skipped dinner that night and didn't come out of her room except to pee and sneak pretzels and grapes out of the kitchen that entire weekend.

Isis didn't speak to either of them for weeks after, communicating via text and a white erase board when she felt petty. She kept her lips firmly shut when Mom talked at her, jaw clenched to keep the long spindly thorns from bursting out from between her teeth. Just looking at her mother made her want to pull one out and stab it into the back of Mom's hand. Stevie crooned into her ear as the walkman laid on her stomach and Isis held a blackberry bush thorn between her fingers. Stevie sang of a woman called Rhiannon who Isis wanted to take by the hand while being promised heaven and squeezed it between her fingers until skin broke and blood trickled into the lines of her palms. She imagined that Rhiannon's smile became Bella's and wondered if Bella's hands would be just as sweet, gentle and calloused, if they would promise her heaven.

*

"I want to move in with you," Isis blurted.

Dad paused from shaking the tarp to dislodge the frost and ice clinging to it. He was careful to not rustle the herbs and flowers in his garden plot too much. His face looked younger, less taut. Isis remembered him coming home gaunt-faced, even as he gravitated to her and drew her into his arms for a squeeze of an embrace.

"You're in the middle of the school year," he said with some regret. "I can't pull you out right now to start somewhere else. It's a good school. It's the one your mother wanted you to go to. I know your grades are good."

"I hate it."

“Everyone hates middle school,” he said, tying the tarp down with Isis’ help. “You’ll probably hate high school, too.” He smiled at Isis’ snort. “But once you get out of high school, you’ll love college.”

“Maybe,” she said, not giving it much thought because it felt so far away. Middle school was bad enough and she didn’t bring her cigarettes with her because if Dad found out he’d make that face which always made Isis’ gut sink and recoil. The thought of four more years of bullshit after middle school was sickening.

“What about once I finish?” she asked, securing the tarp with a click of the bungee cord. She hated the hopeful raise in her pitch. “Can I move in with you after that?”

The look on Dad’s face made her feel like she was five again and sitting on his lap as he read *Shiloh* to her, when she still called him ‘tatay’ and things were still okay between him and Mom. Isis was never good with saying *I love you* out loud, but he knew well enough.

“We’ll talk about it,” he said, ruffling her damp head of thick wiry curls. “That’s a discussion that has to be had with your mother, too.”

Hunching her shoulders, Isis tightened her lips in a scowl, but went back downstairs to the warmth of her dad’s apartment without argument. Bistek waited for her on the kitchen table along with Noah, who took off his shoes at the welcome mat with such ease it was as if he lived there, carrying a Tupperware container of his apple turnovers. “I made extra this time so your Dad would have some left after you inhaled them,” Noah grinned. He laughed at Isis’ scowl which had no heat to it and Dad squeezed his shoulder. Isis rose her eyebrows at the look they exchanged with each other.

During dinner, Noah put his hand on top of Dad's with a tenderness Isis had never seen shared between her parents when they were still married. No ring lined Noah's left hand. Their fingers intertwined, knuckles pressed against the surface of the table.

Isis stared at him and the thorns in her mouth folded against the flesh of her vocal chords, sliding into the skin. Sucking in a breath between her teeth, Isis tilted her chin towards Dad, eyebrows raised. The taut clench of his jaw faded.

"I loved your mother, once," he said. "I loved her when I married her, and I loved her when you were born. I loved her for so many years. But as we get older, we change. Then some things don't change at all. I came to terms with this part of myself late in the game, and that can be scary for your loved ones to understand— that you can love a man as much as you can a woman. Your mother is a stubborn woman fixed in her ways. I don't think she had it in her to understand."

"I'm sorry," Isis croaked.

Dad kissed her brow and tucked her short hair behind her ear. Noah sat quietly by Dad's side, eyes open with vulnerability Isis didn't expect out of the man. She offered Noah a puffy-eyed smile.

Thorns settled. A tether relaxed.

*

III. Trichome

Within a year and a half of living with Mom and Isis, Josef learned that it was best to stay out of their way when Isis grew sullen, Mom's ire rose, and her voice snapped through the halls like the crack of a whip. The uncontrolled element of this new life, Josef navigated the house as

if Isis were hardly there at all, giving his attention solely to Wyatt and his new wife, still so youthful and sure of herself. Whatever he had to say about Isis' father, he kept between himself and Isis' mother after he found the puncture wounds in his driver seat upon joking to his wife about whether or not they should've invited Isis' father as a bridesmaid to their wedding. As punishment, Isis had to clean his entire car inside out in the brisk late April cold.

Isis preferred Josef ignoring her. It made it easier to imagine Noah being her future step-father instead.

Mom had grown accustomed to Isis' silences. She told Isis what she wanted, when she wanted Isis home by, that if she wanted to visit her dad every weekend, she was going to have to find someone else to give her a ride to the Metro station or ride her bike there, to do her homework, clean the dishes, and fix her bed before she left to catch the bus. Mom spoke little to her otherwise. Her aside glances spoke for themselves, exhausted and resigned, dissatisfied with a lost cause. Isis was fine with that; she wasn't planning on living with Mom past middle school. All the better for her mother to be glad to be rid of her when Dad brought up his intentions of having Isis move in with him next week.

Isis didn't have the best record for class participation, but her grades were good enough that her teachers didn't find it worthwhile to report. She had to keep her grades up so that her transfer went as smoothly as possible. The closer to the end of the school year, the sooner she could move in with her father.

She told herself she was *glad* her mother would be happy to be free of her. The roof of her mouth split itself open. Pieces of honey locust spines fell onto the bed of her tongue.

One weekend, Mom and Josef flew to Phoenix for a work party, which meant Isis couldn't see her dad and Noah. Atrialia spinosa rumbled beneath her earlobes when the knowledge that she was meant to babysit Wyatt for the entire weekend, trapped at home instead of packing her overnight bag, hit her with the force of a truck. She was, with no small amount of bitterness, sure that her mother and Josef were relieved to be free of her and the overwhelming neediness Wyatt entailed for a few days.

"You'll see your father next week," said Mom. "You can handle taking care of your brother for a few days. I can trust you to do that much, at least."

Isis had never heard her mother say that she trusted her before. Two days after she was told they were leaving, accepting the weekend's burden upon her father's gentle urging over the phone to try to bond with her half-brother, Isis held Wyatt in her arms and watched as Mom kissed his flushed, fat cheek. Mother and daughter stared at each other and Mom told her to text her in case anything happened. Isis stood in the doorway and watched as the door clicked shut.

Wyatt patted her cheeks as if to remind her that he was still there. Isis quickly disposed of him into his playpen, opening her history textbook while he played with the light-up puzzle that made animal noises depending on the button.

Following Wyatt's schedule as per how Mom writ, Isis fed him at six and had him in bed by seven-thirty. Wyatt was eating solids now. Mom had his food containers labeled in the fridge, she didn't trust Isis to cut up his food without hurting herself or Wyatt getting into them when Isis wasn't watching. The knives were locked up in a cabinet above the fridge, where Isis was far too short to reach. Isis contemplated pulling out one of the thorns from her gums and picking the lock to get in, just to cut up the carrots out of pure spite. Isis rolled her eyes with a harsh scoff as

she turned on the bluetooth speaker connected to Josef's tablet. A far too cheerful tinkle of "Für Elise" started playing, hard and bright bells instead of the soft piano keys as she turned off the lights to Wyatt's bedroom, where her half-brother watched the constellations dancing on the walls from his lantern. When she half-closed the door behind her, his stare followed her.

Twenty minutes into a horror movie she'd forgotten the name of, Isis made herself popcorn and toast with raspberry jam for her dinner, her knees tucked into her oversized sweatshirt. She started to drift off. Isis jolted when she felt a sticky hand slap her bare foot. The toast flew onto the wall, sticking in place and popcorn scattered all over the cushions as she choked out a strangled yelp, barely missing the second body just inches away from where her leg swung out in alarm.

Wyatt's brown eyes pierced up at her while he waddled back towards her, grabbing her ankle with both hands.

Isis gaped at him. "Did you *climb* out of your crib?"

The thirteenth month old's laughter sounded devious, gums showing as he smiled and giggled open-mouthed. He tried to climb onto the couch to sit with her, but Isis scooted away before he could attempt to lift up onto the cushions. He whined and turtle-walked his way back to her, but she stood up, sucking in a breath between her teeth and backed away from his reaching hands.

"Christ," she muttered, bending down to pick Wyatt up and stumbled at his squirming weight in her arms. She so rarely held him that she wasn't used to the weight of him in her hold: Wyatt was much heavier than she thought, which would make any impact from a fall that much more dangerous. Isis didn't want to hold onto him longer than she had to.

He squealed and Isis grunted at his chubby arms wrapping around her neck. Happy noises turned into irate hiccups when Isis dropped him back into his crib.

“*Stay there.*”

Wyatt breathed audibly through his nose. Isis stepped backwards. He stayed there, fingers curled around the bars of the crib as he watched her back out to the doorway. Isis had walked into the hallway for only a minute before she heard the groan of the crib bars. She rushed back inside and saw Wyatt hanging from the side railing, his grip unsteady, fingers coming undone from the railing. Surging forward, Isis grabbed him before he fell to the ground, shouting at the carpet burn as her elbows rubbed against the floor.

“Fuck!”

Wyatt gurgled, reaching for her hair and pulled with his sticky fingers. There wasn't much for him to grab, but his grip was much tighter than Isis expected. Grabbing onto the curls by her ears, Wyatt giggled and Isis hissed at the sharp pull of her skull.

His smile flipped when she moved his hands away. Isis clenched her jaw at his whines that sounded more like aggravated hiccups. Ignoring the increasing volume of his whining, Isis hoisted him back into his crib. Isis wished there was a baby leash she could strap Wyatt to so that he'd stay in place and stop crawling out of his crib to bother her.

Isis didn't know why he was so fixated on getting her attention: she rarely held him. Mom stopped trying to get Isis to hold him when Wyatt was about five months old. Isis had no interest in holding him: she knew how fragile baby skulls were.

Wyatt made a little moaning sound, half muffled, as he tugged on her hand with both of his. Nettle thorns settled inside the junctions of her jaw. Isis swallowed hard and she pulled her wrist out of his grip.

“Stay there.” The thorns in her gums twitched and the pain made her forehead wrinkle.

Wyatt’s face scrunched into a wrinkly red ball, brows furrowing with a slow build of inarticulate frustration that only a baby could feel and he opened his mouth, a little strip of white teeth poking out of fresh pink gums, and screamed.

Isis had never heard his voice reach such a high pitch.

Thorns burst out from between Isis’ teeth and stabbed into the carpet floor, into the plush horse and cowboy, and into the code learner robot, as she screamed back at him.

She screamed. She screamed and screamed. She screamed until her throat grew raw, her mouth wet with spittle and slashed flesh from the thorns spewing out. They fell to the carpet, stabbing through the fabric, around her feet. Upright, standing tall like burnt trees. She screamed until her voice gave.

Chest heaving, a twisting muscle beneath her collarbone, Isis croaked for breath. Clutching the base of her throat, she glared at Wyatt through the burning, blurry wetness of her narrowed eyes. Rubbing her congested nose, Isis straightened.

She’d not screamed this much while confined within the walls of this house. Not since Josef came. Wyatt’s wails had swallowed her own.

Wyatt had stopped wailing, brown eyes open and wide as they stared at her.

Then Wyatt opened his mouth, forehead wrinkled and cheeks no longer sticky and wet, and screamed. He grabbed the bars of his crib, shook them, and he screamed as if his tiny lungs

were about to burst like over-inflated balloons—angry. His brown eyes, too big for his round face, narrowed and trapped Isis in place where she stood. Egging her on. Rattling her thorns, which were shuddering with anticipation, begging to be set loose. They burrowed out of the flesh of her mouth, ripping her throat, piercing her vocal chords and tonsils.

Blood pooled in her mouth. Thick, coppery and syrupy. It trickled down her chin, to her neck, and dotted the carpet.

Spreading her legs apart, hands fists at her sides as she hunched forward, Isis screamed until the skin around her forehead squeezed against her skull, turning her vision spotty black. Thorns fell onto the floor in a storm. Isis threw her body into her screams—her body was made of thorns and she spewed them out.

Half-siblings screamed, wailed and howled until the entire room was coated with thorns.

Isis collapsed to the floor as the room spun. Her knees cracked the thorns beneath her, throat raw and aching. Blood was pouring from between her teeth, staining the front of her sweatshirt. Isis felt the ache all the way to her toes, her ankles numb and twitching. Her cheeks felt stuffed with cotton, tongue raw and tingling. Every breath rattled. Her eyes stung. She blinked sticky wetness out of her eyelashes and she coughed, throat comfortably dry. The blood came out in spittle.

She heard the creaking of the crib as Wyatt climbed his way out. The thorns lowered to the floor as Wyatt waddled towards Isis, stopping in front of where she kneeled, her hands limp in her lap. She lifted her head to stare at him from beneath her sweat stained hair.

The face of a child barely more than a year old is unreadable, their emotions both far too simple and far too complex for anyone to comprehend: only that child understands what they're

feeling, unable to articulate in coherent words. And Isis could only wonder, dazed from the blood spilling out of her mouth and dripping from opened flesh, what Wyatt was thinking as those wide brown eyes bore at her.

When he reached up to touch her face, she didn't push him away. Those little hands pressed against her cheeks and he leaned in close. Not a single thorn had grazed him, Isis realized. He was left perfectly untouched. His crib was creaking from the amount of thorns stabbed into the wood.

Wyatt blinked and he climbed into her lap until he was close enough for their noses to brush. Isis's hands remained in her lap, arms boneless and sagging. Her half-brother made a little humming noise and pressed his nose clumsily to hers. Fat drops trickled from his closed eyes and down his cheeks. One droplet fell into Isis' open palm and it unfolded into a blue hydrangea. Her fingers curled around the petals, the soft edges tickling her skin.

In the trees of thorns and her front covered in her own blood, unable to speak, Isis held her half-brother and cried.

Two months later, Isis packed the skirt she'd outgrown over six years ago and the blue hydrangea inside her suitcase as her father waited in the Uber that would take them both to the train station. It was the last suitcase she'd had to pack. She passed the open door of Wyatt's nursery and the half-siblings stared at each other through the crack in the doorway and she waved. Wyatt gave her an open-mouthed gurgle back.

Underneath one of the pillows in his crib was a thorn from that night two months ago. White firethorn flowers bloomed along the spine.

The Snow Leopard on Sagarmatha

At the bottom of the summit at Camp IV, Felix's fingernails shattered in shards of ice.

The adrenaline of post-summit rushed through him like hot whiskey, pooling in his hips and thighs. He didn't feel his equipment being shorn off of his back and shoulders nor the Sherpa climbers he'd hired rushing him to a bowl of lukewarm water in the warmth of the tent. What should have been comforting felt like the tips of needles pricking at all of his joints, but his skin was too taut and tight to wince. His guide smiled, rapped his shoulder and told him he was lucky; the frostbite was normal, the skin would recover in no time, give it three months, he'll forget it was ever there, wasn't the climb worth it, did he get a picture at the summit?

Felix mumbled his answers between stiff lips, the words gibberish to his ears, and he sagged in the waft of the space heaters. The Sherpa—Felix didn't remember her name; she rarely spoke and his guide's voice boomed like thunder over her, it didn't occur to him to ask for her name again, and he often forgot whether or not she was capable of English at all—left him. She carried his equipment on her back and walked to the flap of the tent door.

She paused and opened the flap. Everest bore down at him in the slit between the flap and the walls of the tent, crinkled and shuddering under the gales of the storm sloping between the peaks and slopes. Her head was raised to the peak.

Everyone was looking at the mountain at each waking moment. When their eyes weren't fixed on the spikes of gray and black on white, so white it was almost blue, their minds were on the mountain, for the mythical peak or the tracks left on the snow.

Rumors of a snow leopard on the mountain being spotted on the mountain roamed around climbing circles months ago. They never came onto the mountain during this time of the year, not when the slopes were littered with people milling about the peak. So silent were their paws on the rock that even if they were out, their coats hid them amongst the gray, black and searing white and the smell of meat jerkies was not enough to tempt them. So focused was he on their climb, Felix barely gave the snow leopards a passing thought. He saw no leopard on the mountain: that's what he would tell his nieces and nephews when he came home, a black stone from the peak in his pocket, pilfered as he sucked in the oxygen while the skin of his skull squeezed against bone. The wind had been so loud on the summit. It pierced the clouds that lingered along the slopes.

It rang in his ears.

The Sherpa woman walked through the opening and the tent flap fell behind her. Felix was left alone in the tent with his hands in a bowl of lukewarm water. The skin of his fingers softened and the water started to turn red. Blistered blossomed on his fingers and knuckles.

A woman stared at him from the corner, frost and snow clinging to the peach fuzz on her face and lips.

Felix looked away. He heard the shriek of the summit bursting in his eardrums.

The winds wailed.

∞∞

In the bathroom of the plane, the air pressure of the altitude squeezing the flesh around his skull, Felix vomited in the toilet. Pink sputum coated the seat and the inner rim of the bowl. He had to flush twice to get rid of all of it. The suction made his eardrums pop. His bandaged feet sank into the floor as he staggered to grab a paper towel to wipe the bowl clean. His calves and feet felt as heavy as Green Boots' body must've felt at the end.

Felix waddled back to his seat, grit his teeth through the needle-sharp pain that shot up the flat of his feet, stretching like a rubber band just about to snap, and exhaled when he sagged into his seat. He ignored the steward who asked for his drink order and closed the sharp white view out the window with a click of the blinder. Adjusting his legs to spread out, knees hugging the seat in front of him, Felix pressed his tongue against the roof of his mouth to feel the visceral pop in his ears. When they brought his tray of food, he left it untouched. The smell of the chicken against the plastic container it was warmed up in made the back of his jaw ache and saliva pool uncomfortably into the back of the back of his throat, his gut recoiling at the strength of the herbs and smell of salt, and he bit his inner cheek to keep from throwing up. There was nothing left in his stomach to release, but his stomach clenched nevertheless.

It'd been three days since he'd climbed to the summit and the altitude sickness lingered. The acute form lasted only a day, three days at most. The symptoms weren't supposed to last for more than that, and certainly not to the point that blood dried in between the cracks in his lips. They still hadn't closed since he took off the hook to his oxygen tank and drank in the sharp, coppery taste of the air on top of the mountain. Felix trained himself to turn the corners of his mouth upward in a facsimile of a smile so that the skin didn't split open, leaving him to bleed all over the front of his shirt.

His pride at having reached the summit, even if it was with an oxygen tank, kept him from asking for a wheelchair when he reached Tribhuvan. He'd been knocked out from sheer exhaustion when he flew out of Lukla and only woke up after they'd landed.

One of his group mates whose name he couldn't remember over the pounding in his skull had looked at him as Felix struggled to sit up in his seat upon being called to get off of the little plane.

"..Do you want me to help you get off?"

Felix had given the man—a man who claimed to be a quasi-professional climber, but enjoyed cave diving more, had turned down the suggestion that they look for the Sleeping Beauty and take a look at her face when another group member suggested it as a joke, alcohol running through their veins to keep warm—a clenched jaw. His teeth were chattering together, harsh and loud.

"If I can reach the top of the summit," he'd said, "I can get off of a plane."

His unnamed group mate didn't bother asking again. They separated at baggage and did not say goodbye. On his trek to his next terminal during the four hours he had to reach it, Felix stumbled his way into each bathroom and hovered over the edge of the toilet rims, biting his lip to keep from keeling over. As Felix sat in his seat, the seat in front of him stretched out far enough for him to spread out his legs, he clenched his bandaged fingers. A hint of rusty red-brown edged at the tips of the gauze wrapped around his fingers, but he felt no sensation in his hands. Felix didn't dare contemplate what his fingers looked like now. If there were any nails left at all, or if there was only sandy flesh left behind.

Felix didn't have animals or pets while growing up, but his mother used to have cats when she was a child. She'd never allowed them in the house because the ones she knew had been nasty little creatures that hissed at her and ran away every time she tried to pet one in her childhood home. They couldn't swipe at her, because they had no claws left. Felix, sluggish, knew that declawing was something of an unsavory practice these days, but he couldn't help but wonder if this was how declawed cats felt, unable to stretch their toes and coil their bones with the same dexterity as before.

How does such a large cat as a leopard manage to climb those sleek slopes and keep their balance on the precarious grip the snow had on the rock? Felix had seen the snow leopard in zoos and their skin once at an auction. Those skins were often quickly seized for their rarity; either by buyers or the police and animal conservationists.

How does a snow leopard climb the mountain without their claws?

Felix didn't see a single animal on the mountain. He barely even saw one of the corpse trail markers, avoided by his guides. All he saw on the mountain was snow, snow, snow, the stray beer can, empty oxygen tanks, frayed tents, and abandoned boots and gear on the slopes, whether on their path or on the jagged corners. This is what he told himself:

"I didn't see anything. I didn't see anything."

Two rows behind him, another passenger squeezed the plastic cup that was given to them as a courtesy for the flight and split the cup in two with an audible snap. It split into the confined air like a shattered femur.

A cold breath gasped against his ear.

The fabric of the airline provided blanket itched at his cheeks as Felix threw it over his face. He closed his eyes and saw the pierce of the sun on the summit. It had been so bright it could've melted his goggles.

On the summit, the wind churned in a low growl.

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“I climbed Mount Everest this spring. Do you wanna see pictures?”

Felix's office wasn't as large as his father's and not as lush and decorative, but along the walls were framed photographs of all of the mountains he'd visited and climbed, from his first to the latest. The first mountain he'd climbed was not one he truly climbed, but hiked with his father. Grays Peak was on a family vacation when he was ten and Felix recalled the thrill of standing on the peak and looking at the expanse of blue above him, the wisps of clouds and the hum of the wind around him, chilling the shells of his ears despite the summer heat below. Even here, along the peaks there could be snow.

“Why would you want to climb it?”

A common question asked of any climber, casual or professional. For the professionals, it was either the highest honor or something expected out of them to do by virtue of the cultural osmosis mythology surrounding the tallest mountain in the world. Some climbers might scoff at the notion, having either already conquered the mountain or expressing no interest in it—it's boring, they said, there's no thrill in it when everyone, from rich amateurs to idiots, want to climb it, what's the point when it's not special anymore? There were the climbers who took on Everest

because that was the name that would instill the most awe and starry eyed glances upon them, whether professional or not. Every climber gave an answer different on the surface, but the meaning was always the same behind the words.

That there were far more treacherous and challenging mountains to blaze didn't matter: Everest was the name that all knew and remembered well.

Nobody knew K2 by name. Nanga Parbat, Annapurna, Matterhorn, even Mt. Washington— These names meant nothing to those who asked such a question.

There was the Killer, and then there was the Bastard.

All of the weight could be felt behind a single name.

“Why do you want to climb Everest, Uncle Felix?” asked his nephew in the months before his flight to Nepal, as he was buying the newest advanced gear and making his plans to take time off of work in preparation for the spring, when the mountain would be open for him to break onto. Felix had smiled at his nephew and ruffled his hair, when his nails hadn't shattered from the cold and the tips weren't yet a dark blue, blue so dark they were nearly black, and said:

“Because it's there, and because I can.”

Upon his return home, his feet still wrapped in bandages to keep his flesh from being infected while recovering from the frostbite, Felix warmed his body with the Lagavulin his father broke out of his cellar, stirred gently with a single round ice ball for him to savor and sip while surrounded in the swelter of his family. He kept his eyes above the rim of the glass and on his niece and nephew, the glass only just barely held in his grip from the sheer wet condensation, rolling into his palm in a pool. Despite the heat and humidity of Southern California in late May,

he'd asked his mother to turn off the AC. She rose an eyebrow but did as he asked, and he sighed into the unforgiving cloud of heat of San Diego summer.

"How long did it take you?" asked his nephew.

"Six weeks," said Felix.

"Any avalanches?" asked his niece.

"Nope." Felix smiled, rolling the half-melted ice cube in his glass. The warmth of the whiskey in his body masked the chill and condensation of the glass.

"Did you get any frostbite? Is that why your foot is still in a cast?" asked his niece.

"Did you see any noses fall off?!" asked his nephew.

"No, Liam," said Felix. He ignored his niece's question and ruffled his nephew's hair, who groaned in disappointment. His nephew then perked up and asked,

"Did you see any of the dead bodies?"

Felix heard his sister tell his nephew to not ask such questions, looking nervous and perturbed as to why her son knew about the bodies. Her gaze fixed on Felix with accusation and their father, flushed and red from two glasses of whiskey, laughed. Their mother was outside drinking wine in the sun room, away from the noise. She had no interest in Felix's escapade to the mountain, never dismissing him or dissuading him from going, but never outwardly stated her approval. Their mother was a woman who liked to be on boats and clear water with a fresh made cocktail in hand and their father lounging on a chair beside her on the beach. She had no capacity for the cold. She would not have lasted on the mountain.

Downing the rest of his glass, the whiskey shot down his throat with the thickness of wool being stuffed into his mouth, the aged spirit prickling at the inside of his trachea and burn-

ing into his chest, where it took rest. The snow-crueted silhouette in the amber liquid disappeared into the crystal, until only white and blurred colors appeared to him through the glass.

“No,” said Felix. “Not a single one.”

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There were no animals on the mountain when Felix and his crew came. There were no animals in sight as they made their descent from the summit. Their only audience were the clouds that loomed in rings around the peaks and the wind, tamed only by the spring at the bottom of the valley. There was no need to warn Felix about bears, wolves and leopards that lived in the Himalayas: they were far more afraid of tourists and the climbers were more afraid of their oxygen running low, ice steps cracking beneath their boots, or their legs getting stuck in the sheets of snow.

They come when all of the climbers have gone, leaving the husks of their camps behind. A red panda that leaves its comfortable tree comes in the summer when the snow is soft but the peaks are unforgiving to smell the bones of chicken left behind months before. The black bear rubs its nose and sniffs, baring teeth and chewing the snow boots and giving it to its young to play with. The yak cough upon chewing the bungee cords stuck in the grass, shaking their bodies whole and hacking, to the alarm of their handlers. A careful hand will take out the plastic stuck in its mouth and rub the hump of its back, the yak will moan its gratitude and continue to graze. The wolves will descend for the summer, have their pups, and fight with bears to take the kill of a tahr, a bharal, and a moschus, leaping over the flaps of the tents torn by the wind.

When the people are gone, the snow leopard climbs.

Each muscle is built for this thin air, the pressure of the ascent. Its claws dig into the snow, its paws keep steady on the rock, and yellow eyes peer at the blued skin. The crust of ice and frost along finger tips. Exposed flesh turned beige and gray under the delusion of need for heat. The snow leopard doesn't eat them. The flesh is too hard. Not rotten; plasticine.

Eight.

This was the number this year.

All were left on the slopes.

The tahr climb high on the mountain when the people are gone, and the snow leopard chases. It's near the peak that the camera, lodged in the snow, sucked into the ground by ice melted and frozen over, brushes against its front paw. That's where the snow leopard finds her.

A black nose sniffs at snow-cruled hair, nudges against a bone that's jutting out of frozen flesh. The lips are still parted, tongue purple and white. The snow leopard sits with her.

Chomolungma shudders. The Sky Goddess shakes the snow on the mountain. The snow leopard watches from its perch on a juttred black rock as the sheets of ice growl in their descent, taking the camera and her with it. The snow leopard stares, unblinking.

In his painkiller induced high, mixed in his blood with the alcohol, weed and melatonin, Felix ignored the woman looking at him in the reflection of his bedroom window overlooking San Diego. The skyline over the ocean shifted from deep blue to white.

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"Avalanche on Mount Everest uncovers bodies of climbers."

Emery Mae Bradoc-Joshi. 32.

Professional animal photographer and conservationist. Native of Missoula, Montana, she's survived by her wife, Harleen Bradoc-Joshi, and their daughter, Sonya.

Presumed cause of death: complications due to hypothermia and high-altitude pulmonary edema.

Himalayan black bears were picking at her clothing when her body was found in the collapsed, hard snow of the avalanche. The autopsy report unearthed a broken leg that was likely the reason behind her hypothermia and eventual death. Her broken Nikon D5 was found with her body. There was no professional climbing gear left with her. Previous attempts to find her body had proven unsuccessful and unsafe for the Sherpa rescuers. At the request of her wife, Harleen, her body was returned to their home in Burlington, Vermont, where she was then given a proper burial and funeral.

Emery was not a climber, but a nature photographer on assignment to catch photos of snow leopards hunting ibex on the mountain on assignment, as well as the build up of trash and compost that have been littering the slopes of Everest and growing in size every year. Her former colleagues *National Geographic* have gone on record to praise her photography and willingness to venture to extreme landscapes and conditions for the sake of bringing attention environmental issues and animal conservation. Her camera is still being examined for any photographs and further evidence of how she died.

Emery was reported missing when she didn't return to Camp IV. No one reported seeing her on assignment while she was injured, but inquiries continue to be made. There have been no sightings of snow leopards, as they are solitary creatures that avoid the mountain during peak climbing season, which runs from April to May, and depending on weather, Mid-June.

∞∞

There were three hundred tourists on the mountain the spring when Felix and his troupe climbed to the summit that May. Professional climbers, amateur climbers, English speaking and not, their faces blurring together into smears of goggles, bulky clothing, the hiss of oxygen tanks, and the crunch of snow beneath heavy boots. Felix read *Into Thin Air* a year before deciding he wanted to climb the Bastard, having already climbed at least ten of the best peaks the Earth had to offer so far. Krakauer was full of shit. They had better technology than that man did now and Felix and his group had the money for proper equipment. Peter and Talia were the more experienced climbers who had the trust of their guide when they paid for their share: they had no issues beyond minor injuries once they reached the summit. Their Sherpa had plenty of backup oxygen tanks and first aid materials in case anything happened. The weather was amiable: the wind was piercing but no more harsh than a typical spring in the Himalayas. The skies were smiling on them, keeping any hint of storms or blizzards away on the other side of the mountain range.

As far as Felix was concerned, he had the best climbing group he could ask for, and with that, felt no need to talk to any of the other groups nor even his own teammates beyond belaying

each other on the narrow straits. In the best climbing weather conditions, with the best gear, the best guides that his money could recruit, there was no need to even consider any other groups on the mountain. All Felix knew was the weight of his gear on his back, the thick layers of his insulated pants and jackets, the high-altitude boots and the sunscreen that cooled on his hot skin while the sun bore down in a white glare from above. When the sweat pooled on his nose beneath the goggles, he tilted his chin at the sun in defiance. While he was on the climb, every single solo step determined whether or not he would make it to the top.

The wind howled so loudly and the Bastard was so expansive it truly was only him, the other members of his group, and the mountain. Felix drank in his determination and the rush of adrenaline as his muscles ached, burned and tendons split with each stomp into the ice. Felix stared down Khumbu's void, spat into it, and walked across.

It was so dark, black, turquoise blue and white, the bones had been buried by snow. Felix never could've seen them.

Several of his crew-mates laughed when they saw Felix spit into the crevasse. The older members scowled, shaking their heads at Felix's lack of professionalism. Narcs. The goggles the Sherpa wore hid their faces and they said nothing to Felix nor the other climbers. They whispered in Sharpa and inclined their heads towards the gorge. Felix clicked his tongue and wondered what they were saying about him, bemused.

The ice moaned.

During a rest after crossing Khumbu, Felix wandered to take pictures of the sunset before the clouds roared in. Each time they made a rest stop, Felix took pictures of where he was, sometimes joined by Talia and Jonathan for selfie photos.

A single turn away from his group, and Felix was alone with the mountain.

From the white and foamy blue, juts of black stabbing out of the snow, Felix saw black horns and then a lion mane. Burning brown and red, square pupils stared at him and its even-toed hooves scaled the rocks with more grace and ease than even the most experienced climber, than even George Millay. Its horns curled till the tip aligned with the jaw.

A ram with the mane of a lion.

There shouldn't have been any animals this high on the mountain.

Crack.

The tahr fled, and she fell.

The slow build of snow piling together. Rocks crashing against one another, the sound fading into the skyline of the mountain. A snapping sound that ripped through Felix's coat, gloves, and flesh.

The Bastard stood in cool indifference when her scream ripped through the clouds. It did not move for her. It moved not for her, and moved not for Felix as she crawled towards him, cradling her broken camera, hanging a noose around her neck, with her left leg bent at a degree that was almost 180.

She reached out.

"Help me."

∞

“She should’ve known better than to have gone up that high by herself. She wasn’t a climber. Even the most experienced climbers wouldn’t go up that far without a guide or a group. What was she thinking?”

Felix would’ve never heard about the avalanche if not for one of his former crew-mates sending him a link to the news article over text, saying quite simply, *Did you hear about this?* Taking the opportunity to exit the chill of his office, he took his break and went to the roof to read the article in full—the avalanche, the dozens of bodies that slid down the mountain. Some with their limbs still in tact, if broken, others barely shreds of frozen flesh. Some bodies were old, buried under lays of ice and snow, their clothes not even having the dignity of being trail markers. Others were little more than bones barely covered by paper-thin white flesh, identifiable only by whatever items were still on their person. Other bodies were recent.

All eight of the people who’d died during the year of his climb had been found in the pile of snow, abandoned gear and trash at the bottom of the mountain range, on both sides of the border. Any previous rescue attempts had been shot down over concerns of safety for the local Sherpa, who were reluctant to traverse the mountain at any point beside the designated spring months.

Felix didn’t recognize any of the names of the deceased. Not from the years before, and none of the climbers who had attempted to conquer the mountain at the same time he did. Their names were indistinguishable to him. Only through his contacts list and the group message he’d shared with his crew-mates did he even remember their names: any chance of remembering the others were nil.

“They’re going to start calling all of the other listed climbers that year for any information about how they might’ve died. Some families are looking to sue.”

An icy breeze cut through the smog and crept down the back of Felix’s sweat laden neck. He jostled with his collar and let the drops slide down the length of his spine. “What for?”

One of his crew-mates, Peter, hummed over the phone. The Denver air was quieter over the phone in comparison to the cacophony of cars and groan of the ocean along the coast. It figured to Felix that a professional climber like Peter would choose to live in a place like Colorado. Felix couldn’t imagine living in a place like that, surrounded by the mountains. He preferred the flatness of the coast and kept the Laguna Mountains at a distance.

Felix could not handle having that mountainous chill follow him to the place he lived.

“To find someone to blame,” said Peter. His scoff was annoyed, audible and wry. “They always do.”

Felix’s grip on his phone tightened.

“It was an accident.”

A pause on the other side. “Yeah, they’re always accidents. That’s the risk you take when you go on the mountain. Any mountain.”

He scratched the dull end of his finger on the roof railing and stared out towards the shoreline. It was the tail end of the summer and he’d yet to visit the beach. The bandages on his feet and fingers hadn’t come off until late July, but the nails had yet to grow back in, no matter how much water and moisturizer he used to foster growth, even on his dominant hand. He still felt the electric shock of sharp pain from when they’d shattered to pieces and fallen off the in

basin of water back in the tent every night before going to sleep. With the electric shock, he heard and felt the stutter of a cold wind on his face.

The cold refused to leave him.

“Nothing will come of it,” said Peter. Felix heard the rustle of metal clinking together and tight cords: already, Peter was planning another climb. Felix was in no mood to be so familiar as to ask where he was going next. “Every climber knows how easy it is to make a mistake or stumble on Everest and get yourself hurt or killed. Everyone knows it before we go up there. You knew it and you’re even less experienced than me, and you still came out fine.”

Irritation pricked at the tip of Felix’s tongue at the teasing, Peter’s confidence leaking through the phone. “I’ve climbed ten mountains before even coming, and it was hardly the most difficult,” said Felix, hand clenched fully over the railing. “Not everyone up there was a climber, though.”

“Oh, right. The journalist.” Peter didn’t sound worried. Instead, he grunted, the physical motion of throwing a pack over his shoulder audible. “Even less grounds for someone to sue there, no matter what her crazy wife says. She shouldn’t have been up there to begin with, especially alone. Probably got herself killed.”

Felix pursed his lips. Chapped, still prone to breaking and bleeding no matter how much chapstick he used—something he never would’ve had before—nor how much water he drank, even when he drank enough to cause a stinging pain in his bladder.

“Have you ever seen a dead body on a mountain before?”

Peter made a surprised noise, though it was pleased. He sounded eager to talk. “Sure I have,” he chirped. “Everest has the highest count, but I’ve seen them on Denali, too. You see most of them on the Washburn route. You’ve been on it before, right?”

Felix made a noise in agreement, rubbing his chest with the heel of his palm.

Peter continued, “Someone died the year I climbed it, too. Not in my group, obviously, but in the group right after mine.”

“What happened?”

Delight flooded Peter’s voice. “He made the first mistake by not sticking with his group while on Motorcycle Hill. He slipped and got stuck on a rock formation with a broken leg.”

Felix swallowed. “What happened next?”

“The group had to keep going, obviously,” said Peter. “If you pay that much money to climb and you know the risks but still don’t follow protocol, the climbers who do and are that close to the summit aren’t obligated to help you.”

∞

She made no sound with her heavy boots as she meandered after him, only leaving behind the fractals of ice and snow on the floor in a breadcrumb path. Her rasping breath was so loud that Felix hadn’t slept a full night in weeks. Felix managed to sleep out of pure exhaustion for a few spare hours at a time when his body took over his mind, but when he woke up, his blanket was a sheet of frozen fabric and the woman would stand at the foot of the bed.

The woman would stare at him. Her camera would hang around her neck. Her left leg still bent at that angle that made the soles of Felix's feet ache every time he saw it.

She never touched him.

She only stared at him.

Her ice blue eyes, red veined and sagging with purple shadows, never blinked.

Felix never looked her in the eye.

"I didn't do anything, it was your own fault," he said, muttering into his beer bottle. "I didn't do anything, so why do you keep fucking following me you fucking psycho *bitch*—"

The empty beer bottles on his coffee table shattered into pieces, flying at the walls and stabbing into the carpet. Not a single shard touched him. Felix looked at the woman and she stared ahead, her gait unmoving and stagnant.

Frost coated the glass that'd broken onto the floor.

Felix didn't even feel the shards stab into his bare feet as he stood and rushed to stand in front of the woman. Hops and alcohol burned at his opened flesh and the smell of beer mixed with the harshness of blood. They mixed together in an oily solution.

"What do you want from me?" Felix screamed.

The woman said nothing.

The shards dug into his foot. It was less painful than the frostbite which he still felt tremors of long after it'd healed. He still couldn't move his smaller toes the same way as he did before.

"When will you fucking say something!"

The woman closed her eyes.

The T.V. came on with a static pop, soft and muffled, and the pixelated lights flashed on the walls. Its reflection against the shards of broken bottles glimmered against the ceiling in an array of colors.

Images flashed on the screen, the amount of colorful gear, trash and tents left behind blurring into a smear of blues, greens and browns. A photo of Emery when she was alive came on the screen, crouched in front of a shy red panda with her camera in hand. The red panda's tail was curled inwards, afraid, but its snout was stretched outwards towards the frame of Emery's camera, peering curiously at the woman sitting on her stomach to get a close up of the shy arboreal. She was smiling, eyes crinkled in mirth. Her skin looked warm, pink and lively.

Her wife, Harleen, swallowed, trained her jaw and raised her chin. She stood on a podium, wearing white shalwar and kazeem. The podium was surrounded by calla lilies. The camera zoomed out to show the interior of the funeral home she was speaking in. In the foreground, there was a wicker coffin covered with a thin white shroud.

“I've been criticized for not allowing Emery's body to stay on the mountain like the rest of those who've died while on Mount Everest,” said Harleen, “But I don't take the words of egotistical athletes any heart. Emery wanted to preserve the landscape of the mountain, to remind people that animals still live there, that it's a place we should conserve— I knew my wife's wishes: she would've never wanted to be left there. In her own writing she said, ‘if it is impossible, leave me there, but if there is a way, give me back to nature properly.’ With the avalanche, she was able to come home. Now, I can allow her to rest properly.”

The screen turned black before Felix could see her cry on camera.

The woman stared at the television as Felix collapsed to his knees and vomited. He gasped, clutched his throat and felt the ice bite at his vocal chords. Pink sputum and saliva trailed down his chin to his throat, over the hollow and towards his chest as he looked up at her.

The woman looked down at him. Her eyes were bright and wet.

Emery parted her lips.

“Help me.”

∞∞

When he walked across the ladder bridge over Khmubu, Felix walked on steady feet. The winds were low, a slow building hiss that would gradually grow in mass and force as the sun started to set. It was late March. The climbers hadn't flown in yet for the next summit season.

It'd been nearly a year since his ascent.

He only wanted to climb to a certain elevation. With enough money and promise in writing that he wasn't trying to reach the summit, acknowledging that this wasn't the safe season for climbing and knew all of the possible risks involved, the Sherpa let him go. They had not been pleased by his being there during the off-season: they still had weeks to prepare for the influx of visitors from abroad and what measures had to be taken, and Felix could feel their ire as he stood in one of the centers at the base. With enough cajoling and money, he managed to convince them, but he didn't ask for a guide. They did not offer him one.

Felix put on his gear and started his climb at midnight. Pink sputum clung to his lips and moistened his face mask as he began his ascent.

A pack of tahr, the lion-goat chimeras, watched him as he climbed and made their trek down the mountain like dancers. They were red ghosts of Everest, escaping the white mountain phantom that made the mountain its territory. Overhead, a vulture that was the largest Felix had ever seen in his life flew over the pack, going the opposite direction of the pack's movement. A recent kill had been made.

Felix didn't remember seeing so many animals the year before. He'd barely seen any birds.

Once he'd crossed the gorge, the frigid air of night keeping the ice sturdy, Felix made the slow, agonizing trek to his destination.

She was waiting for him there, broken camera between her hands, the bits of her hair that'd come out from underneath pure white from the frost clinging to it. Her broken leg hung over the edge of the ledge and she was unblinking. Emery didn't stir as Felix sat next to her.

It began to snow.

The sky was pale blue with darkness bleeding into it as the gray clouds stirred overhead. The wind began to howl and hiss. Felix took off his goggles and rested them by Emery's hip. Shards of her broken camera clung to the rocks where the plastic stuck to ice.

"Was this the last thing you saw?"

A click of Emery's camera went off.

Shuffling off his coat, Felix laid it down on her lap like a blanket. The chattering of her teeth and rasping stopped. She closed her eyes, and Emery exhaled.

"I didn't help you," said Felix.

He took off his gloves. He put them in Emery's lap.

“I did this.”

The skin on his fingers began to turn blue, bubbling with each swell as heat rushed to protect Felix.

Emery smiled.

The camera clicked once more, and Felix heard the guttural, sharp and harsh sound of what was a human cry of pain and the ugliest croon. Felix turned, and in the endless white, he spots of black and gray curl and twist as the white mountain ghost descended cliffs and rocks that would slice through any human’s bare hand at the merest touch.

Icy blue burned through Felix as the snow leopard approached, leaving no trace of footprints in its path. Its tail stood high as it crept closer. Each spot was an eye in the endless abyss of white. Each eye bore at him.

The snow leopard’s lips didn’t part as it began to growl, shaking with each powerful groan of Sagarmatha.

Felix closed his eyes and offered his neck.

Polecat and the Owl

As Soldier Boy, he arrived on their doorstep. Eyes haggard, boots weary and weathered with scratches, welts in the leather, fraying at the heel, he was singing of a girl beckoning him home, a girl that didn't yet exist. Tall, thin, eyes warm and honey brown, he cut a pitiful figure as he knocked on their door, asking for directions to the train station.

He wiped his boots on the mat as Father beckoned the Soldier Boy inside. Mother brought with her the sharp, acidic aroma and waft of fresh brewed coffee from the kitchen. The Soldier Boy drank by the fireplace, and then the daughters three merged from the dark of the staircase to observe their guest.

Soldier Boy glanced upon the Oldest Sister. Eyes brown, almost yellow in the firelight, graced him with a quick glance before returning her attention to the Youngest, who sat on the floor with her elbow pressed against her sister's knee, staring up at her. They spoke amongst themselves in whispers: the Youngest's voice was high, mirthful and not yet broken from its childishness. The Oldest's was low, thick as the honey that sweetened Soldier Boy's coffee. The Oldest crooked the thin string of her yarn into the crook of her needle, then swam its sharp point through the canvas of her embroidery palette. Each movement was careful, controlled: power ran through each little muscle in her wrist.

Soldier Boy knew she had to be his Bride.

The Oldest, he would have in his basket.

Father brought Soldier Boy white bean and sausage soup for his meal and Mother made nest of blankets and pillows for him to rest on the couch by the fire. Mother drew her daughters close and she kissed each of their smooth foreheads, tucked their braids behind their ears, and

left for bed. The Youngest—eyes dark and round, wheat-blonde—left first. The Middle—bow-legged and taut, moon-yellow in the eye—came after. The Oldest threw another log into the fireplace and gathered her needles, yarn, and canvas.

“Please, won’t you sit and talk with me?” asked Soldier Boy.

The Oldest’s lips pressed together. “I should join my sisters, it’s late.”

“Coming home has been so long and painful, I cannot offer your family my thanks enough—but is it too much to ask for your company before I sleep?”

The Oldest’s eyes glowed yellow-orange in the fire, jaw taut.

Hungry, the Soldier Boy smiled. “Your mother and father are generous folk, to let me rest for the night. They make for good conversation, but I wish to know you, too. Just talk with me for a little while? It’s been so long since I’ve had the privilege to sit with such a beautiful and skilled young woman.”

The Oldest’s posture was rigid and Soldier Boy raised his eyebrows, turning his head on his pillow so that his hair turned sandy in the fire. He smiled, and he knew it softened his youthful face.

His smile widened when the Oldest exhaled through her teeth and sat on the plush footstool next to the couch. She lowered her palette and kept her hands close to her lap, fingers coiled together. Soldier Boy offered her sweet words and compliments of her beauty, the fierceness of her lips and her stature. The Oldest replied with nods and hums, and no more.

The fire wavered, and the Oldest rose for bed. Before she could leave the sitting room, the Soldier Boy grabbed her hand and threw her into his bag. He rose to his feet and walked out the door. The army bag he tossed over his shoulder as if it were light as yarn.

Father wept, Mother howled. The Youngest took the needles and the Second Daughter took the yarn. In the room they shared, they sat on the Oldest's bed and continued to embroider the palette, weaving the brown-gold yarn to and fro.

*

Two weeks later, the Officer came to the door to offer them help in finding their eldest daughter. The Second Daughter saw him approach the gate as she tended to the honeycombs. She took the cleaver, the bees parted for her, and she chopped at the edge of the nest. The smell of clover and wildflower nectar was thick as she took the combs in her gloved hands, unbothered by the honeybees that flew around her legs, dancing around her taut skin. She took only her share.

From underneath her wide-brimmed hat, the Middle Daughter saw the Officer staring at her from the gate. The Officer smiled at her, his uniform pressed and new, and the Middle Daughter lowered her hat as she strode back inside on quick feet.

The Officer was sympathetic while Father attempted to stay composed as he told the officer of the Soldier that took their Eldest away, of how their Eldest was suddenly spirited away by the poor Soldier Boy they'd allowed into their home.

"Do you mean to suggest that your daughter didn't elope," began the Officer, a smile sitting on the corner of his mouth, "But that she was *kidnapped*? You're sure of this?"

"There is simply no other option," said Mother. "My eldest would never elope with a man she just met. She would never elope at all. She's never shown interest in marrying. No man would change her mind."

The sisters listened from the kitchen. The Middle Daughter crushed the honeycomb with her mortar and pestle while the Youngest started the stove for her. The hair on the back of the

Second Daughter's neck rose as the Officer's eyes drew to her, appraising her post-adolescent body and the tight braids of her hair that were held to the back of her head.

By the time the Officer was gone, promising to return with whatever information he could gather, the honey was thick, cooling, with tiny crushed petals of lavender spread throughout. Through the window, the Middle Daughter saw that the Officer was standing idle by the gate and she drew the curtains before he could meet her eyes.

He came back three days later with no news on the Eldest's whereabouts. The honey was stacked in jars in the kitchen, complete and glowing a warm gold. The Officer said that, by this point, the Eldest Daughter was either dead or had truly eloped with the Soldier Boy—she was no longer a little girl; they couldn't bring her back against her will if it were so.

Father held Mother back from throwing a cup of scalding milk at the Officer. She screamed that he didn't care enough to try to look for her daughter, that he wasn't taking this seriously. Mother ordered him to get out.

With a bowed head, he did. He lingered to give his compliments on the honey to the Middle Daughter.

The Middle Daughter took one of the jars of wildflower honey and rested it by the Youngest's bedside. It sat next to the needle and palette.

On the palette was the finished stitch of a white-tailed sea eagle in a patch of orange pot marigolds. Halfway finished on the palette was a peregrine falcon. The flowers had not been yet stitched on the fabric.

The Middle Daughter stared at her older sister's empty bed.

*

The Middle Daughter spent every morning cultivating the wildflowers the bees took nectar from. In the afternoon, with a box of jarred honey, she went around from house to house selling jars. Once her arms were empty, she stretched her legs in a sprint over fences and followed the mockingbirds until she saw the Officer guiding an old man back home. She slid to a slow gait before the old man called her over, asking if she was the beautiful, quick-footed girl who sold the best honey in town.

“I am,” said the Middle Daughter, regarding only the old man.

The old man smiled wide, skin pulled thin with the movement of his jaw.

The Middle Daughter felt the muscles in her calves twitch.

“As beautiful as the honey you make tastes. I am so glad to meet you at last. Would you like to have a cup of tea with me?”

“I shouldn’t,” said the Middle Daughter. “It’s almost dinner and I should help my father with the cooking. They’ll be expecting me.”

“Oh, you needn’t stay terribly long.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice lowering a pitch, hard. She took a step back. “I have to go home.”

“Don’t you worry, young lady,” said the Officer, stepping forward. “I’ll be sure to escort you home if you’re afraid.” He smiled, full of teeth.

The Middle Daughter threw the empty box at the Officer’s face and made to run, but the old man grabbed her by the wrist. The Officer threw the Middle Daughter into one of his chest pockets.

The Officer and the old man walked together towards the edge of the town and into the forested trail that wove along the village border.

*

A funeral for two empty caskets, two urns with no ashes inside. That is what Father prepared as Mother raged. The Youngest was left alone in a room made for three. She pushed all three beds together until they were one, but slept only in her own. A golden jar of honey sat next to the embroidery palette.

The nights were unbearable. She soon took to sleeping underneath the blackthorn tree in the yard, not too far from the bee hives and honeycombs her sister used to tend to. And under the shade in the day, the Youngest continued her sister's stitch. She finished the peregrine falcon, strings of rue curling about her deep brown and rich black feathers. She began fell asleep in the yard regularly, leaving the dinner table early to find evening light under the blackthorn tree. One morning, just before dawn, she woke to the dark eyes of a barn owl staring at her from its perch on her knee. The brown crown of its face was severe as it raised its mahogany wings and screeched at her. Its scream cut the growing orange morning, but she was not scared. She savored it, allowed it to simmer, and she offered the barn owl a smile. With a final flare of its feathers, sharp as knives and glowing blood-red in the dawn, the barn owl swept away back into the forest beyond the town. In its wake, the owl left a little pile of feathers in her lap.

The Youngest Daughter took the pile of feathers and put them at her bedside, next to the yarn, the needles, and the jar of honey.

On the front porch of the house, the youngest daughter sat and waited. She embroidered and ate the honeyed cream profiteroles that her mother made. They tasted bitter, the cream curdled and sour. She ate them all.

Two weeks later, a man came to the door.

The man's suit was a deep navy blue that shimmered in the dusk light and his hair was slicked back, away from his forehead, and his polished shoes made graceful clacks against the wood and concrete. The Youngest Daughter saw him approach from the nook of her window and the man offered her a smile, lines of his eyes stretching across his face. Mother answered the door and before she could slam it shut again, he wedged a polished shoe in the frame.

“Please, allow me to help you. I want your family to get the justice you deserve.”

The Barrister was handsome in the way a fresh-faced law school boy ought to be: charismatic and intelligent, he knew all of the right things to say to get what he wanted. None of the shyness of the Soldier Boy. None of the smug coldness of the Officer. This one was polished and poised. The Barrister folded his hands on top of his briefcase and drew his eyebrows in sympathy as the father told the barrister of their plight, of the lost girls.

“Don't worry—I'll make sure that those who've failed your daughters will pay.”

He smiled and it was sharper than any cat's.

“I will make sure to keep your youngest safe, as well. Not a finger will lay on her.”

The Youngest stitched at the kitchen table as the barrister spoke with her parents in the living room. They offered him tea with honey and lime. He said that it was the best honey he'd ever tasted—the taste of lavender and wildflowers lingered on the mouth as he drank

The Youngest continued to stitch every day for two weeks. And every day for two weeks, the Barrister man returned. When he came, she sat in the kitchen and continued to weave her silver needle through the white fabric of the palette, feet bare and ankles crossed, a warm piece of sweet bread dipped in honey by her elbow.

She knew the Barrister was looking at her, of course. She knew the eyes of men who looked upon her sisters and herself. Her silence made her a triumph when she broke it and told the Barrister that yes, she would sit with him in the garden as she stitched. He stared at the long ruffles and layers of her skirt as she sat in the rocking chair bobbing her foot up and down to the sound of a bluebird's cry, and the Youngest Daughter knew what he wanted. When he asked to see her embroidery, she showed him the palette.

"Your fingers are magic." he said, moving his chair closer to her. "Such intricate design must take you hours, surely your wrists get sore and tired. You have a talent."

The Youngest lowered the palette to her lap. "Thank you for your compliments, but this is no talent of mine. This belonged to my eldest sister before she was taken from me, from us. I have to finish it for her."

The Barrister hummed. "You miss them."

"Always."

The day grew dark. Mother was cleaning the kitchen and the living room alone, for Father could barely get himself to come out of bed these days. Mother's restlessness had burned into the wooden floor of the kitchen and the hallways, always arranging the table for five, not for three.

The Barrister put his hand on the arm of her rocking chair, bringing it to a stop.

“I know how you can see them again.”

He held out his open palm, and she took it.

Throwing the Youngest Daughter into his briefcase, the Barrister cast his suit off and entered the forest as the Sorcerer. The nearly finished palette was left behind.

*

The Youngest stepped out of the briefcase and found herself in a manor deep in the woods. The curtains were made of soft satin, the wood of the floors and tables was rich and polished, smooth beneath her hands, the smell of cooked meat thick and delicious in the air, and gold-painted heads of the kill were strewn up against the walls. The Sorcerer took her hands in his and brought her close, and like all three of the faces he wore before, he was handsome and thin, nose narrow and eyes glittering, wet but not mournful. He stood tall over her and though his hands on her waist, on the small of her back, were gentle on the surface, she felt claws retract from his fingertips.

“Welcome home,” said the Sorcerer. “I know that you will be the one I marry at last. You are intelligent but you know your place. You look at me without suspicion. And you are humble. You respect me and so, I respect you. But I must see how loyal you are to me.”

Releasing her, the Sorcerer gave her a golden key and an egg. He told the Youngest Daughter to never go into the only locked room in the entire manor, or else he would have to send her away.

The Youngest smiled and kissed the shell of the egg, letting her lips linger. “I promise.”

Before he departed, the Youngest pressed her body against his as he kissed her, letting her hips rub against his body. His hand lingered low on her back before he left. And he finally he was gone, off to prepare the wedding party.

The Youngest Daughter, now alone in his manor, tapped the nail of her thumb against the ivory egg to see how thin the shell was. The shell echoed in the darkness of the manor. The shell was off-white and as she held it up to a light, the youngest daughter saw coils of washed-out red.

She smelled the blood before she saw the stains beneath the forbidden doorframe. Placing the egg in the pocket of her skirts, she took the key, twisted and opened the door.

Down a flight of a steps to a room beneath the manor, she found the bones of dozens of women and the bodies of her sisters, chopped into pieces against the floor. Their flesh was still flush with what used to be life, skin hanging off of the bones like wet paper. The smell of rotting flesh and decayed matter permeated the thick waft of the bloody chamber and the cold insulation of the room wasn't enough to keep the stench from coating her nostrils and throat.

Her weeping was angry and tooth-grinding as she took the needle she'd kept hidden in the tight bun of her hair and the yarn she'd put into her brassier. She kept with her also a jar of honey and this she produced from her skirts. Her rage echoed in the dark as she began sewing her sisters' bodies back together. Hiking up her skirts, her knees pressed against the dried and not-quite dried blood and grime that coated the cold floor as she gathered the pieces, tying an elbow back into place with its forearm, the Middle Sister's neck to her shoulders, using the honey as glue. The Youngest was careful to not disturb the bones of the other women as she stitched her Oldest Sister's left thigh back onto her hip. For hours, she kneeled on the floor of the bloody

chamber, surrounded by corpses decayed and decimated, and did not stop to eat or drink until she'd finished.

The solemn hooting of the owl over the treetops faded into the songs of morning birds as dawn broke and the youngest sister had finally stitched her sisters back together. With all of their limbs and body parts stitched in the right places, their skin sallow and sickly but slowly gaining color, the older sisters blinked back to the living. And the Youngest wailed, grief and joy intertwined.

In the bloody chamber, the revived sisters embraced the Youngest, kissed her cheeks, and held her close.

"I'm so sorry," wept the Youngest, "I'm so sorry I couldn't do anything."

"That's not true," said the Middle Sister. She cupped the Youngest's face and her legs twitched with life, ready to run, to fly. "You did everything we could've asked of you. You took my honey, as I knew you would."

"And you took the needle and yarn I left behind. I knew you would come for us, come for me. You did everything right." The Eldest kissed her Youngest Sister's forehead. In the cold basement chamber, the bones of women and girls who'd been stolen from their homes strewn about the floor, they were warm. "Now—"

"Tell us what you want us to do next."

*

When the Sorcerer returned a week later, the egg was as smooth and pale-off white as it'd been when he left and the door to the chamber was locked. Not a hint of blood was present on the golden key and his bride was already preparing her wedding veil. "You truly are the one for

me,” he said. “You are the only one who has ever been truly loyal. When would you like us to be wed?”

His bride looked up from the veil she was stringing orange lily petals into by the open window and offered him a smile. “As soon as possible.”

The Sorcerer gathered his wedding guests and as they gathered outside of the manor, the Youngest Daughter saw, from her window, faces familiar and not: men from the local courthouse, bankers, lawmen and their wives and the ladies that clung to their free arms. As he gathered the guests outside, the Youngest Daughter took the skull of a stag from the wall, decorated it with gold and jewels, and placed the veil on top of its head. She put it in the window, and the wedding party looked up at what they saw as the beautiful bride while she prepared a bath.

Standing in the tub, the Youngest Daughter uncorked the vial of honey the Middle Daughter had made and poured what was left over her body. Endless honey coated her naked form until she was utterly soaked in the wildflower scented honey, then she took the little pile of feathers from the barn owl, raised her arm, and let them fall over her. Her bones twisted.

“How strange,” a wedding guest said, his sheriff badge bright in the sunset. “An owl flying in the daylight? Perhaps it’s praising you for a wise choice in bride. Shame that the others were not a good fit for you.”

The Sorcerer smiled as an owl perched on the roof of his manor. It was an unusually large barn owl and it let out a piercing screech. Then it flew out over the wedding party before it disappeared into the trees.

“The Youngest Daughter clever in her lack of curiosity. Her sisters were far less so. How fortunate that she was also the most beautiful of the three.”

The sun set and the Sorcerer went to fetch his bride and begin the ceremony, a pastor from the church in town ready to marry them. But the room he'd given his bride was bathed in darkness. The candles were little more than withered wicks in pools of cooling wax. He frowned and cupped a dying flame in his palm as he called his bride to come to him. No voice answered him.

Brown glimmered deep maroon and gold as the rough beat of wings filled the silence to his call and a large body flew through the open window. Yellow talons clung to the ridges of the stag antlers.

The white-tailed eagle lowered her head as her wings flared out, soft brown feathers darkening into black. Her beak parted with a hissing noise before her call—a shrill shriek that made his skin recoil at the sound of its staccato laughter—rang out through the wedding party.

The Sorcerer had not a chance to do more than snuff out the flame in his hand before she lunged towards him, her talons first, and sank yellow claws into the flesh of his face.

Below, bodies scrambled to flee back into the woods as a peregrine falcon dove through the wedding party like a comet from the heavens, shrieking as its talons tore at their eye sockets and mouths. When the bodies fell to the ground, the falcon dipped her beak into their throats and pulled out strips and strings of their vocal chords.

A barn owl folded her wings against her body as she watched the blood splatter against the wedding veil and her heart-shaped face heard the sound of scurrying little feet. Her wings spread before the polecat could dip into the tall grass. It never heard her approaching until her talons had already sunk into its lanky body.

In the house emptied of the three daughters that once filled its wooden and brick walls with their swift feet and clever laughter, Mother held up the palette that'd been left behind by her lost daughters, holding it up to the light, sleep once more away from her. She ran her fingers over the newest, final addition to the cross stitch; a barn owl surrounded by oleander flowers.

Then, she heard a knock on the door.

The Liberata Virus

“Good Lady of Many Names— Onktkommer and Uncumber, She who prevents suffering, grieving Kummernis and sorrowful Frasobliwa, She who liberates us—Liberata, Librada, and She who rids us of our pains, Dèbarras— I beg you: set me free.

Before your single golden slipper, the other given to the fiddler who gifted you song, I offer you oats. I have no money, no riches nor jewels to give you, all I have are these oats, which would sow the seeds for the harvest. My Lady, give me mercy as God gave you when you refused to be given away like meat to hands that would bring you harm.

Make me abhorrent.

Make me ugly.

Make me seen as I want to be known.

Release me.

Merciful Lady, rid us of our tribulations. We are dying.

Beloved of the Gods and Holy Spirits, Saint Wilgefortis, Crucified Princess and Martyr—
pray for us.”

(Patient 0: The Girl)

In spring, the beards grew.

The first beard grew on the chin of a girl no more than twelve years old. She felt the first bristles when she rubbed her chin against her shoulder to wipe March dew off of her face. They left thin white tracks against her flesh. She dragged her nails against the strands: dark, thick and

coarse. She took her father's razor to her face. The porcelain sink stained red from wounded skin. The hairs remained.

Her mother saw the dark shadow along her chin three days later and grabbed her daughter by the jaw.

“Do you think you're a *man*?”

The next morning, her mother took her to the doctor and the girl began to bleed for the very first time and it was knives in the pit of her stomach, shattering her pelvis. Her jaw ached as she clenched her teeth through the squeeze of blood in her stomach while the doctor kneeled down to her line of sight and told her, with a smile, “Razors are not for little girls to use. It'll just grow back thicker. You don't want that, right?”

For the x-ray, her doctor ordered her to drink water until she felt like she was about to burst. “Drink until your bladder is full and don't eat anything before the ultrasound. Just pretend there is a baby inside of you,” the doctor said. “Think of it as training for when you grow up. It'll be quite similar, I reckon.”

The thought of a baby growing between her pelvis made the girl scream.

On the morning of her appointment, she refused to drink. Her mother forced ten cups of water down her throat. When she tried to relieve herself before the appointment, her mother pulled her hair hard enough to make her scalp sting until the girl cried out.

“We going to get rid of this as soon as possible. You'll thank me sooner or later. ”

Her stomach ballooned, full of water and urine and blood, straining against the confines of her skirt and she cried as the cool gel was spread across her stomach. As the nurse dragged the ultrasound x-ray against her skin, the bulging slope of her body disgusted her.

“Hold it in,” the nurse said.

The girl cried, “I can’t.”

“Hold it in, anyway.”

When the ultrasound was finished, she rushed into the bathroom and locked the door. It took an hour for the nurse to convince her to come out. As they exited the medical center, despite the muggy heat of early June, her mother made her wrap a scarf around the lower half of her face. In the car, the girl’s mother told the girl to keep the scarf on while the air conditioner blasted.

The girl took off her scarf when they arrived home and her mother didn’t look at her.

When alone in her room, the girl turned on her desk lamp and drew a red marker on her stomach where her uterus would be, tracing the rough shape of the organ and left little knicks and marks where the scalpel would cut it out once she was old enough.

The doctors found no fluid-filled sacs, no tumors, nothing malignant nor benign, in her uterine walls. The hormones in their daughter’s blood and DNA were average, a normal amount of estrogen, testosterone and androgen that a cisgender girl her age would have. There were no signs of excessive hair growth on other parts of her body besides her face.

The beard grew and grew, no matter how many times her mother took a pair of scissors to the girl’s face, no matter the amount of razors that she dragged across that fresh baby skin, still as soft as when her daughter was a newborn. Hot wax, honey sweet and thick, only made the girl scream from the pain when her mother ripped it off. Not a single hair came off of the sticky paper. No amount of shearing could rid the bristles and long strands away from her daughter’s face.

Under ultraviolet lasers, the dark hairs disintegrated only to grow back in minutes: full, thick, as if they'd never been cut in the first place. Desperate hundreds of dollars funneled into the girl being laid under the hot lights three times, all for nothing.

Her mother soon decided.

“Nobody can see you.”

And so they hid their bearded twelve year old girl away in her bedroom, took no more guests nor visits, and schooled her from home. The girl picked out the oats from her oatmeal, porridge and banana bread that her mother made and counted them, placing them on her windowsill as she looked at the greenery outside her window and the giant fir trees that stood up into the dark and the day. She began to braid the strands of her beard together and waited for the day it was long enough to scale the walls.

(Patient 157: The Maiden)

The Saint had been with her without name since she was a child.

Her patron Saint had been hidden behind the emaciated corpse that was hung on crosses, lit by stained-glass of rotating colors and fluorescent lights. Though the corpse, sculpted from plaster and wire, was flat-chested and bleeding from protruding ribs, her Saint shared its likeness so well that though the pastors and priests would call upon her as false over the centuries, as mere myth born out hysteria, but the Maiden knew that her Saint was real. Her Saint had breasts, dark robes that hugged her curves, and a chin coated by bristles, hairs and wiry strands that folded into the wrinkles of her dress.

Her Saint and the corpse of the Holy Son who decorated churches, cathedrals and shrines all across the world were twins, but the woman with the beard was *her* savior and her Saint had blessed the maiden from birth.

When she began to see echoes of her Saint out in the world, the Maiden felt no fear as many did. Women who had only known soft hairs on their cheeks now knew the harsh bristles that had lingered on the maiden's face since she was a child. They were forced to understand her in some part, now. The Maiden walked amongst the women with beards and was at peace. Though she was lapsed Catholic, excommunicated by her existence as a woman who did not fit the strict criteria of a binary sitting on a house of cards—she, a trans woman of neuroscience and lab studies, found solace in a modest church pew, knees pressed against the wood.

She did not pray, but she breathed. She removed one shoe and offered oats. In the echoes of the ceiling, she heard the plucked strings of a fiddle.

Her Saint came to her.

“Are you freed from your tribulations?” asked her Saint.

The Maiden smiled. “Yes. You've helped me. Thank you.”

Her Saint kissed her shaven face and the Maiden knew that she and her fellow women would always have the choice bestowed to them. Other women like her did not mind the hair that had been growing on their chins and cheeks since adolescence. The maiden found them a nuisance but her Saint had healed her. Other trans women would prefer to keep their beards but not the Maiden. She'd tired of them.

A fiddle's strings echoed in the bannisters of the cathedral and her Saint's beautiful, bearded face glimmered gold.

Not a single hair grew on the maiden's face ever again.

(Patient 567: The Wife)

The woman had been a good girl. A good daughter, then a better wife. Her mother taught her how to sew the holes in pants, slacks and shirts by the time she was seven. She could make a full course dinner alone by the time she was ten, her fingers scented with rosemary, basil, olive oil and the grease of pot roast. Her skin was clear of blemish and scarring: a result of a rigid routine of cleanser that stung against her open pores. She ate well, counting her calories with zealous under her watchful mother. Her father wore a matching ring with her that he had her promise not to take off until she was married to a man she loved. That she couldn't take it off until her wedding day, when he would pass on protection to her husband. She wore it every day until she was twenty-two, which is when her husband proposed to her upon the day of their college graduation.

He'd been the first man she'd dated, the first she'd ever been with. She didn't let him penetrate her throughout college, where they met at the Greek Living Gala at the beginning of their freshman year—fingers around his cock didn't count as sex, that's what her mother told her. So long as she didn't let anything inside of her—not fingers, not a cock, a tongue, if she did not wrap her lips around his cock—it would not count as sex.

Mother warned her that it would hurt, “You'll bleed, and you will enjoy it.” Mother had not warned her how much.

She'd known no other man—not a woman, had not allowed herself— so she rolled her hips through the pain that swelled with the pressure against her lower organs and wrapped her legs around his waist. She bit her inner cheek hard enough to taste iron as the pressure burst,

matching the sheets below with red. Her pelvis bones pressed against her skin and she held her husband to her breast like a babe as he came. On occasion, there was a sliver of pleasure. A rub against a soft bead that made her thighs twitch and stomach clench with heat, but it would be gone as soon as he was inside to the hilt.

The diploma holding her degree in religious studies sat on the fireplace mantle next to her husband's. Her husband's diploma remained open. Even in summer, she kept the fire going and she'd watch the brisk light lick at the hems of the sleek blue diploma folder. She contemplated throwing her diploma into the electric fireplace. She didn't remember a single thing from any of her classes. She didn't remember why she studied at all.

They were going to have children: not yet, but in three years, when she was twenty-five and he twenty-eight, then they would have children. He made sure to pull out before he came inside of her, but he kept her legs spread as took in the streaks of salty white against her cunt and the inside of her thighs. Sometimes he'd trace a finger over the trails they'd made. Though he had no desire for children just yet, he enjoyed the act of sex and the ritual of it: the fondling of her backside, the stroke of her hair, and her deft fingers against his belt, practiced and coerced by muscle memory. The squeeze of tender flesh beneath his fingertips, the sink of nails into pink: not enough to pierce, but enough to mark.

The woman had no feelings towards it whatsoever. When he finished, she would simply offer him a smile.

After fucking her against the kitchen counter two months into their marriage, he pulled on a strand of hair that rose up from her thigh, streaking towards the careful cut of her pubic hairs. She hitched a half-gasp when he pulled the hair out.

“Why don’t you take a day at the spa this weekend? I’ll book it for you.” He smiled. “I’ll make sure you get a wax and massage.”

Her thighs and cervix were dotted with raised, reddened pores when she left the spa. They left dots of blood on the inside of her underwear and skirt. Her clothes chafed against the raw skin.

He bought her clothes for her. Her jewelry, shoes, the brand of make-up that looked best on her, the eyeshadow palettes that best brought out the shade of her eyes, and facial routine. Little by little, more of her things that she’d had previously began to be replaced by new items bought for her. There was only one set of clothing that her husband urged her to keep, one that he’d ask her to wear some nights he felt particularly adventurous.

“I’m glad your uniform still fits you,” he said, sliding a hand underneath the plaid skirt she used to wear every day to high school. “You look so sexy like this.”

The woman felt the hairs on her sideburns when she was doing her facial routine at the same time she did every morning: 7:30, the smell of coffee wafting through the vents, and the water cold on her fingers. Perspiration from spring rain on the windows. She thought the first strand was just a stray peach fuzz that grew too long and pulled. It did not relent.

The hair grew from the sides of her face then to the cut of her jaw in two days. Fields of bristles and strands grew out of the under-skin of her chin. She felt the flush skin around her cheek bones and felt the soft carpet of fuzz harden. It bristled beneath her nails. When she managed to pull a strand out, it was thick and visible between the cuticles. The pore where she’d ripped it out bled, reddened, and faded. A fresh strand grew out not ten minutes later. The hairs

she carefully plucked from her upper lip lengthened into a mustache of light brown. Each individual bristle was visible against her skin.

By the time her husband returned a week later from a business trip, the beard had grown long enough for the tip to slip between the line of her cleavage, nestling into the collar of her shirt. No matter the amount of times she attempted to shave it off, the hair grew back in hours, then minutes. She gave up after three days.

When her husband saw her, he did not recognize her. He thought she was an exhibit from a traveling freak show his grandparents used to speak of. It was when he heard her voice come from those hairy lips that he realized it was his wife. Her husband felt his own chin, palm against the tip of his chin that couldn't grow more than scruff. He would not touch her.

The Wife had been so afraid the whole week, but when he saw her, she felt none of that fear. She was surprised at herself: the expression of horror and growing disgust didn't hurt her. His reluctance to touch her, lay in their bed or eat at their table with her, brought her no pain. He left on another business trip two weeks later and did not come back.

In the home that was now completely her own, she made herself a bowl of oatmeal, thickened with coconut milk, honey, raspberries and pumpkin seeds. The dry oats she didn't eat were left on the windowsill of the kitchen.

(Patient 82: The Crone)

Wrinkles set in the flesh like folds of old sheets that smelled of dust and the scent of bodies shifting through the decades. Her hair had long since lost its color: the bright and dark shades fading into pepper, gray, and white. The hair fell to the floor, the shoulders, visible against dark,

loose fabrics. It was best to let the flesh breathe instead of be confined in clothing that could jostle bones far more brittle than they once were.

Her husband had passed ten years ago, his mind gone before his body. Late April, the anniversary of his body's death. Her children scattered, her grandchildren drifted on wind, teetering back to her when they remembered her gifts of rings, earrings, and childhood toys carved by her own hands. The only things that grew with the vigor of life were the pots of basil in her window, the sill only large enough for one pot and a succulent.

She felt the beard when she washed her face, her hands moving to the sink with routined muscle before the light, as she washed the sleep and sweat from the wrinkles. The light switched on, and her beard was white as the curls on her head, the strands thin on her scale and exposing liver spots and wizened flesh.

The beard was full, far more handsome than the goats of her own great-grandfather's family farm in the Alps, curling at the end with a single peppery streak. Her husband had once joked that such a beard would fit her austere face, and she'd known it wasn't an insult.

She washed her face, made her morning coffee, and watered her succulent and basil. She hungered for oats.

(Patient 42: The Boy)

The boy was sixteen when he felt the first bristles on his chin. He'd been preparing for his Spring Recital. Legally known by his parents under a name that he did not see as his own, but made for him when he was only hours born, he had never been able to grow facial hair in the way so many men could. The hairs were as dark as the coils on his head, black against his deep brown skin, and as he brushed his fingers against the tips, he smiled.

His vision was a crisp 20/20 but the words on the music sheets were blurs that moved from line to line, the letters jumping from side to side, dancing just as the notes did. Looking at his music sheets for “Je te veux” for too long made the front lobe of his skull threaten to split open, but his fingers danced to the keys, color coded by dots and the stickers textured to his fingers, memorizing by ear and touch. When reading became too stressful, he sat at his bench and meditated, controlling his breathing and feeling his fingers against the keys, and then returned to playing. His father often worried about whether or not the boy could take the strain reading music required, but the boy was determined. He was too anxious to tell his father that his father’s child was not a daughter, but a son through written words, but his music would speak for him. Music was the language he best understood.

Now, the boy stroked his chin, dragged a fingertip along the coarse tips, and relaxed into his piano chair.

He started to brush the edges of his music notes, the sheets that were given to him by his teacher and the ones he wrote himself, the scraps of spoken word and rap beats and stanzas he’d jot down in a flourish at the height of an early morning inspirational high, against his chin. The bristles made the sound of velcro against the edges and they vibrated into his shoulder blades, loosening the tense muscles through his biceps, all the way to his knuckles. The tension in his body melted.

On a blank music sheet, he wrote a hymn: a tango of piano, deep, droning beats and a cello that echoed the mournful wail of the human voice. He couldn’t quite decide on the title, but imagined a defiant Saint, her smile coy and hidden amongst coils of hair, hated by a father who

saw his child as little more than chattel. A child who spoke to God and was granted a wish for safety.

Music was his God, and God spoke to him through his fingers and his lyrics and notes were his worship. He wrote his symphony and his signature was “Luca.” His true name, not the name he would let wither and die on his birth certificate. He would not be known as his parent’s daughter, but their son.

Before an audience of faces obscured by the shadow of bright lights that struck him hot against his skin, an audience largely decorated by similar bristles and strands as was on his face—men, women, little girls, others—he took his bow and plucked the stringed ribs of his cello and the boy, the son of his father and mother, spoke to God and the Saint.

(Patient 5542349: The Bearded Lady)

In the dim light of the pub, the bearded ladies broke bread, shared a table, and made a toast with their chilled glasses. Over their beer, they invoked the names of their late sisters.

“To Julia Pastrana.”

“To Krao Farini.”

“To Anne Jones.”

“To Jennifer Miller.”

“To Helena Antonia.”

“And to all the bearded ladies— May your beards not be scraggly but as fine and luscious as ours!”

As they drank, they laughed into their beer, the foam sticking to the curls and strands of the thick hairs that lined their beatific lips, the round curves of their chins and cheeks, and trailed down their necks to their breasts.

Eat Your Feelings

Ximena signed the lease for the duplex as soon as she saw the little room underneath the staircase even though she was the only person occupying the apartment. It was expensive and a strain on her budget, but roommates were a liability. Within a week, she'd moved all of her things into the space and started painting in the little room with the boiler before all of her clothes and kitchenware were out of their boxes. Ximena pulled out a folding chair, put up her easel and a 8x10 canvas, took a brush between her fingers and began to paint.

The brush was made of oak, thin and reedy: the drag of nails leaving grooves in the wood, scars littering around the edge of the thin metal that held the horse hairs together. Her grandfather had given her the brush when she was four, back when the polish was fresh, when the hairs hadn't bent under the weight of a textured canvas board. An electric lantern lit the dark, damp space that smelled of wet wood and plaster that easily peeled off of the walls, and Ximena painted without oils or watercolors. She had never needed paints. Paint came from her fingertips into the fine strands of the brush.

She didn't leave the little crawlspace underneath the stairs until she was finished painting the hind of a cow, the skin stripped off to reveal the muscle and the meat, the white sinews left behind from bone and the strings of pale beige for tissue. Hints of red colored the outer edges of the meat, but the inner thigh muscle was a deep brown, a slight shimmer of green seen from a certain angle. The writhing maggots were the last details to be added, crawling about the gaping holes in the flesh, the sound of their squirming visceral from within the painting. She could smell the scent of putrefaction; flesh that was already dead decaying further until there was no mois-

ture left, no blood, no juices or nutrients, only dead matter that had to be disposed of and taken out.

It was past midnight by the time she was finished and the smell of rotten meat was thick in the crawlspace. She lit up her oil diffuser, poured the lavender oil inside the slot, and left it in the living room before going to bed. By morning, the scent of fresh lavender would cover up the smell of rotting meat. If she had a roommate, she'd have to find a new space to paint and sketch or she'd have to burn incense and herbs in her room to smother the smell for hours at a time, if not the entire day. Guests were another liability. During the good weeks where the rotten meat wasn't being painted so much, she sometimes invited her colleagues over for thesis sessions, wine and made-for-TV films with terrible acting to destress. During the bad weeks, Ximena allowed no guests over and had to clean up and down the entire duplex to disguise the smell. Those weeks, she spent more time in the boiler room under the stairs than asleep in her bed. Most weeks were in between. The rotten meat still appeared, the roadkill was splashed across the canvas and the sketchbooks, but they were accompanied by other paintings: of living animals, rabbits, a bobcat, a mockingbird, a dense forest or a slightly muddy looking pond or river or lake.

Every night, her brush would wait for her in the boiler room.

Ximena considered herself fortunate. Instead of taking in the emotions of everyone around her, her own emotions spilled out on the canvas and painting brought her release. She'd seen how debilitating it was for her fellow empaths to take in the emotions of other people, how intense their lust, hatred and anger could be, all of the disgusting things they kept locked tight behind their smiles and charm, how it drained the life out of a body that didn't want to know the emotions of others—had never consented to know.

The price she paid for release was that her paintings came alive enough for their essence to be felt: in smell, taste, texture—the rotten meat could not be contained within the canvas. Her price was knowing that the meat came out of her, that she'd birthed it.

The first painting of rotten meat she'd ever painted was the carcass of a deer that'd been severed in half from the impact of a truck, intestines spilling out and coiled around the spinal cord. Mouth hanging open, tongue dried at the tip. She'd been five and a cousin, from her mother's side of the family, who'd been visiting from Morocco had teased her for her stained skirts that could never be quite washed out from the paint she used. He'd pulled her hair, called her names, and her uncles and aunts had laughed. She'd been painting in her room and her father had been alerted by the smell of putrefaction wafting through the vents.

Her father was a man who could sense the feelings of others. When he saw the painting, he looked at her and his expression lingered in Ximena like a welt that never healed properly.

He'd taken a spare sheet that had been freshly washed and put it over the canvas. What he felt from her, Ximena still did not know—her father was a quiet man, who knew the feelings of everyone around him but never allowed anyone to know his— but when he looked at her, her face felt hot from shame she didn't yet understand.

“Don't show anyone this.”

*

Empaths who took in emotions fell into cynicism and were the least trusting people Ximena had ever known. There was no true network between people like Ximena, but she'd met enough to know—through family, from the exhausted bags under eyes, from the way they carried themselves— that they rarely spent more time than necessary around those who weren't family,

if that, or fellow empaths. She'd seen what happened to empaths who'd taken in too much. She'd been to enough of their funerals and wakes. Too many had been within her family.

The shroud had been thin enough to see the line-work of skin when his body was lowered into the ground. There'd been no open casket funeral for her cousin. He'd been from her father's side of the family, who'd lived just a town over from where she'd grown up, and despite his ten years of age over Ximena, he'd treated her kindly, played with her, indulged in her childish whims. The will and instructions her cousin had left behind told his family to not cremate him: lower him into the ground with only a shroud and a bough of wildflowers and allow the dirt to drink in what would be left of his body. His father had tried to have a traditional cremation, regardless of the written wishes Ximena's cousin had crafted months before his death.

Ximena and her cousin's brothers found themselves in a vicious familial broil for days before the natural burial.

Her uncle had excommunicated her and his own children for betraying him; he was the father, that was *his* child—but that's not what her cousin wanted, Ximena and her cousins said. *This* is what he wanted, to be surrounded by the things he loved, the earth that didn't burden him with knowledge he didn't want.

In the dirt, he would become weightless.

His death had not been purposeful, not a self-inflicted punishment, but a weight that ate away at his bones until his skin was sagging, leaving his body open for disease and defeat. He didn't intend for it to happen, didn't purposefully allow his body to fail him, but he put little effort in trying to stop it—his body wouldn't let him. Her cousin didn't deserve to have to absorb all of those feelings put into his own body with nowhere to go, no way to process them within his

flesh. Those emotions that rose from others in a cloud were songs to him, the heavier the emotion, the louder and more piercing they were. He didn't deserve to have a gift that left him needing to wear noise cancelling headphones wherever he went just to be able to live without migraines that split his skull down the middle. If he'd been able, she was sure he would've built his own cabin in the Appalachian Mountains and grown a self-sustaining garden, away from all of the people and all of their weighty worries, pains, desires and hates, and the world would've been quiet.

Her cousin had been thirty-two. She'd been twenty-two at the time of his death. He'd been forced to contain too much. All that he took in infected his bloodstream, to each and every pore until the agony of holding all of that weight inside of him was too much to bear.

It was better to seep out than to absorb, but they had to be released with caution.

Ximena needed no paint in order to release all of the emotions and nerves that'd bundled up inside of her, all of her anger; all she needed was her scented oils to cover up the stench, a room, a lantern, access to an open field or wooded area, and a canvas. Her brush would do all of the rest for her.

When the paintings became too cluttered and filled up the rooms too much, when looking at what she had birthed out onto the canvas made her want to smash every piece of glass she owned, Ximena took the dried paintings, piled them into her car, and drove to nearby woods and took measures to find an isolated patch within the tall trees that stood dark and imposing over her, and she let the elements take them. The ones she destroyed and let be washed away by rain, animals and growths were the paintings of rotten meat. The others, the more acceptable ones, she sold at auctions and online. The flowers, the fresh baked bread, delicious food and streams—

their smells would be pleasant and they would bring contentment to whomever bought them. When they came alive, the owner of the painting would feel little more than pleasant relaxation. They would feel none of the chemicals in Ximena's brain that wanted to kill her and were made flesh.

Whatever happened to those pieces she'd left in the woods, she didn't know. Perhaps they became a feast for the vultures, coyotes and other scavengers that skulked about the darkness. A new nest for insects and vermin. When the guts and rot spilled out, the earth would take its bounty and eat.

Did you study art? She was frequently asked when she began selling her paintings years ago. Every time, Ximena would smile, swallow down her irritation and push it into her fingers, and say, "No, it's just a hobby."

Ximena didn't paint because she thought herself creative, imaginative or driven enough to create art: she did it because all of the emotion in her had to be released or else they'd start to implode in her body from within. Her insides would start to rot and wither, just like the roadkill and slabs of flesh in her paintings. If she didn't give those emotions an outlet, they would fester inside of her just as they'd killed her cousin. All of the emotions inside of her were her own, but that didn't make them any less deadly. Ximena was no artist and didn't consider herself one, despite selling her paintings and earning a modest side hustle for her work. To call herself an artist was an insult to those who put in the effort and the hard work required of the practice.

Artists created so that it could be shared with a world that was endlessly curious and intrigued by beautiful things, the sublime, the horrifying, and every stroke, brush of paint, and

streak of charcoal was intentional, the fingers working according to the command of the muscles and the brain.

Ximena's paintings of this roadkill were not meant to be shared.

Only the elements saw the faces of the rotten meat on canvas.

*

The paintings couldn't always wait for her to get home. During office hours, in between students coming in to ask for extensions or clarification about the dense research paper she'd assigned her Middle Eastern and Persian History students, Ximena sketched. In between answering emails, phone calls and grading, she took out a little sketchbook and drew with a dulled down pencil. The lead end was barely more than a blunt stub and there were grooves in the black wood where her nails had dug into. Adjuncts and Teaching Fellows had no offices but the cubicles did well enough to hide her notebook from view most of the time and if Ximena thought hard enough, she could pretend that no one else was around her.

The squeak of a chair being moved and pushed around drew Ximena's attention and she looked up to see the over the shoulder bag, a bright neon yellow, purple and white pin with the pronouns, *they/them*, on it, hanging off the corner of the cubicle. There was a pop of a tupperware box being opened and the smell of oregano, basil and rosemary, and something altogether salty and oceanic burst out into the steady air stream of the office: mahi mahi, wild rice and chili-dusted potatoes.

Liezel glanced at Ximena over their shoulder as they ate, and both exchanged a nod before returning to their individual laptops and activities.

If there was any other odd duck amongst their cohort, it was Liezel.

A year above Ximena, Liezel was one of the rocks of the Doctorate of History program: well-spoken, courteous to their peers, passionate about their thesis in Filipino history, and adored by their students. One of the few non-white students in their program besides Ximena herself. Some of the older candidates found Liezel irritating to be in seminars with for their advocacy for less Western-centric seminars on history (always the first to sharply criticize any glorification of the Spanish Empire and America as a whole), but Ximena found it hard to disagree with Liezel's frustrations, given her own thesis work. Ximena hesitated to say they were friends, but Liezel was kind enough company and easy to talk to when they both happened to run into each other in between classes and thesis hours.

Liezel rarely went to cohort functions and they never ate anything offered to them at parties. When they did go, they never touched the food unless they had made it themselves. Ximena figured that it was because of an absurd amount of allergies Liezel was unfortunate enough to have, but when she saw Liezel have lunch during their office hours, Liezel never seemed to have an issue eating anything. Later, she simply decided that Liezel was a food snob or a germaphobe that hated food touched by other hands. The same did not seem to apply for drinks, as Liezel heartily took any cocktails, beer, and boxed wine that their peers provided during parties. If Liezel was a food snob, then it was well-deserved as every single dish they'd brought to the few functions they'd gone to had always been nothing less than delicious. Ximena had always enjoyed the food Liezel brought over to the few parties they'd gone to; the ensaymada was her favorite.

This week was a bad one. Ximena could feel it in her skin. While she typed an email to her advisor that was more passive aggressive than amiable, her right hand was preoccupied with

her notebook: a messy sketch that was more charcoal than pencil, more like black pastel than oil, of a jackal ripping meat off of the ribcage of a rabbit. Teeth dripping black blood, lips pulled into a smirking snarl and fur wet with grime, mud and blood. The rabbit's flesh was opened, exposing ribs and the organs spilling out of the wound. Black eyes wide, blank, jaw unhinged at an awkward angle, peg teeth exposed and the tips chipped and broken. Ximena could hear the flies swarming around the open and decaying flesh, the squirm of maggots growing out of the meat. Tethers of tension in her back and shoulders loosened as all of the coiled sensation and emotion spilled out onto the page.

Leaning back in her chair, Ximena twisted her right wrist, heard the subtle crack of joints, and scratched the back of her head with a harsh exhale.

“Can I buy that from you?”

The chair's back had leaned far enough that, if Ximena had not grabbed onto the edge of her desk, it might have toppled over.

Liezel had their chin in their palm, faintly amused while Ximena collected herself. The TA office was quiet apart from the clack of fingers on keyboards and muffled music from headphones inserted so deep within their ear canals, a siren could go off and it would go unnoticed.

Ximena looked between Liezel and the sketch, which she quickly closed with a soft *pat*.

“You want one of my sketches?”

Liezel shrugged. “You sell your paintings sometimes, don't you? Do you ever sell your sketches? I'd like to buy it from you.”

Ximena felt her brows tighten, peering at her neighbor. How much Liezel had seen was uncertain and if they had seen the entire sketch then that said quite a bit about her classmate's

taste. Few were ever so open and frank about their aesthetic choices when they weren't conventional. "Paintings are more easily preserved than sketches are and mine are too messy to sell."

A smile stretched across their face, mirthful. "The messiness is part of the charm. How much do you want for it?"

Ximena clenched her jaw.

"It's not for sale."

Liezel blinked. "Okay."

With that, Liezel swiveled their chair to face their desk and opened their laptop. They put in headphones, opened a thick textbook with color tabs spread all throughout the pages, so much that Ximena could barely see the pale beige of the paper, and got to work. Try as she did, Ximena couldn't focus on her work and her eyes glazed over the growing list of unopened emails, muting her computer when the audio notifications pricked at her nerves. Her fingers trembled and she stuffed her sketchbook into her bag before the smell could thicken. A coil of nausea was growing in her stomach, the edges of her organs just starting to sicken.

It took all of Ximena's willpower not to throw up during her next lecture, grateful that she wasn't obliged to take the stance of a professor or instructor for the day. Much as she wanted to get up and leave, she couldn't allow her peers nor her professor to see her as someone who idly skipped class, not at this level. She knew that the expectations put on her were much higher than her white peers. The bright lights overhead and the projector made her skull pulsate and ache. The infestation was slow, but she felt the grime on the roof of her mouth.

On her desk, where she always stopped to pick up her teaching notebook and books she used for the classes she taught before going home, there was a little plastic container waiting for her. There was a post-it attached to the lid.

Peace offering? - L.

She put her bag outside to air out the stench of roadkill after she went home. She lit incense—cinnamon and sage—and made ginger tea to settle her stomach before she opened the container. Inside were cake-dough buns, a sweet brown sugared with egg wash, flaking at the sides. Ximena recognized them as a dessert that Liezel had brought to a function to welcome the new doctorate students that year—hopia, if she remembered correctly.

The bun was still warm as she picked it up, the dough sinking against her fingertip. She pulled it open and the filling steamed. Sweet mung bean, mild and delicious. The smell alone, coupled with the ginger's tang that brought comfort to her aching stomach, eased the nausea.

Ximena took a bite.

Wrinkled hands, dotted with liver spots, scarred from decades of labor, the individual lines white on brown skin, pressed against the top of her own, much smaller fingers. Those gentle fingers putting the brush between her fingertips, a soft whisper of, *go ahead*, in her ear. Her grandfather's warm, firm chest that she leaned against as she stroked the brush across the canvas he'd brought her. Her four year old fingers clumsy and amateur, but the colors of trees heavy with fat, ripe peaches and the baskets of pecans she gathered with her grandmother, uncles and aunties, to be ground up into sweet paste and pies. The smell of pecans fresh off of the canvas, the texture of paint shifting to the soft fuzz of the peach's skin. The patter of rain on the window of her grandparent's home, where they would look at each other and know their mood, their

whims, and feelings without words needing to be said—for they took all emotion in and cherished them, then gave in return. The comfort of a house where all was out in the open, the good, the ill, the enraged and the low. The shuffle of feet below where her cousins were chasing each other for some toy or video game. The little notches in the wall where her grandfather put up the first painting she had ever made.

“I want to be able to see it every day when I wake up in the morning.”

Ximena ate the mung bean hopia and painted a cemetery surrounded by peach trees, the scattered bones of ankles piercing out of the peat, the dirt, and the growth that curled over headstones. The smell of earth and broiled peaches emanated from the canvas as Ximena went to sleep, free of the rot in her innards.

*

For the sketch, Liezel would cook an entire meal for Ximena and bring it to her by the end of the week. Ximena thought it excessive and far too much work for little reward, but Liezel refused to accept any other condition of payment that wasn't food or money offered towards her.

Two weeks later, the day began to wrap up and her office hours came to an end, meeting with two of her sophomores who needed guidance on how to better structure their papers, Ximena opened her sketchbook as if it were made of the most delicate, needle thin glass. The paper barely made a screech as she gently pulled the piece out. The smell was already starting to emanate from the kill on the page, blood juices dripping along the fine curves and edges of the jackal's fur. The buzzing of flies could be faintly heard from within the thick parchment. Liezel took the drawing delicately and pressed it between the pages of one of their bookmarked textbooks, covering the sketched side with a blank piece of paper.

Two days later, Ximena came into her cubicle to find at least four different tupperware containers full of food with labels taped on the top; mami, pancit, and bistek, amongst other fried vegetables that she could smell the seasoning for without even having to take the lids off. Bukayo and peanut brittle.

“I can’t take all of this, it’s too much.”

“Well, *I’m* not gonna eat it all,” said Liezel, slurping from their tumbler. “Share it with someone else if you want, I don’t care.”

“I just gave you a *sketch*, this doesn’t exactly feel equal to me. This had to have taken hours—”

“I put in the same amount of work that you put into your sketch,” Liezel interrupted, eyes already on their laptop screen as they opened up their email to several messages by students and their professors. “So, it should have the same affect on you that your sketch does on me. Besides—”

Liezel leaned back in their chair, the joints squeaking under their weight as they tilted their head back, hair splayed against the head of the plush cushion. Ximena noted that their skin seemed clearer than it did earlier that weak and their smile didn’t seem as stretched thin. Liezel looked well-rested. It’d only been two days.

“I think you should start selling more of your work like that. I think you’d be surprised by how many buyers you’d get.”

Ximena didn’t touch the food until she finished with class and teaching for the day. She was going to have the closing shift at the bar she backed for and it was going to be a long, busy one. She’d need the energy for the rest of the night. According to the instructions on the little

sheet Liezel gave her, instead of microwaving the food, she was to heat it up on the stove top. The steam from the broth was thick and tasted of roasted garlic, the chicken perfectly cooked through as it simmered in the mami. The bowl was hot, almost unbearable, in her palms as she cupped it while bringing it over to the little table and chair she'd bought at a thrift store months ago. Dabbing fish sauce on top of the bowl, she began to eat.

There was no need for her to paint when she returned home from work at two in the morning. Ximena took off her shoes, changed her clothes, washed her face, and went to bed. She was asleep before she hit the pillow. It was the best sleep she'd had in weeks. For breakfast, she made coffee and tried a piece of the peanut brittle.

Ximena finished over ten pages of her thesis in three hours.

Her skin didn't feel tight when she came into her office on the following Monday. On Liezel's desk was her sketch of the jackal and the rabbit, framed in rich black lacquer and propped up. Liezel and Ximena exchanged a nod and the former grinned as they bit into a sweet smelling bread roll: homemade, none of the polished finish of a store bought bread. Before Ximena settled in for work, she took an offered roll. She ate, and it was as if a star had burst in her chest: cheerful, bright and energized.

Whenever Liezel chewed on the tip of their pen or sighed harshly through their nose, they looked at the sketch and their next inhale would feel smoother, relaxed. The scratch of the pen on paper or the fingers on a keyboard weren't harsh or sharp, but method and careful; languid.

On her lunch break and after a failed intervention with one of her students over her fruitful participation but refusal to turn in any written assignments, Ximena opened up her sketchbook and began to draw.

A crow with tire marks running over its broken wing, beak unhinged and eyeballs slightly too large and loose from its socket. Flattened feathers, none of the sleek shine but rough as bristle. Blood with the texture of scorch marks circled the body of the crow and the paper hummed with the flies swarming over the corpse. A squelch from the maggots that were taking root inside of the empty, blood-dried eye socket.

Ximena sold it for twenty dollars to a cello student the next week.

The Terror in Lake Michigan

No one knew nor saw when the boat lifted itself out of the water and onto the sheet of ice, rust screeching against the thick layer, and the ice beneath it cracking into shreds and slush.

The first time Hayden heard the ice on Lake Michigan crack, she was seven. Her fathers had finished a minor legal battle with her elementary school to change her paper work to her proper gender and her father, Shane, took her to empty Bradford Beach at five in the morning to celebrate their victory. Being woken up so early didn't bother Hayden at that age. Hayden and Shane crouched down by the edge of the sand where the frost turned to ice, Hayden tucked between his knees to keep her warm, and he said—

“Listen.”

Beneath the melting snow, underneath the black-blue water and seagulls crooning overhead, she heard the groan in the shadows of the water.

The ice burst open with a crack, like splitting bone, and then with a hiss as the water rushed in. Hayden felt its shudder into thawed out spring in her chest.

The winter the lake coughed up the ship, Hayden was fourteen.

The sunken boat rose out of the water in early January, just after the passing of the new year: it came without a groan, a hiss or a roar. The boat came into harbor without a horn. The defunct lighthouse did not turn its wheel to beckon it to shore with its light. On the riverwalk, the hull of the ship made its stop. There was no chain attached to the side bringing it in.

“The boat has to be from the sixties,” said Shane over dinner. “I don't see any boats or ships looking like that outside of a museum.”

Hayden's other father, Brody, paused as he flipped the catfish on the pan. The spittle of oil hissed on the iron and Hayden was more interested in the wild rice that smelled sweetly of oregano and basil than the conversation between her parents. The novelty of the boat had worn off after four hours of gawking on the wharf.

“How do you know for sure?”

Shane waved the paperwork he'd been looking over, scouring over the details to make sure that his company could get the funds needed to properly implant the habitat hotels for Harbor District, in Brody's direction. “I grew up around *Superior*,” he snorted. “I know what those ships look like; there's enough of them at the bottom and at the Bermuda. I don't think she'd give up *her* dead like that, though. She'll give up her dead when Le Griffon is found, which will be never.”

*

The social media machine cogs exploded when they found the bodies. The cops were searching every single freight boat and yacht owner and transportation company trying to find who'd pulled the boat up, and the bodies had been taken into custody for identification.

Five corpses, a thick layer of adipocere where the skin once was, with the consistency of melted wax. Gray and white spotted across bruised flesh and their stomachs had enlarged from the pressure.

Out of curiosity, Hayden took her dog with her on a walk to the site where the boat had been. Rust still colored the ice and snow, leaving a v-shaped crack where the hull had rushed in. Yellow tape blocked the shore off from public view, but it was so cold that the cops didn't stick around for all hours of the day. Nova, her Newfoundland mix who'd always been on the meeker

side since being adopted, growled and bared her teeth at the excavation side, ears folded back, fur raised and bright teeth visible in a snarl. The tide trickled in and Nova scooted back, her tail curling around one of her hind legs as she snapped her jaw, dragging Hayden back with her.

Winter steam rolled off of the spikes of ice along the pier, dragging along the water, and wandered towards Hayden. She patted Nova's neck, rubbed behind the dog's ears and shushed her, murmuring, *it's just water and snow*. Hayden peered over the railing of the pier and out into the gray, tugged gently on the leash, and began her walk home.

A wave crashed against the lighthouse, icicles pure white and gray hanging from its neck. The ice shuddered, but didn't break. Lake Michigan groaned and the sky above the surface darkened, bringing another blizzard from Minnesota down to Milwaukee.

*

Although Hayden had lived her entire life by Lake Michigan, she'd rarely gone deeper than stomach height into the water and always stayed close to shore. The water was cold, so *cold*, and when Shane told her that the lake was where they got their drinking and bath water from, as an eight year old, Hayden was so fixated on the fact that their toilet water came in and out of the lake that she refused to get in for a year. Even when she'd forgotten that silly disgust, the lake side was always a distant vestige.

The lake wasn't even noteworthy enough to have a proper beach. It was a sunken piece of land filled with rainwater: background to the groan of the city.

It was simply *there*.

More vessels sank outside of Millennium Park and Chicago's beaches than they did in Milwaukee. When people drowned in the lake, barely anyone raised a glance outside of the im-

mediate family or the life guard who was supposed to be on watch. It was Superior who was the violent of the five, the angriest, the most selfish: per the name, Superior made itself the fiercest of the five lakes and Hayden knew that she'd never dare step into a single boat on that water.

Compared to the starving maw that was Superior, Michigan was its meek sibling.

“My grandpa knew some of the men who were on board when the Fitzgerald sank,” Shane said, Hayden curled up in his lap and Nova's head rested on her knee. It'd been a month since the ship had been removed from the wharf. Brody was in his office working on his lesson plans for the week. “My grandma said that he was glued to the radio the entire week of the wreck. It was one of the worst storms he'd ever seen, and he never let us go too far on the water when I was a kid. Didn't want her to take us, too.”

“You keep calling it a *she*,” she said. “Why?”

Smiling, Shane brushed back Hayden's hair.

“I'm sorry, sweetie—hard habit to break. I got it from my Grandpa: that's the way he always talked about Superior, like it was alive.”

*

By mid-February, the most notable development about the ship that rose out of the ice was the discovery of its name. After weeks of distant murmuring, of almost forgetting, Hayden's homeroom teacher shared the news article that'd just released that morning.

The *Hand of Vincent* was a fish trawler, built in 1962, and its crew of five men disappeared in March of 1972 during a routine afternoon fishing crawl. The sky had been overcast that day, the ice just melted enough for boats to go out on the lake, and the men at the helm were experienced fishermen. After seventy-two hours, they were declared missing in action, presumed

dead. All five crew members' bodies were aboard the ship as it rose out of the water, the bottom of Michigan too cold to allow them to float back upwards. Too cold to let their bodies decay, far too icy for the bacteria in the water to eat.

There were no marks of any hooks or pulls to lift the ship back up to the water, no trace of any other ship or cranes on the riverwalk and the ice. No one knew where the *Hand of Vincent* had sunk all those years ago, and no one knew how it breached the surface in the dead of winter.

Her teacher told the class that the families of the bodies found were contacted, and Hayden tuned her teacher out as she stared out the window towards the gray skyline.

Despite all of the media attention on Harbor District, Hayden's daily life changed little. She woke up at six in the morning, made breakfast with her dad, Brody, took the train to school. On the commute home, the dark of afternoon crawling closer by the hour, Hayden stared at the fires they lit on the rails and then at the lake, watching how the endless gray churned past the white.

*

Two months after the trawler rose out of the water, hundreds of dead fish were found on the ice, the rank smell of rotting flesh mixing with garbage and waste rising to the highways and downtown. Hayden started wearing a face mask on her commute to the train to keep herself from choking on the stench. Ice volcanoes grew out of the ice shelves. The average chilly temperature hadn't changed in a month, and yet the ice had begun to cluster together. Though Shane had stopped talking about his work at the dinner table, Hayden saw the tired sag of his eyes, how he grit his teeth when his phone vibrated with each call or text.

On Twitter and in texts from her friends in Chicago were murmurs of how all of the shores along Lake Michigan suddenly started coughing up their fish. A series of ice volcanoes suddenly burst on the Gold Coast, breaking six private boats on the dock to splinters. Half rotted vessels were lifting themselves out of the water and onto the shore. All of the states surrounding the lake were reporting similar occurrences. Michigan itself remained churning, but steady, and the wind continued to hiss between the white lines on the highway. Brody eventually banned all phones from the table when they were having dinner and meals when their conversations were interrupted every five minutes.

“When Hayden’s done with high school,” said Brody, unaware that Hayden was pulling the laundry out of the dryer just down the hall. “We should think about moving.”

“Oh yeah? Where do you think we should go?”

Shane sounded amused. Nova’s tags jangled from his scratching under her chin.

“I don’t know, I hear Colorado’s nice.”

“Lots of mountains there. Air pressure so heavy it’d make your ear drums pop. You’ll get nosebleeds from how dry the air is. Think you can handle it, city slicker?”

Brody snorted. “If my great-grandparents could handle the highlands, I can handle the Rockies.” The faucet rushed for a few seconds, and then stopped. “It’s always made me uneasy, ever since I was a kid.”

“What did?”

Hayden waited as Brody paused, then heard the scrub of a sponge on ceramic plates.

“The lake.”

*

The next time Brody joined Hayden on a walk with Nova, the fish had all been cleared out, eaten by the seagulls that refused to leave, stray cats, dogs, and perhaps even the desperate homeless. All that was left behind were the bones.

The lake was quiet, its waves placid. Their arms linked together as they huddled for warmth, Brody looked over the top of Hayden's hair to stare at the lake. It was a rare blue sky day, not a cloud in sight. The gray of the ice faded into a deep green-blue of the water: if Hayden squinted into the aether, she pretended she could see the tip of the Michigan needle, at Cheboygan, where the two halves to the state met and flooded into Huron, or the high raises of Chicago that pierced through the smog and clouds like nails upside from the ground.

"When was the last time you went swimming in the lake?" she asked.

"Not since I first started dating your dad," said Brody. "It was during the summer I met his family for the first time—thankfully not during the holidays, a smart man. Partially why I married him—" He laughed as Hayden made a face, drawing her close to preserve warmth while Nova sat on their feet against the bench they sat on. "They rented a boat for the day and took me out on it with him, I didn't have the heart to tell them that I don't like being on boats that much, and I *really* wanted to impress your grandparents—so, they shipped us off to a little island further along the coast. Cana Island. Your dad took me swimming around there. The water was freezing and they went into the water as if they were born in it."

Hayden pursed her lips. "But you don't swim anymore. So... what happened?"

"Oh," he said. "I almost drowned."

Last summer, Hayden heard about a personal sailing boat that went under the waves and took a couple with it: a rich couple that was from out of state, and therefore their family caused a stir in order retrieve their bodies from Michigan.

Hayden didn't know if they ever found the bodies. She hadn't known them, barely even recalled their surnames, so she hadn't given them more than a second's thought before returning to her geometry homework. No one who'd ever drowned or almost drowned in the lake was someone she knew or cared about.

She had never considered that it could've taken one of her fathers, that it could scare him into never going swimming again. She nudged closer to Brody.

"I shouldn't have been out in the water that late in the day, so it was really my fault," he admitted, hands folded together as he stared at the horizon of the lake. "But we were young and stupid—thought it'd be romantic. I couldn't see anything at the bottom, but my foot snagged on *something* and it started dragging me out. I was lucky: Shane managed to bring me back to the shallow water because he was such a good swimmer, but only just. We got out at the right time, because a nasty storm hit us right after. One of the worst I've ever seen."

Pursing his lips, Brody adjusted his coat and stood up, cajoling Nova to stand up with him. Hayden gathered up her scarf and doggy bag, attentive.

"Your dad knows Superior storms, how violent they are, but Michigan can be just as bad. Sometimes worse." Brody smiled, grim. "Superior has the Fitz, but Michigan has even more at the bottom. Most can never be recovered. It might even have Le Griffon at the bottom. That night—"

Pausing, Brody looked out back on the water.

“That night, the waves were twisting, and I thought that the blue men of the Minch had somehow traveled all the way from the Highlands to Lake Michigan. There was something beneath the water—I couldn’t tell what the shape was in the dark. I don’t know if there even was a real shape. But there was *something* in there. I’d never seen a **lake** twist and churn with such anger before in my life. It was as if I were in the middle of the ocean, in the middle of a storm that was about to turn our boat over, like the ones my great-grandparents saw in the Highlands.

Those lakes shouldn’t be called lakes. That name makes them seem so much smaller than they actually are, less powerful. They’re oceans locked on land.”

The route they took every day to get around town by car required that they drive along the shoreline of the lake. Ice and grey snow licked the shore the entire way and Hayden’s stare fixed on how the ice faded into the dark blue-green of the water.

“Are you scared of it?” she asked.

“As much as sailors were afraid to cross the sea without giving an offering to the gods.”

That next Monday, upon getting off of the train to school, Hayden went to the railing that looked over the water and pulled a plastic bag out of her backpack. She pulled the yellow petals of witch-hazel and white-pink of sloe and blackthorn, dried and preserved from the tree in Mitchell Park, between her fingers, and threw them into the churning water below the bridge. She spit at the water.

*

Winter clung to Milwaukee in a vice grip, the ice unrelenting and precarious even as the cement slowly began to warm. The CAUTION: FALLING ICE signs were a yearly visitor and Hayden was always purposeful in stepping half a foot away from the stains left behind by the

falling ice. On the shores of the beaches and harbor, the ice was gradually starting to recede. The shelf ice staggered with brown and beige sand, the grime of the streets and roads black and gray on the slowly melting snow.

Despite the dozens of researchers and weeks of investigations combing through the lake to find out how the *Hand of Vincent* had lifted itself up and out of the water, there were no findings whatsoever. And so, Milwaukee moved on from its month in the spotlight: the researchers left, the bodies were laid to rest with their families, and the ship was put in the backrooms of the Public Museum for further study and preparation for exhibits. There were other boats and ships coming out of the water in other cities that were grabbing their attention.

The Hand of Vincent became an object of annoyance rather than intrigue. Hayden's semester continued.

The only change in her routine was the weekly bounty she offered to the lake: the dried flowers and the bulbs she cut off of the bouquets that were centered on the kitchen table. In time, she, too, forgot about the *Hand of Vincent*.

Hayden didn't think about the *Hand of Vincent* again until a field trip to Discovery World with her social science class. Neither of her fathers would be chaperoning as Shane was busy with the Habitat Hotels and haggling for funding, and Brody had to teach all day. Hayden was fine with that. She'd been to Discovery World so many times as a kid, back when she still held onto her fathers' hands for safety, and Hayden considered herself too old for the museum, but it was an excuse to get out of busy work for the day.

The museum itself was as boring as waiting for the bathtub to fill up with hot water, but it was nice to not have to do any real work and hang out with her friends, chatting under their

breaths while the tour guide droned on about information Hayden already knew. She played games on her phone in between exhibits and lingered by placards, pretending to be interested while she tuned out her teachers and the guides. It was when they walked through the Reiman that she showed genuine interest, where the fluorescent blue surrounded her group on all sides and the fish fluttered around the tunnel like birds in flight.

Reiman wasn't nearly as big as the Shedd, but there was a homely comfort to its smaller size. The tunnel wasn't so oppressive as the cold blue-green of those exhibits. The Shedd's glass tanks were thick, just as thick as the Reiman's if not more, and there had never been a reported breakage. If it did, the explosion of glass would kill everyone before the water did.

The waves of Michigan would never get big enough, but the Reiman sat on the lake, and sheets of ice clung to the metal building. If the lake ever overflowed, it'd swallow Discovery World whole.

Through the walls of the Reiman, Hayden thought she heard a distant groan. She sped-walked out of the tunnel, throat clenched.

*

Warmth was rare in early spring, but the winds weren't so dire as to bar Hayden's class from being led outside to see the Denis Sullivan schooner from up close. The ship was carefully docked and her class of forty was led up the rail to the deck, mindful of their steps. They weren't going out onto the water: only being toured around the deck and hull, shown what parts of the sails were modeled after traditional vessels, and how the ship itself, despite being a twenty year old boat, still looked and felt like the schooners of the 19th century.

“Why not just show us an *actual* schooner, then,” Hayden muttered, scuffing her heel into the wood of the hull. The polish on the wood was shiny, well-cared for, and recent. It’d been cared for in the month that no boats were allowed on the water in January, docked by Discovery World. Hayden could smell the fresh paint, the linen of the sails above.

There was no grit, no realness. No markings, no scars on the wood and no evidence of any real relationship with the water the Denis Sullivan sat on. Though the Sullivan was an echo of the ships that used to swim on the water, it was only that: an echo.

She had seen real ships, the history that scarred their bodies and the weather beaten sails and paint, ships that Superior hadn’t eaten on her grandparent’s house just a fifteen minute walk from the shore. This couldn’t begin to compare.

Hayden couldn’t find it in herself to listen to the intern going on and on about boats, and snuck her way back up the stairs to the deck. Taking care to walk on the balls of her feet so her full weight didn’t creak on the wood, Hayden sucked in the cool air and leaned against one of the rails. Tugging up the collar of her jacket and pulling down her beanie, she pressed her chin against her folded arms and stared, blithely, out on the water.

The distance was placid, and the sky shimmering blue in the streaks of visible skyline between the clouds, overcast and a light gray: no rain, and no snow. There was barely a breeze: a rarity on the harbor. Hayden almost missed its familiar bite.

Hayden could’ve dozed off if not for the glimmer of color in the water below. Underneath the green, Hayden saw the fluttering of wide brown wings, distorted.

She leaned forward. Her diaphragm pressed hard into the rail of the Denis Sullivan and nails scraped against the polished wood.

At first, Hayden thought it was fish. It was rare for them to come this close to the surface by the harbor, frightened by all of the sounds from the cars on the expressway but the shapes weren't right. It couldn't be a sturgeon—they were bottom feeders and rarely came up to the surface when the water was this deep. Hayden hadn't even seen one since fishing with her grandparents in Minnesota over three summers ago.

She leaned in closer, stepping onto the little platform wedged into the wood to lift herself up enough to get a better look.

What she thought were the winged fins of fish only grew larger, and with the wings, came a stocky body. The shadow was a dark brown-green, and Hayden could see the water close enough to see the speckles of grime and exhaust oil on the surface. Waves lapped at the sides of the Denis Sullivan and, giving no attention to anything else, Hayden hoisted herself up far enough to let her feet dangle, pulling up with all of her strength in her upper body.

The overcast sky began to swell with grey. Hayden managed to lift herself just enough to rest her knees on the railing of the ship, the water steady enough that she barely felt the slow movement of the ship's belly.

The tips of the wings came out of the water first, then the head: the head of an eagle, beak open wide, and a tongue exposed, menacing. The rivulets of water made rivers in the lines etched into the wooden wings as the griffin rose out of the water, its neck long, the swell of its chest narrow. Its eyes were as black-brown as the wood it was made from. Algae and bacteria coated the wood in spots, a tattered cape. The griffin rose higher, and the bow of a ship slipped out of the current.

“Young lady,” the stern voice of a tour guide said, “Get down from there! Why aren’t you with your group—“

In the griffin’s claw, there was a wet white flower, the petals coiled and wrinkled.

In the water, Hayden saw a dark shape beneath the tip of the bow and the griffin that screamed into the open air. It twisted.

Forty teenagers in the hull screamed as the Denis Sullivan groaned a heavy moan and suddenly rocked, the wood creaking against some sort of pressure slamming against it. There was a clatter of bodies falling to the floor, tour guides trying to keep calm and chaperones gathering their kids close and teachers trying to placate terrified students. One of the deck workers fell hard to his knees, unable to reach Hayden in time before she fell over the side of the ship and into the water, her own scream cut off by a harsh splash.

*

As Hayden fell headfirst into the lake, she’d never experienced such unrelenting, squeezing cold in her life.

Her eyes burned and she had to force them shut, curling into herself from the sting of the impact. The cold and its pressure swallowed her whole and pressed against her body like thousands of needles shooting into her skin all at once: through her clothes, past her skin, and all the way to her bones and organs, she felt the immense strength of the water and it *hurt*. It hurt, it hurt so badly she could’ve screamed, but she’d already swallowed so much water.

Every orifice wailed in agony. Hayden couldn’t even kick her legs out. It was as if she’d forgotten how to swim entirely. None of her limbs could move, as the burn soon became a debilitating numbness, so stiff she couldn’t even feel her fingers twitch or clench.

Hayden always considered water to be a quiet body when submerged, a way to muffle the too hectic world. She'd never been underwater long enough to know otherwise.

The lake was so loud it felt as if her skull was going to crack like a melon.

Groaning, moaning, growls— an ever constant churn of the water and pressure all around her body. The water was the lake's stomach and its acids were eating away at her flesh.

The weight of Hayden's clothes were like stones in her pockets. There was no easy movement, each kick she tried was slow, trying to move through wet cement that was drying up. When she opened her eyes, there was nothing but darkness ahead of her. Hayden she saw the movement of brown next to her, something vertical and narrow, and she grasped for it. There was a dull impact on her skin, but her elbow hooked around the wood, and it was barely small enough for her to hold onto. The wood cracked underneath her grip, but it was steady enough for her to grab.

Hayden saw the griffin at the tip of the ship's bow.

She couldn't feel the splinters piercing her fingers.

Hayden once thought that being burned alive was the worst way to die. She now realized that drowning was far worse. Fire had the illusion of escape. Water offered no such comfort.

Hayden's eardrums popped. Warm liquid poured out of both canals, quickly swallowed by the water.

Despite all of the fish, despite the recycling of drinking water from its depths, Hayden considered the lake a dead thing: waiting to dry up when there was no more rain and the planet too hot to sustain itself. A pale imitation of the thriving, living ocean.

In Lake Michigan, Hayden felt eyes all around her.

No longer able keep her eyes open, her grip loosened on the mast.

The lake quieted.

She felt a shift.

The water around her churned and twisted as a body did, a serpent unfurling and coiling and loosening its muscles in one turn, but there was no body she could grab onto. In the dying white noise of the water, Hayden thought she heard a rumble of consideration. Air filtered through mouthfuls of lake water, filtering out the oils from ships and waste thrown from the pier and the smoke from the cars along the elevated highway. Hayden tasted something floral in the water, like flowers. She smelled them as she inhaled the water through her nose. Sugary as candied flowers.

The water hummed around her, considering. It groaned like a stomach not quite hungry enough. Its voice twisted in Hayden's brain like the eels at the bottom of the lakebed, where they wouldn't even touch the waxiest of corpses that'd fallen to the bottom—a body that Brody had almost become, one she could be.

Slitting her eyes open, she felt and saw the darkness of the water around her churn and twist. Its body moved.

The lake opened its maw and said,

I'm not interested in you.

The water lifted and Hayden threw up lungfuls of water as Le Griffon emerged out of the depths for the first time since its tragic maiden voyage in 1679.

Hayden never went into the water again.

The Heart Peddler

Less than twenty four hours after I entered the Albuquerque city center, the skin on the inside of my nose split open and my lips grew raw from a need for water. I'd left my water bottle on the plane and for fear of my lips cracking like my nose, I bought the cheapest water bottle I could find in the nearest vending machine, and Albuquerque's relentless hunger quieted. I make sure to carry water with me at every moment.

It's November when I arrive to manage and curate a touring exhibit at the Natural History museum: bones of animals once prolific in the Americas, North, Central and South, now extinct, brought over from one corner of the country to the next, moving every three months. Bones of the mastodon, glyptodon, scimitar-toothed cats, steppe bison, the woolly mammoth, teratons, the saber-toothed salmon are brought by truck for the larger bones, by plane for the smaller—all carefully contained, temperature controlled, and meticulously handled. My own luggage matters little by comparison to the history those bones carry. The only luggage of value to me beyond my immediate necessities is my briefcase of hearts.

They are not the hearts of people, bloodied and raw. They still beat, but they are not the organ hidden behind bone and flesh. To the unseen eye, they are simply snow-globes. Kitschy snow-globes that anyone could find in some convenience store on a city corner, gas station, in the airport: something that locals and cashiers would side-eye in judgement when an obvious tourist buys them.

I'm one of the few who knows what they are. I hear them howl in my eardrums and feel their heat in my fingers and feet.

Every city is a body. The streets are the veins. The alleys are the arteries. The buildings are the hair on the skin that is the ground. The hair is the river and water that flows around the city. If there is no water that surrounds the city, then its hairs is the grass, gravel, and dirt. Its grave is the bedrock of stone, steel and brick.

The people in these cities? They are the cells. Each human body is a nucleus that contributes to the circulatory system, the subways and lifted railways that hold up the bone structure and ribcage of these metal and stone machines that operate at every hour. Cities are living entities. They are easy to see on a map. The heart is much harder to find.

Inside the glass sphere, their winds churn and waters swim.

I carry the heart of every city I've ever been to in a briefcase.

When I'm at my rented house or condo for the three month long stay on every tour, I open my briefcase of hearts and let them breathe. Whatever cannot fit in my briefcase remains at my apartment in Chicago—the closest concept to a home I have.

Chicago gave me the first heart I ever held in my hands.

*

I found Chicago's heart at 63rd Street Beach, buried in the sand. I was six. I knew I liked girls, but not how much. I didn't know I was non-binary yet. The glass eggshell was shattered, the water in it gone, but flakes of plastic snow coated the walls that were sharp and irrigated with sand. I held it in my hands, uncaring of how the sharp edges of the glass cut through my fingers and bled between my knuckles and onto the sand, onto the tips of my toes. I brought the heart home and put it back together with gorilla glue that I painted copper.

Its heart is angry, broiling, and passionate all in one. It is far older than the steel beasts of the city. It's as angry as the lake that holds the city in its mouth, a wide span of hair that licks beneath the streets into the river, going downstream to the plains of the lower state. Whatever was here before has been expunged and suppressed since the city first grew from a settler village. The heart has a different name than the one the world knows, but has grudgingly accepted the name it's been forced with— it is not so different from the wild reeds, the ponds full of onions and leeks that Shikaakwa once carried as bounty to its people. The citizens of Chicago, the commuters that take the Metra every week day, have never heard the original name of the city they live, work, eat and love in. The smell of ash and fire clings to the film of the glass globe, only a ghost remaining of the city before the entire wooden town burned to sticks. Beneath, there is the scent of water logged ramps and fresh onions, a hint of paprika, cayenne, and the brisk foam of the lake.

I bring Chicago's heart with me whenever I leave. It is always the first I pack, a privilege that the heart allows me. It's a privilege that I have had to earn again and again. It's one of the few that I never felt inclined to sell: sentiment to the place I grew up in.

When other people see my collection of hearts—such as my mother, whose job as an architect meant she had to travel often and would bring back trinkets from her travels for me, spare friends, one night stands, girlfriends— they see a wayward tourist and their collection of souvenirs who sees these trinkets as valuable statements of their traveled nature. They see a glass cabinet full of snow-globes. Snow-globes that look as if the paint is still fresh, the glass clear and water clean. The flitter made of sawdust, bone chip made of porcelain, gold foil that looks pure and white. Others, moisture clinging to the glass and plastic that is exposed to oxygen, the water

slightly dirty from age, and the class smudged by time. Snow-globes that are tacky and kitschy, snow-globes that look like proper pieces of art. Snow-globes that collectors would pay good money for. They don't hear how those hearts beat and hum behind the glass. I smile and let them believe what they want.

Few have known their value. Those who do know how precious they are. Some may call it as a means to own a piece of a city. I once did, and paid for it. They sit underneath my gloves and close around my fingers. A soft rumble from the sky tells of a coming storm and I feel the vibrations beneath the glass. When it rains heavily, the scars on my fingers throb and re-open as phantoms.

I haven't been this close to the West Coast in years. The last time I was this close, my mistakes woke Shasta.

*

Albuquerque sits at the bottom of the basin like a terrarium of steel, metal and dust in a fish bowl. The air squeezes around the basin and the sky is pink as the sand of Himalayan salt, a brush of conifer green growing out of the bottom of the Sandia that I see outside of the museum window every day. My commute back to my rental is a walk from the museum to my Air BNB, making sure to change my shoes into better walking flats instead of my work shoes. It's a waste of money to get a rental car when I could walk or use public transit. I despise driving. When I have to drive, I don't feel the veins beneath the pavement and gravel. I feel no pulse when I'm in a car. Riding a bus or a train, the blood cells in the arteries of circulation, feels more natural.

The arid altitude breaks the skin in my nostrils and I feel the blood pool down the curve of my upper lip as I step through the doorway of the stucco gates to my rental. I don't begrudge

the city for this. Water is precious here and if not cherished, the body will crack. Water is as vital to this city as it is to Chicago, which sits on its mouth, where the only difference it has to a sea is the lack of salt.

The skyscrapers and apartment complexes are stabbing through the gray fog. I think of my apartment and the shelf of glass hearts, and I miss it.

When I touch the stucco, I feel an angry heat. It scalds the skin of my fingertips, now red.

The winds in the mountains hiss.

I brush my thumb over the rough textured stucco, the cement, lime and sand. I dip my head in apology.

The snow rarely leaves the peaks of the Sandia, but with enough pressure, the flakes will fall heavily in the valley and swirl with the dust, sharp as cut glass. The city doesn't trust me. I don't blame it.

"I'm sorry. I won't take it without permission."

I don't do that anymore.

The pulse of the city is soothed and I go inside, where the warmth blasts into my skin. As I brew coffee, a bitter, honeyed grind, the wound in my nose and the rough patches on my mouth soften and close.

The winds slow, growing tepid. Not tamed, but satiated.

I no longer take a city's heart without permission. If I am given a heart, I keep it. I make sure they're clean, dusted off, and wrapped in bubble when I have to travel. The others are kept safe inside my Chicago apartment. The others I sold for money when I didn't understand their meaning and importance to the cities and places those hearts belonged to so I could have extra in

my savings for graduate school. Those are lost to me, now, and I'm still on my penance walk to make up for their loss. The cities themselves are still recovering from freak storms, blizzards, earthquakes and floods. My hands pay for it.

The hearts of American cities are heady, a mix of earth and coppery blood. These hearts are not young, though the institute of the country's current state is. They are old hearts and they are passionate and angry. They do not enjoy being bartered and toyed with as if they are trinkets. The lands they have grown out of have been cut and sliced as if they are stale bread, passed around from hands that don't know the land, and they are constantly fighting. If Albuquerque doesn't want to be found, I'm not going to dig for it. If I were to, I might not have any hands left.

"Thank you," I smile. "It's my first time here. You're beautiful, so far. I'd love to get to know you better."

The coffee tastes of the desert after rain: clean, light of air, and just warm enough. The mug's heat pulses against my scarred fingers, relaxing the muscles and torn ligaments that are still repairing themselves together years on.

The stars are visible that night. Andromeda flickers.

*

The Holmesina fossil skeleton is the newest addition to the exhibit I oversee. It was found in the Dunes of Illinois after nearly getting destroyed by a motocross rider last summer. The bones alone require a team of six to carry and place for display. The shell is patterned like marbles and pebbles along the curves. There's a jagged crack in the protective shell that tells me that it'd been attacked by a larger predator, attempting to crush the shell in order to eat it. The flexible shells are hard as bone and likely broke the jaw of the predator. The Holmesina probably died

from broken bones regardless. The exhibit I oversee is based strictly on Pleistocene animals of the Americas, and my heart is calmed by the sight of Pueblo, Navajo and Hopi art in their proper territory rather than in a high-rise building in New York City. The city is still angry, hungry for their return. They're now held with warmth, but it's not finished. The city demands reparations.

As the curator of the Animals of Ancient Americas, I'm allowed to be at the museum as long as I please; it's a privilege I take advantage of during the quiet hours. My lunch breaks are spent in various exhibits, staring at Navajo bowls, clothing, and the mighty fossils of the T-Rex that unhinges her jaw, her teeth lacquered black.

The museum is a foreign object in the body of the city, where it contains elements that only belong to it in theory: it's been given tentative permission to exist.

*

"I'm going to stay and finish up a project, you can go ahead without me. I'll catch up with you later."

Ishleen, my colleague, raises her eyebrow at me high enough to touch the hem of her hijab, but she smiles with a huff. She's one of the librarians, but she'll take over as director at the Field one day, I'm certain. She's more than worthy of the position.

"If not tonight, then let's catch some coffee tomorrow morning. Or tea. I hear St. James is good."

"Sure," I say, rubbing my thumb against the shell of Boston. "You know better than I do about how to find a good tea blend, I'll trust you to pick one out for me."

Ishleen scoffs, and then she peers at me, lingering by the doorway.

"You always bring one of those with you."

“Hm?” I lift my head, fingers curling around the base of Boston’s heart. “One of what?”

She gestures. “Those snow-globes.”

This isn’t a new question. My fingers squeeze around the base as I smile. “Tacky, aren’t they?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I don’t think they’re tacky.”

“It’s okay,” I laugh. “You can say that they are. I know it’s silly.”

She quiets, her expression inquisitive. I lower Boston back onto my desk. The chill of winter is even sharper in the swell of its heart, tinged with the smell of the ocean and cooked crab. Chicago is sitting in my pocket, where it always is.

“It’s sentimental, I guess. But I like having a piece of the places I’ve been to with me when I’m traveling. I barely spend any time at home, rarely more than a few months at time, so—it’s nice to have a piece of cities I’ve been to with me.”

Ishleen hums, hands in her pockets as she leans against the door. “Like, the way people will take rocks or bottles of sand from places they’ve been?”

The scars on my fingers tremble and I shake my head, smiling while I rub my hands together. My wrists ache from hours of typing. “Not exactly. It’s not about owning a piece of a place, it’s more like—“ Tutting the tip of my teeth, I gesture vaguely: it’s difficult to explain without getting too existential and I’ve seen enough of my mother’s bemused raised eyebrows to try with those I only have a cursory relationship with. “A memento that I’m borrowing. Like how museums are supposed to just borrow artifacts. Keep them safe. Put them carefully on display to educate, but we don’t really... own them. We’re not supposed to, anyway. They’re not really *ours*.”

I can't read her stare and so I look down at my hands, fingers laced together. When I handle artifacts and old manuscripts, they're always gloved and the scars are hidden. It's only when someone cares to take a moment to look do they see the scars that litter my skin.

"I'm not making much sense, am I?"

Ishleen hums, eyes crinkling at the corners. "No, you are. That's more thought than I've ever given to tourist trap trinkets, though. Did you pay for all of them?"

"No, they're all gifts. I don't buy them," I say. "I'm a tourist, sure, but not *that* much of a tourist."

She laughs and it settles in my palms like my hands to the hearth.

While it's not the full truth, it's still *a* truth: I don't buy these hearts. They are given to me. They're not meant to be looted. If the cities demand they be returned, I'll give them back. I've been more than a third of my collected hearts away. Although I have dozens in my glass case back in Chicago, they won't stay there permanently.

I can feel Albuquerque's heartbeat in the cement, sand and dirt. Distant, reverberating as an echo in the steel walls of the museum. A hush over the watermelon skyline. I want to seek it out. I want to see if there are other pieces of it that I can find, the little copies of its heart that scatter across the city territory. I know their value, their heat and weight.

The pulsation of the skin around my scars reminds me why I must ignore it.

"Well," says Ishleen as she tightens the belt of her coat around her waist, "You'll have to show me the rest of your collection sometime."

"I'll show you when we get back to Chicago. I've got a lot more."

She snorts, mouth wry. "I'm sure you do. See ya later."

I smile at her and she lingers in the doorway before she, too, leaves. Attracted as I am to her, I don't mingle my sex life and work. It's a boundary I'm not willing to cross. There are anthropologists I need to email and call, other museum directors I need to follow up with, plane tickets to book, and my mother to call to let her know that I'm still eating well and not just relying on DoorDash or GrubHub for meals.

I look at Boston's heart and my hands burn, remembering the skin flaying open, the smell of blood in my mouth, and the white-hot surge that struck from my palms to my shoulder blades as the glass cut through them.

I wrap my palm around the globe of the heart, the cool glass, and I feel the crisp foam of the Atlantic in my hands.

*

Chicago's heart keeps my hands warm as I walk to my rental after closing. The sky over the Sandia is pitch black-blue, stars dotting the sky. The only stars I see in Chicago are the moving lights of airplanes and satellites reflected on glass and steel. The sky is clearer out here, the desert defiant of the smog of those larger, more congested cities across the country. This is a defiant city of a rebellious, stubborn land: it refuses to be expunged. There is resilience all across the country, but it is palpable here in a concentrated burst: it is evident in the architecture, the tumble weeds, road runners that dash across balconies of apartment buildings, and the watermelon sky of the mountain skyline.

What kind of heart does this city have?

*

“Do you have a heart for sale?”

My grip on my briefcase handle tightens as I pause. It’s December. Snow clings to the stucco and cement relentlessly. The air is much sharper, even more dry and bone deep. I’m on my way to meet Ishleen for tea at St. James, eager and bemused to hear her far harsher, brutal opinions on teas and their history: much more elevated than my own understanding. Chicago’s heart is heavy in my pocket.

A man in a long, expensive black coat smiles at me, his hair swept by the wind. If it were light out, I’m sure I would see his cheeks reddened on his pale face. The sight of his face makes my stomach twist. I press the side of my briefcase to my knee.

My hair is much shorter than it once was, dyed a variety of colors and now at resting at a pale brown. When I look in the mirror, I barely see a reflection of the self that didn’t have the scars on all ten of my fingers. These hands handle bones, file paperwork, oversee exhibits, and their pains and aches are soothed by snow globes that regulate their own temperatures. His face has aged in the years it’s been since I last saw it, laughter lines stretching across his eyes and dimples in his cheeks that accentuate the swathe of his skin.

The question makes my ears ring. With a scoff-laugh, I smile.

“A heart? Do I look like I work at a hospital?”

The man seems bewildered, then amused. He laughs, shaking his head. His hands are tucked in the front of his black coat—brand name, no doubt—looking as if he just stepped out of the Financial District into some ritzy bar on the Chicago River, the ones where they crack open expensive coastal oysters that were shipped in just that morning. I know these sort of men. I used

to take their money and put them in the empty sockets of my briefcase which used to hold snow globes.

“You’re funny,” he says. “Funnier than I remember. You’re much older now, too. You look good.”

I try to not to remember faces beyond immediate family, friends, my colleagues at the Field and girlfriends. I recognize his.

The scars on my fingers throb.

“If this is some creepy way to ask me out for a drink or a fuck, I’m not interested. I’m spoken for. Bye.”

He blocks my way before I can keep walking. I press my briefcase against the back of my calves.

“I’m willing to pay you anything for them. What’s your price? Is it the same as before? If it’s higher, that’s not going to be a problem—”

“I’ve got no idea what the fuck you’re talking about,” I lie. “Get out of my way. Unlike you, I’ve got somewhere to be.”

He laughs again, the pitch higher, borderline hysteric.

“You must have driven your price up by a lot now.”

The streets are quiet and empty, rush hour long over. Ishleen is already at St. James, waiting for me. My phone presses against my hip, vibrating and audible against the fabric of my coat. Drivers are far too preoccupied to pay us mind. Discomfort tremors through me as the man leans in far too close. He’s wearing black gloves on his hands and his eyes are wide. They’re grey. Not blind, but lifeless. Such empty eyes.

“What’s your price?”

Stones have more life in them.

“I don’t know this city very well,” I say, slow, taking a step back away from him, careful not to jostle the briefcase, “But I’m sure there’s a rehab somewhere nearby for you to check in. Or a bench. Somewhere warm. Go inside the CVS and sober up. If you need money, I have about twenty dollars for you to get food or a cab.”

“I don’t need *your* money—I need those hearts.”

I put my free hand in my pocket and curled my fingers around my keys.

“I’ll humor you: even if I *did* have these hearts you keep going on about, why should I give them to you?”

His expression brightens.

The man straightens and wrenches off his gloves. He splays out his hands underneath the streetlight we’re in the presence of. I blink back from the white reflecting in dots across my eyes. The hearts in my briefcase rattle as the jewels embedded in his fingers glitter under the streetlights—from opal, to ruby, sapphire, deep cuts of stone and gem that line his fingers and knuckles as if they were rings piled on top of each other, a glimmer to them that was far more than simply just the reflection of light upon the cut.

The hearts inside my briefcase screech, I feel a pop in one of my ears, and bile coils at the base of my throat.

“I have to complete the set, I’m sure you understand. You must have collected dozens of hearts over the years. Hundreds, at this point I bet. I’ll pay you a good price for them. So tell me—how many do you have now?”

The scars burn.

“They’re not for sale.”

“Of course they are,” he says, laughing. “Anything can be sold.”

The lake churns inside of Chicago’s heart, coaxing another boat into its depths.

His mirthful smile drops.

“I have the eyes, now I need hearts. What do you want for them?”

“I told you—they’re not for sale.”

He grabs me by the bicep and the eyes that are stuck to his skin along his fingers dig through my thick jacket and my jaw twitches at the ache. I’ve forgotten the cold. The cars continue to drive on.

“You must have a lot, then. I remember—you had a pretty nice collection ten years ago. They must get heavy. Don’t you want to be rid of at least a few of them?”

The hearts are rattling in my briefcase with the force of alarm bells. They are so warm, ignited that the briefcase is close to setting on fire. I can smell the smoke as the hearts burn, burn as their cities did—Moscow broils, London churns with its plague of black boils, Kyoto wails—and the scent grows as the man takes a free hand to dig around in his pocket.

Old Faithful broils.

He holds it out for me in his palm.

“You sold me this back in 2009, Los Angeles. You were interning there for a traveling exhibit. You told me you an extra to spare.”

The black letters of the Hollywood sign scatter against the mountain within the snow globe, slate blue skyscrapers raising over them like a forest made of metal, a reversal of the city I

knew. The mountains are green-brown, empty of their snow-capped peaks, the palm trees cartoonish and twisting around the Hollywood sign. It's a perfect replica of the one stored in my glass case in Chicago. Every time I try to touch it, it scalds me. When I handed him the heart, he rocked the snow-globe and the gloomy smog of Los Angeles churned into a sorbet swirl of orange, purple and pink, the palm trees glowing green and grown neon in the skyline. His smile had glittered wide, shining as bright as the rare gems and jewels that were ripped out of the earth and had to be driven out with bloody hands. There's no other way he could've found them without the hearts. Nausea churns in my gut.

I feel my scars reopen. The edges bleed into my black gloves.

The rattling shriek grows to a crescendo.

The hearts are so much more than souvenirs. They are the essence of a place, the connective tissue of a land. To steal from it is to cut it by the artery. Its body will go on for the attack wherever it can aim.

The desert rumbles.

I grab at the hand that's free, let the briefcase fall to the ground, buffered by the back of my calf, and dig my fingernails into the wedges between gems. They're always cut short to keep from damaging preserved documents and fragile bones. I break skin and my nails pull beneath the cut edges.

The eyes of dozens of cities pulse beneath my fingers as I rip them out of the man's, and he screams, a howl that could shatter glass. Blood trickles between my fingers, bits of flesh cling the cuts of the gems. They are hot in my palm, slick with blood. The bones in the man's hands are visible and the hearts in my briefcase are quiet. He clings to his hands, pressing them against

his chest as the blood trickles down his suit, expensive and black, staining it with a distinct shine, glimmering white under the streetlights. The blood coats the scars on my fingers.

“I’ll be giving these back now.”

*

The eyes lead me to the Bosque.

The Rio Grande is cold and brown, but the blood wipes off of the wulfenite easily, smoothing the jagged, dried bits of flesh off of its edges, leaving the gem itself completely untouched by the silt and soil that drags through the river. The trees are bare, brown as the river itself, but flickers of blue can be seen as the water shifts and reflects on the light of the sun. It’s early morning, hours before my shift starts at the Museum and the Bosque is empty. The eyes of Albuquerque hum as the water drifts over it.

Place me here, the eyes say.

The hearts are quiet in my briefcase. The eyes that I’ve carefully wedged inside are still coated with blood and flesh, but stagnant and waiting. They see through the fake leather and plastic of the briefcase, watching my every move. The wulfenite eyes of Albuquerque wait to see what I will do.

I bend down, my knees brushing against the cold dirt of the river bank and my boots already coated with mud and soil, and put the wulfenite eyes in the river bed. Putting my bare hands in the water feels as if I’m dipping my fingers in a tub of ice for a wine cooler. It grips me by the bone, but it doesn’t hurt. The water kisses the scars that New Orleans’ heart left when it exploded in my hands, furious at what I’d tried to do to it. That water-beaten, defiant and thriving city refused to be sold again. I was twenty-four, then.

I've never sold another heart again.

The wulfenite sits in the bed of silt for a second, and then it drifts into the water, the clouds of mud and soil obscuring it from view. The tide is languid, smooth.

The hearts hum and the eyes settle.

The sunrise is a burst of orange and pink over the Sandia and Manzano, cutting through the dark branches and giving them a light glow on the edges. I watch as the wulfenite drifts back towards an island in the middle of the Rio Grand and I stand up. I pick up my briefcase, careful not to jostle it too much with the hearts and eyes now inside it, and my boots sink into the damp sand as I begin to walk away.

The side of my boot brushes against something hard and upends the sand of the bank. The heart of Albuquerque peeks out of the sand of the Rio Grande, encased in a round globe of glass.

A red and gold sun over the peaks of Manzano, dotted with turquoise and wulfenite. I don't take it with me.

The next time I return to Boston, I put the heart back where I found it: under the weeping willow whose leaves dance along the water.

The Children in the Floating House

My ex-husband is dead. I've been dead for twelve years.

*

Laurel's birth was agony. She was an angry child from the moment she was born, even in the weeks before I went into labor. As soon as the thing inside of me started kicking, pushing on my bladder, my stomach, starving and hungry for the nutrients that were never enough no matter how much I ate, I knew that I wouldn't like her. There was no glamor in it, being pregnant: it was not smooth as butter as the movies always showed, no cut to black midway through the groans and half-strangled shouts of pain. I felt every roll of my muscles, the squeezing, tightening and tear of my lower body as the mass of cells forced her way out. My ex-husband was to hold onto my hand and kiss my sweaty forehead as I tried to roll through the contractions. I forgot all about him as the pain settled in my skull. I grabbed his hand so tight that had I been any stronger, I could've broken his fingers. Labor with Laurel lasted nearly 48 hours and I didn't hold her for nearly five while she was cleaned. My mind shut down as soon as I heard her scream for the first time, sinking into the numb tearing of my body. Her father was the first to hold her. He asked if he could name her Laurel and I mumbled a *sure*. I slept for those five hours and when I woke up, she was there next to me on the bassinet, sleeping, face wrinkled but free of the blood, mucus and sewage that spilled out of my body. Her hair was dark brown, a wisp along her much too large forehead, barely the length of the end of a paintbrush.

I wanted to push her to the floor.

*

I'm split in three, one fragment for each of my children. I've been with them since the moment I died, spread thin across the country. I only come close to feeling full when all three are together: it is a rare instance. They are rarely happy occasions. The birth of my grandson, Lucas, was the closest to togetherness amongst my children. They've been divided since the moment they were born. Their mother was a stranger to them in life: an alien in death. Death reaffirms again and again that I didn't know my children at all. My children are pieces of a stained glass window that I'm scrambling to put together and paint. Now, I'm starved to know my children, who they were outside of me, how I saw them as strange little creatures who lived in my house, and how they prosper after I let them down in the worst way possible.

I think I disappointed Gabriel most of all. Valerie was the most heartbroken. Laurel already knew her place in the roster and was not surprised; but she was the angriest.

I don't haunt my ex-husband.

*

My son, Gabriel, has taken up vaping. My youngest, Valerie, hates it.

Valerie wrinkles her nose at the smell of the vapor, a sticky watermelon flavor I imagine—Gabriel's shirts were absolute hell to clean during the summertime, when the watermelon was at its sweetest, stained pink on white—she stares at the pen stuck between Gabe's fingers and scowls. She moves her glass of wine out of the vicinity of the smoke.

“Can't you do this *outside*?”

“Narc,” says Gabriel, blowing smoke out from between his lips. Athletic tape is wrapped around his fingers. So many of his sprained bones have I put back together. “What're you gonna

do? Whine to Daddy? He doesn't care. I'll just open a window before I leave, it'll be gone in an hour."

Valerie purses her lips, fingers tightening around the stem of her glass.

"Don't be such a buzzkill, Val," Gabriel sighs, lowering the pen. His tone is significantly softer, I notice: his Big Brother Voice he always put on whenever he realizes he's upset Valerie. He's had this voice since Valerie was born, the neediest of my three: her wails were agonized, painful, and Gabriel was the first to reach for her before even I could.

I remember the wonder in his face as he held such a tiny hand in his own small fingers when he met her in the hospital.

The years between them is not such a wide gap and when his little sister was in pain, even if she didn't know what that pain was, I could trust my little boy to take care of his sister. When Valerie couldn't reach for me, she always reached for Gabriel.

"Lucas liked it, didn't he? It's perfectly safe, his feet are gonna be rooted to the board. Just take him out on the little hills and slopes first."

"He's going to try snowboarding down the stairs and he'll break his arm, one of my vases, or something else. Because his uncle told him it would be *fun*. Because Uncle Gabe decided that making a slope out of our own staircase when we were eight was a good idea and that, no Val, we *totally* won't get caught, Dad will *never* know, it'll be *great*, Val!"

Gabe snorts, grin wry.

"Well, it *was*."

"You broke one of the bannisters. **Two** of them. Dad was pissed."

"Yeah, he was," chirps Gabe.

He grins like a high school boy who smuggled his skateboard into school, to the anger of his teachers; not the thirty-six year old man he is. When I look at my son, I see a six year old whose hands were always sticky—paint, glue, tape to hang up all of his glow in the dark stars, my make-up he saw as more tools to draw with, streaks of lipstick on paper and the walls, on Laurel’s face— before I am uprooted to a present I can’t touch.

“The look on his face was *hilarious*.”

*

Gabriel smuggled his skateboard into school and, with the help of his friends, rode down the three story staircase of the old wing as part of his senior prank, one week before he graduated. I didn’t have the heart to scold him too much for it. There wasn’t much the school could do to him by that point: his grades were perfect, he was the captain of the hockey team, and well on his way to Boulder. His friends took pictures. Valerie was mortified and didn’t talk to Gabriel for a week. As the youngest, those same teachers Gabriel had would know her by her surname and remember the menace that slid down three flights of stairs on his last day of school. She forgave him after he bought her a pair of boots she’d wanted for months.

I asked for the pictures from Gabriel’s friends and sent them to Laurel over email.

When she finally started talking to me again, she told me, “He sent them to me after he did it. That idiot.”

*

“What’s your *problem*? You’ve been making snippy comments at Dad all night. You’re like this every time we come home. Why do you even bother coming at all if you hate it so much?”

Gabriel clicks his tongue. “I’m here because you, Nate and Lucas are. For some reason, you *always* insist on seeing Dad every Christmas. I’m not here for him.”

How I wish they wouldn’t fight. They never fought as fiercely and brutally as they do now. I can’t call on Laurel to break them up from their wrestling anymore. Their play fighting was always a tussle of love when they were children, before the divorce, before Laurel left. Now they want to *hurt* each other.

They are copying how their parents treated their eldest.

Valerie frowns. “He’s lonely. You should be here for him. He wants to see you.”

Gabe’s scoff was harsh. “Sure he fucking does. As far as he’s concerned, I’m the oldest, his little star, the second favorite—not as much as *you*, obviously. You get baby of the family privileges”

Oh, sweetheart. I was scared of you almost as much as I was scared of Laurel. I’m sorry. You weren’t as painful as Laurel, but you were a boy and your father loved you so much. I didn’t know how to talk to you until after Valerie was born and you could help take care of her.

Valerie’s face darkens.

I sigh.

“You sound like Laurel.”

The sun room grows quiet. The crackle of the fireplace and a Rankin and Bass Christmas special played over the speakers in the living room down the hall. Gabriel glances at his younger sister and raises the pen to his lips. He inhales, exhales, and swallows, leaning his head back.

“She wouldn’t come.”

“She never does.”

“I wouldn’t make her come, anyway.”

Valerie laughs. “She hates us that much, huh?”

No, baby. It’s not you that she hated. The only one she could hate more than me is your father.

*

“How many kids do you want?”

I’d looked at my husband, hips and thighs thrumming with postcoital exhaustion. I squirmed when his fingers, coated by a towel, brushed the sides of my cunt to wipe the semen off of my inner thighs so the cum didn’t crust the hair. We’d been married for a month and I hadn’t even thought of children. I’d only just started getting used to not having my twin brother on the other side of the wall. We were miles away. I was basking in that freedom, of having it all be mine mine mine. I wasn’t ready to share, yet.

But my husband stared at me, olive eyes wide with hope, wiping me down so clean and so gently.

“As many as you want.”

He smiled, wiped back my sweaty hair, and kissed me hard.

*

When I was eighteen, I became a wife.

*

My ex-husband loved Laurel. She has the same dark hair as him, the same olive eyes, and his strong chin. He took time off work to spend as much time with her as he could, as I was horribly sick in the months after she was born. He bought her formula, made sure it was the right

temperature, rubbed my ankles, brought me food and tea in bed, and brought her a bucket of toy animals to toss around the living room. I couldn't breastfeed her. My nipples hardened as soon as she crawled towards me, mouth pink, open and eager as she giggled. Every time I looked at her, I thought of how much she hurt and it made me want to throw up. My husband divided his time giving me affection and Laurel his attention, but I wanted it more.

That first year was a fog. I was less alive than I am now. I couldn't see anyone but myself and what I needed.

When she was eight months old, she stopped trying to come to me. I found it to be a relief. When she was put into daycare as soon as she could walk, I felt like myself again. I rarely held her and felt even less inclined to as she learned how to talk, to read, to use her own spoon and fork without help.

When Laurel was born, I was nineteen years old.

*

My husband knew our daughter was a lesbian by the time she was twelve. I don't know what he saw, but there was something in her that made him suspicious. In her music? Her way of dressing herself? The girls she hung out with? I never saw any of it, I was so preoccupied with taking care of Gabriel and Valerie. He knew but she didn't show it openly in front of us or anyone, and so she was allowed to stay. He watched her carefully, the way she interacted with other girls and boys. Who her friends were. Hoping it would pass. I didn't know until my husband announced to the two children who were left that no dyke would be living under his roof.

My ex-husband disowned our daughter and he knew her more than I did.

Laurel was seventeen, and all trace of her was gone except for the leather jacket she'd given to Gabriel before my ex-husband kicked her out of the house. If she wouldn't go to a therapist of his choice, she was no longer his daughter. I did nothing.

Gabriel never wears the jacket, but it hangs up on his wall in the apartment he shares with his boyfriend of five years along with his medals, diplomas, and all of the other items he considers to be prizes of accomplishment as well as sentiment.

My son never came out to me when I was alive.

Even in the stasis of death, regret spooled into me when I realized. The greatest sting was that I understood why.

*

When I am not with my daughters and son, I drift. Time and memory do not move in a linear trajectory and they bleed into each other as stains do on white fabric. The more I drift, the more my bitterness ferments. Sometimes, I wish I could haunt my ex-husband just so I could hurt him.

*

"Do you hate me? For not telling Dad?"

Laurel hesitated.

"I did, for a while."

I am partially whole—two-thirds—and Laurel and Gabriel are celebrating the latter's 30th birthday. Laurel's wife and Gabriel's boyfriend are the hosts of the party and managing the crowd to give the siblings space. My boy was born just before spring, where the winter still holds reign on the glass windows, and the party is warm as an orange fireplace. It's cold, but my chil-

dren still clanked cold bottles of beer together as cheers and drank on the balcony. They call each other almost every other day. When Gabriel left for college, he called me once a week.

In Apartment Three, I learned that they had been talking every day since my ex-husband threw out our eldest. It was only through Gabriel that my daughters managed to be in the same room as each other at all. Valerie had called him a traitor when she found out. In the one instance of Gabriel losing his temper at Valerie he'd screamed, *she's my sister, too*.

“Do you still?”

Laurel taps the butt of her bottle against his shoulder. “No. You're not obligated to tell him anything.”

He smiles, a weak little thing, and takes a drink. The party behind them continues on, deep guitar and drums vibrating through the walls.

“Actually,” said Laurel. “I'm glad you didn't say anything. If what he did to me is anything—“

She doesn't finish. She smothers it with a drink. Gabriel's smile is grim.

“Yeah. It'd have been worse.”

*

My ex-husband had expectations for our son and our eldest had already failed to meet the steps expected of her. He no longer attended church regularly, but it didn't erase what he saw as truth. If my ex-husband knew our son was gay, I wonder if he would've killed him.

I don't want to think about the answer.

*

Lucas, my grandson, doesn't cry when my son-in-law hoists him in his arms to look at the comatose old man in the hospital cot. He's only four and barely knows this man who comes to visit every holiday, each birthday, even as Valerie holds my ex-husband's hand and mutters under her breath about having to possibly prepare for the funeral. My ex-husband is seventy and has been unconscious for three days from a heart attack. It's only because of my attachment to Valerie that I ever see him. It's Easter weekend, now, and the last time I saw that man, it was Christmas.

I cock my head at the wrinkles that sag into his face. "You're so old, now."

My ex-husband doesn't reply. The heart monitor beeps softly next to him.

"Laurel is aging much better than you ever did."

How stupid of a sixteen year old girl to ever think that this molting husk of flesh could've ever been attractive.

Lucas doesn't understand that the body in front of him is dying and Nate, my son-in-law, is trying to explain to the four year old about the natural phenomenon of death. Valerie doesn't contribute. The most perfectionist of my three children, I know she's compartmentalizing between the logistics of having to cremate her father and her discomfort at being in a hospital again. She hates hospitals. The last time she's been in a hospital was to give birth to Lucas.

The time before that.

Her husband Nate is careful not to talk about it. About the hospital in Grinnell. She's only here for her father.

"Just leave him, Val," I tell her. She doesn't reply.

*

I met him when I was sixteen. He was twenty-five. He made me feel so grown up.

*

“Dad’s dying.”

My eldest’s voice is split in two: a tinny imitation through Gabe’s cell phone and next to me, fluid and organic—more weathered now that she’s forty-two, but just as full and rich— as I am stretched between my two eldest children. I watch Laurel’s face as it changes from mirthful to slack, expressionless, and then the clench of her jaw.

“Really.”

“Heart attack,” says Gabriel. He tucks his hands underneath his armpits while he sits on his apartment balcony. I wish I could reach for his mittens, the ones he wore until his hands were too big to fit them, and put them on for him, as if he were my little boy again. He was easier to love once he could walk and talk, when I wasn’t so scared of the prospect of a baby boy after he was born. If I couldn’t feel that innate motherliness for Laurel, a baby girl, how could I feel it for a boy? I hadn’t been around young boys—boys my own age— since I met my ex-husband. I barely knew any men outside of my husband’s circle of colleagues. I knew their wives even less. My husband had been elated: a little boy he could talk to and speak in a language I could never understand. A little boy who could pass on the family name, introduce to all of the writers that laid the foundation for my husband, artists whom he considered geniuses: a child he could mold into a man of his own fashion who would grow up to be a genius and marry a beautiful girl-child. Gabriel had us both fooled on that front. When my breasts grew heavy with milk, I didn’t feel

love, but relief. The affection came later. He was easier to love when his birth wasn't as fraught on my body, when he started to talk and proved to be the chattiest little ferret of a child.

He was a child and I'd finally felt like a proper grown-up by the time he could talk.

Laurel grabs a bottle of dark gold whiskey from the top of her fridge and drinks straight from the bottle on her kitchen table. Her wife is asleep upstairs.

They have no children, but many nephews and nieces on her wife's side. No children was the rule she made when it came to seriously dating in the long-term and held to it when she met her wife. I've heard my daughter whisper, "I don't know how to be a mom. I can barely take care of myself, I'm scared of what I'd do to a *kid*. I don't want it to be as fucked up in the head as me."

While a third of me sits with Valerie in front of the hospital bed, the other two watch my son and my eldest daughter sit in silence, split over hundreds of miles across the country. My son in Denver, my eldest in St. Louis.

"Laurel."

"Mmm?"

"Am I a bad person for not feeling sad? That I don't care?"

She laughs. It's brittle and my guilt tethers me to the earthly plane ever deeper.

"If you're a bad person, then I must be psychopathic—I want it to hurt him more."

*

My ex-husband does not die. He makes a full recovery and is let out of the hospital after two weeks. Valerie is ecstatic and Gabriel is terse. Over the phone, Valerie tells Gabriel of how they're going to be visiting their father every Sunday for dinner so that she can keep a closer eye

on his condition as he gets older. She has never left St. Paul. I know she resented me for leaving as soon as she was of college age and weeks from moving into her dorm, that she didn't understand why I divorced her father so quietly and never showed the signs for her to see. She was the most attached to me and her father, trailing behind me like a duckling does its broad-winged mother.

"He misses you," she would tell me.

"I know," I'd say, brushing her hair back.

"Don't you?"

There was a plea in her voice. Hope. Childish and cloying for a lost dream in rose-tinted glass. She adores her father, his steady hands and how he would hoist her onto his shoulders to better see the fireworks in the summer. How he cried during her high school graduation, where she achieved the highest of honors, kissing her face and still called her his baby when she was fully grown. I think she liked it best when it was just her, her father, and myself. She calls him every day even though they're only hours separated. She visited him every weekend. She could only manage to see me once a month.

I was still struggling to connect a man who both loved his youngest daughter and hated the elder with the man who promised to always be there for me, to protect me from any who would hurt me, who told me I was special, more special than any girl or woman he'd ever met, behind the locked door of a history classroom of a high school.

I still struggle to reconcile it.

I was living in Apartment Three in Grinnell. I grew herbs in my kitchen window and watched undergraduate students mill about the quiet college town. Valerie didn't understand.

“Don’t you miss him, Mom?” She repeated, more desperate.

It was a struggle to come up with an answer.

She would not have understood. She still didn’t. She can’t see it plainly.

“Sometimes.” It wasn’t a complete lie. “But I’m not going back anytime soon.”

“Why?”

“It was a long time coming, Valerie. It’s better this way.”

Her look was skeptical, an elegant arch of her eyebrow. She reminded me painfully of my twin brother, Dean, who I had not seen since the day I left home to marry my husband. I’d lost all contact with him. I no longer had his number and had no means of finding him again, even if I could get past the shame. He’d make the exact same expressions.

My ex-husband said that he wouldn’t have understood. None of my family would’ve. I’d believed him. He made it feel so easy.

“Why here? In some *college* town? Is there even anything to **do** here?”

I nudged her ankle with my foot and she rolled her eyes like a teenager. “It’s *because* it’s quiet that I chose here.”

“It’s so far away, though.”

Valerie was the most like me and as a result, as all failed parents do, I lavished her with my attention and time, because her siblings were older, more independent—I thought at the time, that they didn’t need me anymore. Valerie did.

She was the first child I’d wanted. That I was ready for. It wasn’t hard to love her, the wisp of blonde hair and gray eyes that collided into soft brown.

Of course she didn’t understand why I’d move so far away from her.

“Laurel lives in Des Moines,” I’d said. “Just an hour from here. I moved to be closer to her.”

*

I think she resents me the most.

*

Laurel didn’t come to my funeral after I killed myself in Apartment Three. I was buried in St. Paul, in my husband’s family lot, which I did not want, but I hadn’t thought to change my paperwork before killing myself. Valerie didn’t let Laurel come.

“Don’t bother. I’m not letting you come here just so you can start a scene again and make it all about yourself when it’s about Mom. You’re not fucking wanted. Fuck off.”

If Valerie had any less self-control, I’m sure she would’ve thrown the phone at the wall with the same ferocity that she did her door when she and Laurel got into fights. Split between St. Paul and Des Moines, I watched my daughters scream.

*

Valerie never had to fight for my love. Gabriel no longer trusted me enough to seek it out after Laurel had to leave. Laurel had always been hungry for it.

*

I knew about the other girls, distantly. He liked a certain kind of girl—light brown almost blonde hair, pale skin, young, lacking in the crow’s feet that adorned my face when I died. He was a history teacher, well-respected and liked by his peers, by his students. He managed to make the driest of textbooks about the Gilded Age enjoyable with wry humor and jokes that bordered on crass, but not crude enough to alarm. It’d been my favorite class and I sought his atten-

tion, raising my hand at any chance I could, interrupting other girls who weren't as special as me, who didn't get personalized notes on essays and exams. I was more mature than them, more wild and grown. I wasn't a girl to him: I was a woman. In every class, there is a girl who's more than a girl, he tells them just as he told me. He saw their potential, knew what they were capable of: made them feel as smart as they were, smarter.

He showed them just how grown up they were.

I didn't even consider any other options. I'd felt trapped by my children into that marriage, even when I noticed he spent longer hours at his school sporadically over the years. I was the one he'd married. If I were younger, I'd have been resentful but triumphant that I was the one who won. On the few occasions I went to his school as a volunteer to functions while we were still married and our children were young, I looked at their faces and saw my daughters reflected on their skin.

I nearly threw up in the punch bowl. I felt my insides rot and mold over.

It was too late. I had to pretend not to see. Who was I without him?

I see all of my mistakes born onto the skin of my children who cannot be in the same room together without trying to hurt each other. I can't think about the other girls.

*

Laurel doesn't have children, but she adores her nephew, Lucas, who adores her back and always asks if his Auntie Laurie—Larry, when he was only just starting to talk—is coming for the holidays. He is the olive branch between Valerie and Laurel. Gabriel has given up on trying to be their mediator and fosters his relationship of mutual care, experience and understanding

with Laurel, something that Valerie could never understand even if she tried. It was one of the few times all three of my children were in the same room together and I was not split three ways.

“Be gentle with him,” Valerie had said, more bite in her tone than necessary. I frowned at her. “He’s delicate. Soft bones, and all.”

“Val,” I murmured.

Laurel looked up from the crib, olive eyes just underneath the wisp of hair, then back at Lucas, who held her finger in a firm grip. “I know.”

“It’s been over twenty years,” I said. “It was an accident. She didn’t mean it, Val.”

Gabriel only sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He’d been keeping the peace for hours, as he’d done for years, and he was tired.

None of them could hear me.

There’s guilt in the gentle motions of Laurel’s fingers and fermented anger in the hard grip Valerie had on the rails of Lucas’ crib.

Laurel held Lucas’s head against her palm with the same hands that had dislocated Valerie’s right arm when Valerie was eight and Laurel was fourteen. I will never know why or how it happened. I only remember Valerie’s scream, her crying, my putting her arm back into its socket, and Laurel’s pale face. If Laurel had cried, had tried to apologize, I never heard it.

All of my attention had been on Valerie. I held her face and kissed her cheeks and my eldest daughter faded behind her door.

My eldest tried to move forward to help reset her sister’s arm and I shoved her back. She hit the floor.

*

I can no longer see my own body: there is no translucence, I do not appear in an imitation of flesh. I float, invisible to myself as I am to my own children. I am a part of the ether. I'm grateful for this, so I didn't have to see what I did to my own body in that bathroom. When my children visit my grave, all I have to see is the headstone that was built for me, the name and dates etched into the stone. There is no body for me to look at.

Laurel comes to my grave in St. Paul only for me. Since she was barred from the funeral, despite Gabriel's best efforts in trying to convince Valerie to allow their sister to come, she comes alone to lay down rosemary and lavender flowers.

"Hey, Mom," Laurel murmurs.

It is late January. The cold of it was unforgiving, I remember.

"Hi, baby."

Laurel smiles. I pretend that it's because she can hear me.

"I finally got tenure."

"I knew you would. You're the only reason that the sociology department hasn't fallen apart."

How close we had been in our interests and focuses, and I hadn't realized until after I'd died. I'd known, distantly, that my eldest had majored in psychology. I hadn't known her focus: child development and social work.

I'd wanted to dig up bones and wonder, imagine, about their lives when they had flesh.

"And Gabe's finally getting his shit together and he's gonna propose to Joel, I think."

I smile. I have no muscles anymore, nor a body, but I remember the echoes of what it was like to smile. It's easier now.

“He’s got nothing to worry about. Joel looks at him like he hung up the sky.”

“It’d be nice to be invited to a wedding for a change.”

“Of course he’ll invite you.”

Laurel bites her lip, a clench of her jaw, and I see the flash of a surly teenage girl who would throw fine china at the wall when we would fight and smoke cigarettes on the roof before sneaking out with a girlfriend I never knew about on her face. Exhaling, Laurel lowers her head, hair falling against the hands that hold onto her knees.

I sigh. “Give her time, Laurel.”

“I hate him,” she whispers. “I hate him so fucking much. He should be here. He should be the one in the fucking ground. Not you.”

Even if I could talk to her, there’s nothing I could say.

“I wish you had called me, Ma. I was right there.”

Just one of my many mistakes. I was so tired, baby. How can I explain just how tired of it all I was? How methodic and *easy* it’d felt? How easy it was to fall into that dark, and how easy it was to let my mistakes, regrets and resentments eat me to the bone until there was only marrow left?

To look in the face of how much time I had wasted, how much had been stolen from me, all of myself that I could’ve been if I hadn’t been so gullible, stupid and desperate to be loved?

It felt like there hadn’t been any other option.

It was only in those last moments that I remembered my children.

“I was right *there*, Ma, you could’ve just called me and I would’ve come.”

For twelve years, this has been my greatest regret. I float around my grave and watch as my daughter turns red from crying and the sharp cold, cries like a child and not the grown woman with a full life that she is, and just as I did when I was alive—I do nothing.

I realized I truly loved my son when I saw him fall off of his bike with training wheels and he got up, laughing despite the split skin on his knees. He was four. I knew I loved Valerie when she rose her hands to my chin, just days born, and tapped me with a gurgle.

So many times have I seen my children cry. So many times have I done nothing.

My ex-husband lives. He cried over my grave, called me his greatest love at my wake and funeral. He has watched his grandson grow and his two youngest children grow into the brilliant young people they are today. He has a photo album of myself and him when we first got married, one I once thought was sweet, romantic—a memento of our love before Laurel was born.

He'd begged me not to leave him the moment Valerie left for college, but there were no children to keep me rooted in that house anymore. I hadn't made friends in the neighborhood we raised our children in. I went to school functions and parties, sometimes, but he'd kept his hand on my waist and did most of the talking while I drank cheap wine. The women were so much older than me and I didn't know how to talk to them. They didn't know how to talk to me. He would encourage me to try, but when we were home, he would sigh about how annoying his co-workers were, how rude and elitist our neighbors were, and dealt with the neighborhood association on his own. I barely knew the parents of my children's friends. It was when my two eldest were gone that I realized how alone I was in a town I'd lived in for over twenty years. It was when Valerie turned sixteen and went to prom with her first boyfriend, the same age I was when I

went into her father's office the first time and spent two hours inside it, that I fully understood what my ex-husband was.

He continues to live in the house where he kept four children.

One child, he tethers to that house. One child, he only knows the superficial face of. One child, he threw away. One child, he married.

When she sleeps in her hotel room, I press my invisible hands to her face and my forehead against her own.

Darling, let me tell you everything.

*

I hadn't seen a baby that was mine. I hadn't seen myself as a mother. I was a child in a grown-up's suit staring at the mass of flesh that had come out of me before I was ready, before I even knew if I *wanted* to be a mother.

*

Gabriel and Valerie sleep. I am almost whole.

"Under the pot," I say, guiding my daughter's arms.

Laurel lifts the white potted plant for the decorative flowers, and a silver house key sits, an outline of dust surrounding its edges. She takes it and lets herself in. She pauses at the click of the undone lock and presses her fingertips to the doorframe. The hinges don't creak as she pushes it forward. The noise she makes is primal, her joints twitching, and she nearly staggers back.

"Easy, easy. You know your way."

Into the dark of the threshold, Laurel takes off her boots and places them on the doormat. She flexes her gloved fingers and carefully goes up the stairs. I follow her as she makes each

careful step, with the front heel of her feet she puts all of her weight on—practiced. She has done this before, I now realize, with the girls she tried to hide from her father’s view. I only smelled the cigarettes and pot that were let behind, lingering in the carpet fibers.

The Master bedroom is the furthest down the hall. The first bedroom that the staircase leads to is Valerie’s. Gabriel’s is to the right. In the room that overlooks the front yard through twin windows shaped like half-moons, is where Laurel’s childhood things remain. Untouched for twenty-five years.

He wanted to throw everything away. I told him no.

For years, I’d stood in that room and sat in that carpet, trying to put together the pieces of the daughter I hadn’t wanted nor truly known to come up with the shape of her, who she was.

How jealous I’d been of her, to be so loved by my ex-husband. How much she had hurt me, splitting me open and tearing me at the core. How I could not forget how painful it’d been to carry her for nine months, the forty eight hours of labor, and the haze that’d lasted a year after she was born.

How young I was.

*

“Did you know?”

“Know what?”

She’d grown so much taller than me in the years I hadn’t heard from her, but she curled inward, like a child being swaddled. She’d cupped her coffee mug so hard I thought it might shatter in her hands.

I was living in Apartment Three. Laurel was twenty-five.

“You know,” she said. “That I was gay.”

The coffee was cold.

“No,” I’d said. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

Laurel scoffed. “Checks out. You never did.”

I couldn’t reply.

There was a pause as cars drove below Apartment Three.

Her voice was brittle.

“Did you ever like me?”

*

I look at my ex-husband’s sleeping face through my eldest. His face is slack, relaxed. Despite the heart attack, his sleep is peaceful and languid. He still has the same sheets and bedding from when we were married. My pictures still stand on his nightstand. Pictures and portraits of Gabriel and Valerie are scattered throughout the room. Whatever pictures of Laurel I managed to save have been given to Gabriel before he could burn them.

As I look around the room through my daughter’s eyes, I see myself reflected through gloss and snapshot. There is only one picture of me over the age of thirty-five. My ex-husband sleeps. He still sleeps on his usual side of the bed: on the right, where the mattress dips just enough to fold into the concave of his back, resting his older bones. My pillows are still there.

Together, my daughter and I take one of my pillows and press it against his face.

*

The last day Laurel stood in the doorway of our home, she was seventeen, and her nose was broken from how hard her father had slapped her. Her face was red, mouth coated with the smear of blood, and she held a duffle bag in one hand.

“Mom?”

Her arms weren't outstretched, but she reached for me. I could hear Gabriel and Valerie shuffling around upstairs, then the creak of the staircase as Valerie peered through the bannisters on the second floor and Gabriel trying to reason with my ex-husband. Their voices rose. I kept my eyes low.

I rummaged through my purse and gave her a hundred and fifty dollars in cash. She held it between her blood-smudged fingers. Her jaw straightened.

“That's it?”

When I said nothing, I watched my daughter's face shift between disbelief, hurt, resignation, and then anger. It was the most I had looked at her in the days since Sister Lucille caught her and another girl kissing under the bleachers.

“Fuck you.”

She spat a puddle of blood at my feet. It hit my ankles. She took the money and I didn't see her for seven years.

*

When he begins to struggle, Laurel and I press down harder until the edges of the pillow touch the comforter.

*

“I didn’t know how to. I didn’t know how to like someone I barely knew. And I didn’t try to.”

“What about now?”

*

If it could give me back my youth, if it could wake up the sixteen year old girl who thought she was so grown up and that her History teacher understood her far better than her own family, her friends, and herself, that she was in love with him and thought herself so mature, I would wrap my hands around his neck. I would claw him open. If it could give my children a mother who could’ve properly loved them, I would’ve never married this man. I would have split him in half at the spine.

But I listen to his dying breaths, feel his struggling body beneath our grip. I listen to this old man die in his sleep and free my daughter and I both.

*

“I like the person I see in front of me quite a lot. I would like to get to know her more.”

*

I lift.

Ritual

Margot

My wife Therese was not yet my wife when they put my Uncle Eli in the ground. She wasn't my skeleton, not my open secret: she was my girlfriend and my favorite uncle had taken a bullet to his throat. It was the frayed, open and raw skin that took the longest to cover with make-up. It was the eighties and morticians who handled such blunt force trauma didn't exist yet, corpses that'd been through the worst bodily trauma you could imagine: car crashes, lost limbs, faces completely disfigured by being run over, hit with heavy objects, or drowning victims.

My Grandfather didn't have such a specialist to call on. They hid the neck wound, rotted over and tinged blue at the flayed ends, with a red scarf. No amount of make up could hide the swollen skin where the bullet had shot through his Adam's Apple.

Eli was embalmed for an open-casket wake and funeral. The family gawked at him. Young nieces and nephews and cousins were lifted up to look at his face that was wired to look peaceful, content. Dusted with blush, foundation and concealer to disguise the bruising on his once-pink flesh.

Uncle Eli's face used to flush when his smile was sincere. Eli gave me a telescope for my birthday and a book of the scientific names of reptiles and their origins for Christmas when I was eight years old. I saw him fleetingly, as a child, but his visits had been my favorites. He'd supported my choice to move from the east coast to Minnesota for college for a medical program, when it was still out of the norm for women. When I cut my hair at the ears over the bathroom sink, he told me it looked good while my mother touched it, horrified, pulling at it as if it would make it grow longer. He never married. I'd never stopped to wonder why.

The blush on his face was artificial, a plastic peach.

Therese hung back from the majority of the party, dressed in a sleek black dress and a blue butterfly-shaped brooch that'd belonged to her grandmother. She'd walked up to Eli first. Minutes later, she was distraught and looked as if she were about to be violently ill, holding a hand to her nose. "I can't, I'm sorry. It's so awful. What have they done to him?"

It was when I saw his corpse, the blush applied to make his body look fresh, his jaw wired shut to keep his mouth from opening and the flowers in his folded hands that kept his ripped open chest cavity from showing, that I understood why Therese couldn't take it.

"This is wrong," Therese murmured into my shoulder when Eli's casket was lowered into the ground. Her fingers gripped my shaking elbow. "Look at them— they're ruining him. Is that what he would've wanted?"

The smell of formaldehyde was so strong I ran to the bathroom of the chapel and vomited as soon as the service was over. I barely made it to the bowl.

Whatever was in that casket was not my Uncle Eli. My Eli, who found more comfort in wild birds and ivy than his own family, would have never wanted his body to be put on display. Would not have wanted a poisonous disease of a chemical pumped through his body, iron casket put into the earth where it would sicken everything around it. That was not my Uncle Eli. My Uncle Eli was gone the moment the bullet shot through his nervous system, cutting off the spinal cord from going to the brain. As soon the brain is gone, all that is left is a husk of flesh that will become feeding ground for bacteria, maggots and carrion.

There weren't any places that allowed green burials, yet. Had that been an option, my Uncle Eli would have requested they wrap him in a shroud and put him in the dirt. We still don't

legally allow open air, else he would've given his body to the birds—what he would've wanted most of all.

Uncle Eli was the first body I reburied. Therese gave me two shovels and in the dark, we lifted him up. I cut the wires holding his mouth shut. Therese wiped the makeup off of his face. I ripped off the scarf. The hole where the bullet shot through his Adam's Apple was vibrant, black scarring into dark red crust, the flesh bruised. I saw his pain. I saw him plainly.

I saw my Uncle Eli, and I mourned.

*

A Place Called Gorham, New Hampshire

We are the dirt carrying the weight of steel caskets on our shoulders. We eat the wicker, hold the decaying bodies, feeding the flesh to the maggots, bacteria and animals. The body is too poisonous for us, for the birds that that husk loved, finding kinship in their solitary lives. It sickens us, a sore on our skin. It leaks in pus with each body pushed into our body. They drain the sick out like blood, the tongue lapping the venom out of a bite. We would offer leeches, but it would kill them, too.

On our highest peaks, the holiest of eyes in the horizon, the birds descend on spiced, split meat. Here, they will show their love as the body did them.

*

Margot

I started my first year at mortuary school in Minneapolis that fall after I reburied Uncle Eli. Therese started work in the Birth Center downtown. Life and death weren't brought into the same building on campus until a decade later and there was a fearful sort of held gaze towards the mortuary students, even those far younger than I am. Some were fresh out of their undergraduate degrees, fingers supple and not yet dried from the sharp winter air as they held mock skulls in their hands, applying restorative makeup and clay where false broken bone would be. Two years later, I graduated with them.

The first that Therese brought to me was a baby that'd been born without a brain and didn't live beyond fourteen hours. The baby's mother came with. She was alone, and she held the baby's corpse to her chest, as if she could still offer her child warmth. The body had been cold for the two days since it'd died, made warm only by the blankets it was swathed in. I didn't take it.

"What do you want me to do?"

The woman's voice was steady. "I want you to bury her in a patch of sunflowers."

The concept of green burials didn't exist in '86. The woman's options were to either put the child in a casket in another day or stuff it with embalming fluid. There was nothing else for her to do. There was no place yet in Minnesota to offer a natural burial legally. The woman wasn't going to wait until the 90s for the chance to bury her baby.

"I can do that for you."

Making a mattress out of ice packs, I put the baby in a cooler and the mother sat in the back of the car as I drove an hour to Orrock, where the sunflowers were in bloom. We arrived at dusk and I gave the mother the shovel. She wanted to dig the grave herself. She wrapped the

baby in a shroud, kissed the sunken flesh where the brain ought to have been, and lowered it into the dirt.

The sunflower field became a local tourist destination for the brightest yellow petals that'd been seen in a decade.

*

A Place Called Orrock, Minnesota

We are the soil where the child with the hole in its skull was buried. We are the seed of the sunflowers where the body became decayed matter, where the bones turned to fertilizer before dust. The maggots grew from the flesh merely days old, the bearer of that body, carried for nine months, only held for that long. There was no brain for the maggots and beetles and seeds to feast on. We are the seeds that coiled in the bones of its little chest and came forth as bright yellow petals, glimmering in the morning dew as we sprung out of the brown center, the pupil of a gold eye.

The caretaker of the dead brings them to us and we hold them to our breast.

We cradle the young. The ones who breathe only for moments. The ones who suffocate. The ones who were never alive. We nurture, we cultivate.

*

Margot

The teenagers came within two years. Therese did not bring them to me: she became a heavyweight in the birth unit of her hospital and although she had to help teenagers through

births they should not have had to experience, they somehow found me through other means. I didn't ask how. For the safety of my clients, I don't press the hushed thread that meanders beneath legal notice.

I still worked in a proper crematory and funeral home. I was the main liaison between the grieving families and the director who ran the ceremonies. The smell of the crematory in the other building adjacent to the main funeral home was thick, sticking to my lungs. However, they didn't perform embalming services, for which I was grateful. Therese started making enough money that she started trying to persuade me to quit that job so that I could do my proper business full-time. I always turned her down.

"I can't make them change their regulations, but I can use whatever they give me. I need the experience, I'm not ready."

It was a venture I wanted to pay my share towards and I was not about to use my future wife's money to carry the weight of it. I needed to establish myself first on a legal ground so I could push for more natural burials in the future, as I eventually did.

The job also provided me an alibi. I was doing honest work in the funeral home and while I hated the crematory, it was better than embalming. I knew *how* to embalm, but the smell of the chemical and the sliding of my work gloves made me want to slough my skin off.

My boss would suggest that the grieving family order a more expensive urn for ashes or a metal casket that would do nothing to protect the body but cause it to decay slower, and I asked the families what they wanted and gave them whatever they wished. It was protocol to ask what they wanted first and then provide further, more pricey, options. My boss was sympathetic to the grieving families, orderly and prompt, but he still had money to make in order to keep the funeral

home afloat. It was the nature of the business of death: compassion for the grieving, but still needing money. I felt no small amount of guilt when suggesting a more expensive urn or casket that would just become waste in a landfill, eventually, but our customers could afford it. Outside of my job, my other customers had no such funds. When I was not at work, I was taking bodies to the lakes where they could be set aflame, drifting far enough away that the smell wouldn't linger in the air.

The babies were easier. With the teenagers came the heightened risk.

The weight of the late 80s and 90s kept us in a tight chokehold. I remember the quilts, the candles lit for vigils in downtown, and this stutter of fear from how AIDS spread like a violent rash that our governments saw as divine punishment. Their apathy didn't leave those young teenagers untouched, it didn't spare their friends. I had to help bury many of them, within the funeral home and outside of it. When a young trans girl, Sofia, and her sister with the car, Becca, sat in my living room, I'd assumed that I would burying one more life that could have been saved if not for that apathy. However, their friend had not been killed directly by the virus, but a freak heart attack—something rare, but not unheard of, in people as young as seventeen.

“They'll put him in a dress, put makeup on him that he'd never wear, and they'll call him a name he hasn't used with anyone in years. They don't see him as he was—they're going to lie to everyone.”

“What you're asking me to do is *steal* a body.” My thumbnail shook against my knee. “I can't do that.”

“And burying dead babies in sunflower fields is legal?” Sofia glared. “*I'm* not legal—the name I have isn't recognized as legal. I can't get a driver's license or an ID with my name. Don't

give me that crap. Who gives a fuck about what's legal or not—I'm not letting them disgrace my best friend like that. I won't let them lay a fucking finger on his body if I can help it.”

Her anger spilled into violent sobs, face in her hands. In between sobs, she wondered out loud, “What about when *I* die?” Her sister, Becca, wouldn't go against her wishes, but if her family had their hands on her body when *she* died—

I'd seen too many acquaintances and friends die alone in their hospital beds. Their partners and friends barred from seeing them. Their families refusing to acknowledge them, already dead to their family name years before. Their government seeing them as barely more than statistics. The families who did take their bodies did not acknowledge who they truly were and erased it upon death. With just a few more steps into misfortune, Joseph McClain could've been one of those bodies left to die alone in a hospital room and then his body put on display as a warning, if it was remembered at all.

I didn't take the body myself, but I rented the van. Once the body was in the van, I made sure the body would last the drive. I left Sofia and her friends in the back to sit with their friend as I drove.

Two days later, after a four hour drive in a rubber tub filled with ice and ice packets, Joseph McClain was surrounded by his family without blood as he was buried amongst the Red Cedars. They sang for him, wrote poetry and drank cheap beer and bad whiskey to celebrate this life. They never called him anything but Joseph. His biological parents never laid a finger on his body. They called off the search after three months, his body declared as missing indefinitely, and my fear of being caught began to dissipate. Even when there are no words on papers to remember who provided Joseph McClain the burial he deserved and wanted, surrounded by those

he loved and who loved him, memory and word of mouth remembers just as clearly. They remember, and they protect.

After Joseph, there were many more teenagers. I took them all.

*

A Place Called Ely, Minnesota

The bones sank in the sand-bed at the bottom of the lake where the boat built for a child burned and melted into the water. If the bodies made it to the bottom before our animals took their fill, we hold what is left of them at the bottom of the great ocean and give them liberation. Where the ashes from the bodies on the pyres fell, we ate them. As our bounty, we offer the sprouts of green. Soil that can be turned and harvested. What we give in exchange is far greater than only the temporary can imagine. We go far deeper than what little has been discovered about the oceans we carry on our shoulders.

We have no body. We are everything.

*

Margot

In '93, I left my job and opened my own funeral home with a small staff of like-minded employees: I had a crematory but I didn't offer embalming services. I had many lapsed Catholic and Jewish customers. I turned down all requests for embalming, restating over and over that it was a service I didn't provide. My true business continued, now with a larger network of green

morticians who handled the jobs I could not handle in far stretches of the state and our bordering Midwestern peers.

Therese refused to enter the crematory, but she thought of my funeral home as a second house.

“It smells pure in here,” she said, hand brushing along my back. Wrinkles had begun to form on the back of her hands, stretching over her knuckles. Freckles from the sun of brief summers and harsh winter dotted her skin. “You care about the bodies you bring in. They’re going to be treated well here. They can trust you with their bodies, just as I trust you with mine.” She smiled. “In every single way.”

I brought her hand to my mouth and kissed it, pressing my teeth over where I would put a ring on in twenty more years.

*

I’ve lost count of the bodies I have buried, burned, and thrown into the lakes over the years. I leave no paper trail and the grieving don’t ask for them. I still bury the babies, those whose blood relations would not treat their bodies with the respect their friends and found families would, and I offer burials that would be seen as unseemly elsewhere. Grown bodies were more difficult to hide and take back than the babies and my funeral house job gave me an alibi, but the threat was always hanging over my head. It was only my clients keeping their mouths firmly shut, a tight-knit circuit of whispers, no paper trail, and hushed sounds of a funeral director who offered unorthodox burials at minimal cost, that I’ve evaded being arrested for this long. I’ve had more close calls while attending Pride with Therese or being with our friends in the bars that welcomed us in, in holding each other’s hands in public. I knew the risks and seeing the

faces of the grieving made it worth it. We watched as the world began to crack open, splintering with repressed rage, a demand for better, as we laid our dead to rest—the dead would not be forgotten, we made sure of it.

*

A Place Called Fond du Lac and Another Place Called Saint Louis River

There are those who have been here on this land for far longer than the caretaker's ilk and the caretaker of the dead respects this. Their practices and their connection to us belong to our marriage alone, but the caretaker of the dead and her bodies remember the old ways of their people. In our palms we hold the patriarch whose blood runs with olives, Aegean salt, and old gods.

Our hands are warmed by the pyre that sends him into the aether and it burns for hours, days, until his ash remains held in our breast until the day we, too, are gone.

*

Margot

I came home smelling like burnt wood, ash sticking to my short-cropped hair and jacket, and our kitchen smelled of almonds and rosemary. Therese opened her arms to me and I fell against her chest: our bodies, smoky and sweet.

Butter and brown sugar was still on her mouth when we were laying in bed together after several rounds of fucking (we were in our fifties, not senile) when she asked me, “How do you want to be taken care of when you die?”

I licked the sweat off of her left breast and hummed into the fleshy curve. There were freckles dotted along the slope, droplets of post-orgasm sweat sliding along the pale brown dots as if trying to form a constellation; this one was in the shape of cloud swirl. Therese wants to be fed to the coyotes when she dies. She told me on a snowy day in '84.

“What do you think I should do?”

Therese tugged my hair. Cropped short since my mid-thirties, there wasn't much for her to grab, but she still managed to pull at the strands until my skull ached as I ate her out, dragging and edging her high so I could feel her thighs shake against my cheeks. The shorter it was, the closer her fingers felt, the closer she felt. “It's not about what I'd want—it's you. What you want. I want to know: how would you want me to take care of you?”

I lifted myself up slowly, so that our skin didn't sting as we separated, held together by sweat, and hovered over her.

“I want to become a tree. Take my ashes and put me in the backyard. I don't care what kind of tree you plant. Put me back in the ground as dirt. If you embalm me, I'll never forgive you. I'll poison your garden.”

Snorting, Therese flipped us over with a roll of her hips, a lock of her calves around my waist, and a push of her hand against my shoulder.

“Touch my garden, and I'll plant giant hogweed with your ashes.”

“Kinky.”

*

When we were in our fifties, Ramsey Creek had been open for twenty years, Therese had moved hospitals because the smell of the chemicals in the ICU had grown too much for her, and

I still buried bodies in sunflower fields. When they began building the old Greek pyres in Crestone, I considered the notion of buying my own plot of land to conduct even the most bizarre of funeral practices.

“What kind of name would you want to give it?”

Therese lowered her pen, adjusted the braid that fell over her right shoulder and her eyes wrinkled at me in a smile. Her braid fell to her waist now, kept in its loose interlocking coils so as to not get in her or my mouth when we made love. Therese hummed, folding her hands over the manuscript of report-essay she was crafting for her hospital.

“Ankou,” she said. “I would make it law that whenever we have to bury someone who died from cancer, we must place a bowl of butter next to their gravesite.”

I hummed, playing with the end of her braid between my fingers. “That sounds like a waste of money and food.”

“You’re lucky my grandfather isn’t alive to hear you say that,” said Therese. “He’d be very upset.” She rifled through our mail and smiled at the name on a letter: young children weren’t for us, but we often kept in contact with the kin of those who we buried. As we watched the young ones grow up, they were as close to having children of our own as we ever might’ve wanted. The closest was one of Therese’s nieces who still lived in rural France, where Therese’s family was from. I’d met her niece, Rhiannon, several times, but never in France.

We would be leaving for France in three days for a funeral. The body of Therese’s Great Aunt Beatrix would not be embalmed. She had been dead for two weeks already. Her body was being kept in a pool of ice, filled every other day to keep the body in tact and cool. Ninety-six years old. It would be my first time out of the country, and Therese’s second visit of the year. I

often contemplated asking her if we should just move to France, the country she'd spent half of her childhood in from all of the summers spent with her grandparents in Brest and its surrounding woodlands and moors.

I'd met Great Aunt Beatrix once before, years before the wrinkles had grown more defined on the back of our hands, before the freckles widened into brown spots on my wrists and knuckles. She was not a warm woman, but she was beholding: her eyes were brown, dark with decades bearing their weight on her. All of her children had gone beyond Brittany, the little alcove in limbo with France, but she had never left for more than a vacation. "I will die where I was born: home. I won't let any of you fools take me anywhere else."

All of Therese's family was returning to Brest for her celebration of life and welcome her into death. They knew of our relationship, that although we didn't have the legal words, we were truly married in all ways that counted. In their indifference, they were far more welcoming than my own family. However, all boundaries belonging to the human world would be shed as soon as we entered Brest.

"Will you help me bury her?"

I took Therese's hands and squeezed them in mine: hands that had touched me in every crevice, every scar, wrinkle and blemish. Hands I knew as well as my own. Hands who brought life into the world, held them as they died, and mine, who brought those dead bodies to rest.

"How would she like me to take care of her?"

*

A Placed Called Your Grave

When you die, we will hold you in our arms and kiss your bones. We will take you and free you of your burdened flesh.

*

Margot

They wheeled Great Aunt Beatrix into Paimpont and wrapped her face in scarves so as to hide the sallowness of her skin. The scarf wrapped around her jaw gave her the likeness of sleep, so that her jaw did not hang open. That the family allowed me the privilege to position her so that she would go unnoticed as we walked onto the many trails of the Paimpoint was no small act: it meant I was a member of the family. Even in death, Great Aunt Beatrix's mouth was severe, in a firm line, and her brows furrowed. Therese held her shoulders so that her head didn't bounce around too much in the wheelchair when the wheels rolled over rocks, gravel, and roots that sprung out of the damp moss and dirt floor.

The smell of rain was thick in the air, hovering in a faint fog that rose to my knees. Rhannon wheeled a cooler full of water and cloth for me to use when I would change the body into clothes that would naturally decay with Beatrix. The lavender and thyme in Beatrix's hair hid the smell.

I could smell the salt from the coast and taste it as droplets of dew scraped against my arms and ankles. We continued to walk until Therese found the den that'd once been the frequent spot of play and rendezvous for a young Beatrix, not far from the Val sans Retour.

We came into the grove, and I lifted her out of the wheelchair with Therese's help. My bones didn't work as well as they used to, and the younger ones, the nephews, nieces and

younger relatives helped us lift her by the legs and onto the ground, where the white shroud was waiting for her. Rhiannon took her shoes off, Therese slipped the skirt off, and I took off her scarves: I let the older members of the family take the rest of her clothes before I started to wash her body.

*

A Place Called Brittany

The roll of a metal wheelchair is little more than a brush of a single strand of hair on our skin. The pound of feet on the path that leads to the slab of rock formations called the Vale of No Return—a misnomer— is dust on our flesh. But we feel them, nonetheless.

These are a people of this particular face we wear: it has shuffled through as many names as there have been wars found on our flesh. Trees burned, blood spilling into the soil, not yet salted so it couldn't regrow once more, bones that entangled with the roots of our trees—they call us Breizh, and this mole on our body is the forest they call Koad Pempont. We have many more, and none and all are true. In centuries to come, we will attain many more.

They have come to bury their dead. The body they hoist from the wheelchair, unravel from its bindings and wrap in a loose white fabric that will sink into us gently, will be one of countless. We prefer to take the bodies whole. We will let the animals who still live here feast on the body and then we will take what's left. In hundreds of years, barely a blink of time passing to us, where the ribcage was will become the roots of a grand tree.

*

Margot

Decades of having looked at the naked corpses of people from infancy, little more than a few hours or days old, to teenagers, to fully grown adults and to the very old whose traditions had almost been lost by a world that refuses to look death in the eye, I didn't feel disgust when I looked at the sallow, sagging and yellowing skin of Great Aunt Beatrix's body. This was no longer Beatrix's body, after all: it was the husk that was left behind, the skin of what used to hold the mind that was once Beatrix.

Funerals and mourning are never for the dead. The dead cannot speak for the mourning, cannot thank them for the mourning, for the remembrance. It is for the conscience of the living.

Great Aunt Beatrix knew this—she made it so in her last rites and will: for the mourning of her family, she would have them celebrate her life by facing the husk that she once was and let her naturally be eaten away by the bacteria, the dirt, and the white-necked griffon vultures that flew from the south; the carrion of her body would be their feast. Great Aunt Beatrix would have her body be greeted with dignity: just as she ate bird meat and flesh off of the fish bones that her father would wrangle out of the coastline, she'd offer her own back to that same meat she'd consumed.

Together, Therese and I folded one half of the white shroud over Beatrix's body. Beatrix's son, Mathèo, and Rhiannon folded over the other half. The shroud was kept loose over her body. It would be easier for the boars and foxes to nose through it as it began to shred. The griffon vultures and crows would have no difficulty in tearing through the thin fabric. Beatrix would join her ancestors in Paimpont.

After her she was covered, we laid canary clovers, lilies and thyme on top of her chest. Then, the wailing began.

Wailing, bleating, howling and the crying that was between screams of despair and calls of joy. The body that once held the mind of Beatrix laid silent and still, even as her organs and insides had opened themselves up to the heat of mid-summer, allowing the bacteria to fester and begin to eat away at her.

Around her body and the circle of stones that sprouted out of the growth, etchings deep in the rock I couldn't decipher, the D'Angou clan feasted, broke bread over Beatrix, drank wine, and shared stories of Beatrix's sharp tongue, her harsh teeth, and her backhanded kindness born from seeing so much change in over ninety years. In between laughter, there were more tears, and the griffon vultures hovered on the branches, waiting for us to leave so they could eat.

“Why not here?”

Therese cupped her glass of wine, a thick red, in her palm. Her sleeve slipped to show Ankou in his wide-brimmed hat dancing on her wrist: touched up two years ago to cover the wrinkles that were steadily growing. We would have at least twenty to thirty more years together, I was sure of it. I thought she was be beautifully put to rest in such a forest, just as she was in life.

She sipped and the wine stained the curves of her mouth. She licked, and I felt the familiar licks of want in my belly: never burned out in all these years together. She smiled.

“There aren't anymore wolves here, and I like to hear them sing.”

*

A Place Called []

**Only one can truly kill us and it rises and falls in rotation every hour, every minute. But until that day comes until we, too, die, we'll continue to linger and hold onto their dead. From their dead, we will give back fruitfully. We will grow more thyme, lavender, and this-
tle, the same they put into the body's hair to disguise the smell.**

One present is a caretaker of the dead. Accompanied by a wife, and the wife's family. They understand that to give back to us instead of poisoning us through chemicals and fabricated ash is what this corpse needs. What this body wants. What was left of who used to move that body is gone: what's to be done with the body isn't for the dead. It is never for the dead.

It is for the living.

We are alive. We will take what is given to us.

Assembly Line

Tori was coming back from her Environmental Science class when she saw the campus police cars parked in front of the Delta Xi Nu chapter house. An ambulance was careening down the street south toward Putnam County Hospital, sirens shrieking. Yellow tape barred off all of the student spectators who gawking, recording on their phones and chatting amongst themselves. Although Victoria had the right to go in, she resisted and hung back in the crowd. One at a time, in an orderly fashion, the Delta Xi Nu girls strolled out of the house in their leggings, yoga pants, and over-sized sweatshirts and stood on the front lawn, huddled together to preserve warmth in the blistering Midwest cold. It was early March, still two weeks away from spring break. The chapter was preparing for a Spring Fling party: Delta Xi Nu was hosting.

As they stood next to one another, Victoria just another voyeur amongst the student body, she could no longer distinguish the girls from one another.

Blonde, dirty blonde, brown haired—highlights, buns, messy and tight, braids and let loose to their hips—the one or two stray redhead, their expressions were all perfectly calm, at ease, lips perfectly relaxed.

All of them blended together. The pants, some dark shade of grey, black, or blue, and the sweatshirts were white. All of the girls wore white. They folded their hands against their lower stomachs, nails painted, their skin clear, their beauty immaculate.

In the grim gray of the afternoon, they smiled as cats did over a bird.

All of the girls were present on the house lawn, sans two. Herself and Luci.

The roar of the ambulance siren grew fainter until it disappeared, barely more than the soft shriek of a bird before it was shot.

*

It wasn't the house that caught Tori's eye on that college visit last year. It was the girls.

She remembered seeing them then: the lawn in front of the Delta Xi Nu chapter house laden with girls sprawled out on the grass, their bodies protected from the pollen and little insects that hid away in the dirt by blankets, towels, and lawn chairs. It was a hot day and the girls were wearing bikinis on the front lawn. The girls laid on their stomachs, letting their skin warm under the sun, other sisters rubbing their exposed backs (some with the strings of their bikinis showing, others leaving the strings falling to the side, thin strips of pale skin pearly in the light) with tanning oil, sunscreen, and moisturizer. Tori smelled sharp watermelon and aloe vera spritz. A cooler sat by the front door of the chapter house, which was decorated with the Des Plaines colors: bright yellow flowers and blue roses wrapped around the columns, hanging on the doorway and windows.

Tori imagined the girls as the marble women in the Hellenic wing of the Art Institute—their bodies shapely, perfectly chiseled to each smooth curve: displayed for Tori's worship. Tori the observer, the admirer, the obsessive, safe behind the motion sensor lines.

She'd strangled the impulse to reach out and trigger the alarm.

*

The campus police sat with the girls in the living room and drank eggnog. They were laughing. The officers grinned and joked, "We won't tell if you don't say anything," as the girls poured shots of amber liquid out of a label-free bottle into their eggnog. Tori turned down the offer of a drink and went upstairs when she was finally allowed back inside. The yellow tape had been brought down, but Tori followed the faint sheen of adhesive of the walls. They led her to

Luci's room, which had been becoming increasingly scarce over the past month. Sticking her hand inside of her coat pocket to not tamper the fingerprint evidence, Tori was surprised that it wasn't locked or that the doorway hadn't been barred off. But then, the yellow tape had only been up for two hours before the girls were allowed inside. She waited for the rise of voices downstairs before she twisted the knob. Inside the room, Tori was blasted with the stench of Clorox, bleach, and vomit.

The room had been tidied already. Since there were two girls per room, it wasn't uncommon for one half to be more cleanly than the other, but both were well-fitted and clean. Except for the stain that was on the floor next to Luci's bed.

On the white carpet was an outline of yellow-green and reddish-brown, and the scent of bleach was strongest on that spot. Holding her nose and eyes tearing up at the chemical smell, Tori kneeled down to get a better look. She took care not to touch anything and the carpet groaned under the weight of her feet as she bent her knees.

She was familiar with the evidence of vomit on the floor after months parties on the weekends, rushes and benders. Upon further inspection, Victoria realized that the dark red mixed with the vomit were bloodstains.

On Luci's night stand was her pale blue water bottle, half full and lid uncapped. On shaky feet, muscles twitching in her calves, Tori gingerly took the water bottle using her coat pocket and sniffed at it. It was odorless.

Through the walls and the floor, Tori heard laughter.

*

Tori had initially wanted to go out of state— to Chicago’s brisk fall winds, Atlanta’s rhythmic heat, D.C.’s contradictory mazes—but her parents thought it’d be too much of a change for her. Tori already had a hard time connecting with other girls her age with few that she dared to call friends. She’d spent most of her lunch hour in the computer lab or as close to the exit doors as possible rather than talk to her peers. She’d dropped out of lacrosse after freshman year. She had seat neighbors in class who she shared notes with, but she didn’t invite them over after school. All of her old friends, girls in her neighborhood and kindergarten class, had either moved away or moved on when Tori started talking to them less and less. By middle school, the most they gave her were nods and waves, surprised smiles on their lips before their attention was drawn elsewhere.

Tori worried so much about being found out by them and how her eyes lingered that she encouraged the distant, even during the loneliest nights. Her hometown, Carrionville, was small and if anyone found out about what she imagined doing with the pretty girls in her class, it’d spread like a viral disease in days.

Des Plaines University was also in-state and her scholarship greatly decreased the amount of tuition costs since she’d lived in Indiana her whole life. Her parents’d been happy with her choice in Des Plaines, her mother even more-so when she sat down with her mother with the Greek Life applications, even though Tori already knew which house she wanted to join. Her mother was thrilled to pay the \$1,200 dues.

“You’re going to love it,” she said. “You’re going to make so many friends that way.”

On the first day of Sorority Rush, Tori met Bekka.

*

Luci was a fellow freshman who rushed with Tori during the week prior to classes starting and she was in a medically induced coma at the hospital. She and Tori had not been close but they got along well enough to go grocery shopping together on a regular biweekly basis and pooling money to buy overly expensive lattes. Tori listened in on conversations in the week that followed her hospitalization but there wasn't any consistent story about what'd happened to her—alcohol poisoning, drug use, with the most common theory being a suicide attempt. Had it been anyone else at any other sorority, Tori might've been willing believe that.

Had it not been for Luci's friendship with the girl who'd dropped out of both the sorority and Des Plaines, Tori would've been willing to write it off as a tragedy barely skirted.

There'd been a third girl who joined Delta Xi Nu that first week after Sorority Rush: her name was Sage and she'd disappeared after the Greek Life Halloween Party that fall. Tori was the last one left.

As far as the Delta Xi Nu girls were concerned, Sage didn't exist.

*

"We have an open door policy here," Bekka had said the day Tori moved in. The other girls had offered to help move her things in, minimal as her luggage was, but Tori had been so overwhelmed by the cheeriness and warmth of the girls that she couldn't say *no, thank you, I've got it*. "So please come see me anytime, okay? You're always welcome here at home. We all look out for each other here, first. You're one of us, now," Bekka winked.

Tori could only mumble *sure*, though she smiled. It was easy to do. Bekka wasn't her roommate, but she lived just down the hall in the Delta Xi Nu house. She was a sophomore in the nursing program and her voice was molasses-rich, her long brown hair had faint gold highlights,

and Tori recognized her as one of the girls she'd seen on the lawn a year ago, skin glowing gold in the sunlight. Her skin was even more vibrant up close and Tori found herself talking more than she had in years with a girl she'd met hours ago, rattling off whatever came to her mind without a second thought.

"I'm sorry," said Tori, neck hot. Her voice cracked faintly. "For talking so much, I'm just kinda nervous."

Bekka laughed, eyes crinkling. She leaned in close and Tori could smell strawberries on her breath. Her lips were glossed over. She was so close Tori could see the freckles on her mouth. "No need to be sorry," said Bekka. "We're sisters, now— who will be there for you if not your sisters?"

Bekka took her hand as cheering grew in volume from downstairs, chanting *Victoria! Victoria! Victoria! Victoria!*

"We'd better go, they're calling for you."

As if on a string, Tori was led downstairs from the half-unpacked bedroom she shared with an upperclassman and was brought into the common living room area.

The entire common room had been completely decked out with foot covering each corner of the table: pigs in blankets, casseroles, cakes, cookies and bars, along with punch, soda and a modest amount of liquor. Decorations were strewn up all over the common room: a banner that said, *Welcome Home, Victoria, Sage and Lucy!*, bouquets of pink and white flowers on the mantle of the fireplace, confetti and flower petals all over the floor, and vanilla scented candles lit and giving the common area a warm glow.

Tori took it all in and started crying in the middle of the common room.

She fell to her knees and the girls swarmed around her, petting her hair, murmuring sweet words in her ears, rubbing her back, touching her with so much affection and care and no one judged her for her tears

“We’re here for you, Victoria. We’re your sisters, now. You’re home now. We love you. We love you so much. We love you, we love you, we love you.”

She sucked in the affection like a starving animal. In her hunger for love, she forgot to tell the girls that she didn’t like being called “Victoria.”

The rest of the night was a miasma of wine and lip gloss.

*

“Do you know if Luci’s woken up yet?”

Bekka shrugged. She thumbed through the event planner, jotting down quick notes and scratching out cancelled plans with a frown.

Luci’s hospitalization put all of their plans for the Spring Fling on hold and it’d been a nightmare to fend off the student journalists as much as it was to ward off the city journalists. Their House Mother had to call the cops on a journalist for the local newspaper who tried to interview the girls and the Mother filed for harassment. Despite the amateur writers for the *Des Plaines Post* constantly rapping on their door and flooding the chapter email, the Delta Xi Nu girls carried on as if it’d never happened. The most they showed was mild annoyance at having their plans delayed and complaints of cabin fever on the weekends: no more parties until after the furor had simmered down.

It’d been two weeks since Luci almost died. The older girls had started a GoFundMe for hospital expenses, but as the weeks passed, Tori was surprised that she hadn’t even seen Luci’s

parents come to visit and talk to the coordinators for the chapter. They'd met their goal in less than a week—donations from Alumni, other sororities and fraternities, other concerned family—and still, Tori had heard nothing.

“Not sure. I'm sure she's okay, though.” Bekka tapped her pen to her chin, thoughtful, then laughed. “Well, physically, that is.”

Tori paused in stroking Bekka's hair. Bekka was naked apart from a pair of shorts she'd shoved on and Victoria wore an oversized sweatshirt, her hips still pleasantly numb from how enthusiastically Bekka had fingered her. Tori's jaw slightly hurt, but it was a pleasant ache and it had settled nicely in her stomach. Her stomach twisted, now.

“What do you mean? You think she tried to kill herself?”

Bekka looked up at her and the glow of her skin was fluorescent. She smiled, a pitying Grecian curve along her mouth.

“Not everyone is cut out for the Delta Xi Nu lifestyle. Maybe it's for the better that she not come back if she can't handle it.”

*

They were in Bekka's room preparing for the Halloween Party. Bekka helped Tori figure out that she'd go with a Lara Croft costume. Bekka herself was going as Dexter: the Dexter from the cartoon, but sexy. It was almost midnight. Tori started to gather her things but a warm hand on her thigh stopped her.

Bekka gave her thigh a little squeeze, fingers pressing into the inner flesh. Tori's muscles trembled. Bekka stared at her, not saying a word, then rubbed her thumb upwards. Heat coiled in the pit of Victoria's stomach.

“Don’t go,” murmured Bekka. “Stay here.”

Their books and papers fell to the floor as she sat up on the bed, inching closer, her other hand now on Tori’s other thigh. She wasn’t wearing anything more than a long nightshirt that went to her knees. The fabric bunched under Bekka’s wrist.

Tori gasped, sharp, and her legs spasmed when Bekka’s finger swept over her underwear. Bekka smiled.

“Spend the night with me?”

Tori closed her gaping mouth, teeth clacking together. Her hips swayed forward.

“The door’s open,” Tori croaked.

Laughing, Bekka stood up in one smooth motion and Tori mourned the loss of her touch. Resisting the urge to squeeze her legs together to rid herself of the heat pooling between them, Tori watched Bekka as she shut the door, the click of the lock echoing in the room, then sudden darkness. The scented candles lit up the room in an orange-yellow glow. Bekka seemed to glide back towards the bed, towards Tori, legs languid as liquid, a smile on her lips. The curtains to the room were pulled over the windows. The mattress squeaked and sunk under the weight of Bekka’s knees.

“There we go,” she said. Putting one hand on Tori shoulder, she guided her down to lay on her back.

Tori leaned back, compliant.

The other hand returned to Tori thigh. “Much better.”

Tori licked her lips. Bekka's brown hair, curled waves and slightly damp from her shower earlier, covered her in a veil. There was a faint throbbing between her legs now that she desperately wanted to put her fingers on. She clutched the mattress.

"You said there was an open door policy."

Bekka smiled. The hand on Tori thigh swept upwards, tracing the edge of her panties, and the other moved downwards. Tori jerked with a closed-mouth noise when Bekka squeezed her left breast through the nightshirt.

"Exceptions can be made."

Fingers slipped through the edge of Tori underwear and for the next two hours, Tori could think of nothing but Bekka's fingers, her mouth, her tongue, and the heat of her.

*

Tori didn't remember much about the Halloween party. She'd been distracted by the rub of Bekka's body against her own, the alcohol in her system—more than any sips of wine or shitty vodka she'd tried on a whim from her parent's liquor shelf, which she'd promptly spat out at the time because of how it *burned*—the music rumbling in her bones and the smell of body paint. She'd been in the common area only for a short while before Bekka sank her fingers into the waistband of Tori's cargo shorts and rubbed her clit, after which they rushed upstairs to eat each other out in the bathroom and then fuck in Bekka's bedroom. Sage was more Luci's friend than Tori's so she'd not been paying attention to her much at all. The last Tori recalled of her was Sage on the couch and a boy from the Sigma Tau Epsilon chapter on top of her. Other boys and girls from Delta Xi Nu and other sororities were cheering him on and he'd pressed her into the couch further. Tori didn't know what happened after that, only what came the next morning.

The next morning, Sage had packed a duffel bag of her things and left. Tori hadn't noticed her disappearance until more than a week later. When Sage's name was mentioned during the first few weeks, the Delta Xi Nu girls would click their tongues, shake their heads, and mutter, "She didn't have what it takes."

By the time December rolled around, nobody mentioned her name at all.

It was only after Luci's hospitalization that Tori remembered she'd lived in Delta Xi Nu at all.

Luci had stopped talking to Tori after that night and spent less and less time at sorority functions or in the house: she was practically a ghost and Tori spent most of her time with Bekka, having sex, working on homework, and helping to set up parties. Other students gave her and the Delta Xi Nu girls a wide berth. Tori couldn't get the smell of Luci's blood mixed with vomit, only barely covered by bleach, out of her mind.

The older Delta Xi Nu girls had ordered all of the members to not talk to the journalists associated with the *Des Plaines Post*, or even the journalism majors (with an entire list of their names and profile pictures provided so they knew who to look out for, some of which were Tori's own classmates), but the newspaper archives were public to all Des Plaines students. They went as far back as the thirties, but most of the older articles pre-2005 were in print rather than digital. When Tori couldn't find the articles she was looking for—anything about Sage—on the website, she resorted to going into the archives. Being a Biology major, she was used to power-skimming through articles that had little to nothing to do with what she was looking for, but the sheer amount of fluff and news that she didn't care about was baffling. Delta Xi Nu hit the front pages often, but there was no mention of Sage anywhere—until she hit the Mid-November issue.

Former Des Plaines Student Sexual Assault Case Against Des Plaines Delta Xi Nu Chapter Settles Out of Court.

The article was less than a fourth of a page near the end of the issue. Sage wasn't even mentioned by name. There was no digital version of the article. On the front page of the mid-November issue:

Delta Xi Nu Chapter Successfully Raises 150K in Funds for Alumni Garden as Gift to Donors of the University.

*

The little alarm on Bekka's watch rang for her and she got up, having to leave to go to a leadership meeting with the other sorority houses, and she left with a little wave and grin. Tori waved two fingers back and then looked down at the applications on the table. The house was quiet, the other girls either in their rooms studying or out elsewhere. She sat down and looked through them. There were comments on the margins of the papers, next to names, typed out responses to questions about leadership and what sisterhood would mean to the girls transferring into the next semester from other schools or out of dorm residence living. The girls had to submit pictures as well, and Tori noticed that there were two different piles. Tori sat there, staring at the piles of applications until she heard the doorway shudder against the front porch and the sound of boots on the wood. She promptly put them back as she found them.

Bekka showed her the applications, and Tori hummed, eyebrows raising in interest as if she hadn't seen the pictures before. Bekka was showing her pictures from one set pile: the ones that, Tori soon realized, were pictures of girls that Bekka and the rest of the recruiters were thinking about accepting into Delta Xi Nu next fall.

“What about these two?” asked Tori. She drew out two applications that she’d seen earlier, eyes scanning over the words and looking deep in thought, although she’d already read them earlier, while her free hand felt around beneath Bekka’s pillow. Her fingertips brushed against the lighter she hid there, curling around it. “They look promising. Looks like they were both heavily involved at school, in a bunch of organizations and shit.”

“Show me them.” When Tori held up the two applications for Bekka to see from her position, back of her head propped up on Tori’s knee. Bekka’s lips pressed together, displeased, clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, and shook her head. “No way, I already ruled them out earlier.”

Tori looked at the two pictures—Gabriella, a black girl with natural coils and a dimpled smile, Honors Scholar, and Tonya, a white girl with brown hair that curled around her face, aspiring nurse— and back at Bekka.

“Why? They seem cool.”

Bekka sucked in a breath through her teeth and leaned back, eyes closed. “Those two just... wouldn’t fit into the culture here. We expect *excellence*, you know. That’s why we invited you in. We let you in because we know you belonged here with us. Those two? They wouldn’t like it here.”

She reached up, curled one of her fingers through Tori’s hair. The lock coiled around her finger and she hummed at how it’d been left free, un-straightened and held flat by lotions and chemicals.

“We have an image to maintain, Victoria.”

The muscles in the back of Tori’s neck spasmed.

“It’s Tori.”

Bekka blinked. A flinty glare flickered across her expression before she smiled, like a Baroque painting. “But Victoria’s so much prettier, don’t you think?”

Her face was carved by Bernini: pure white marble, cold to the touch, eyes as lifeless as the hollow white balls carved out of the stone.

“And I don’t think our sisters would feel safe using the bathroom if Tonya were to live here. If that’s even *her*’ real name.”

Bile pooled in her chest bone as Tori’s stomach swooped. Violent as a shock, Tori’s clenched her shaking fingers and inhaled to speak, but Bekka kept talking and shoved another application in front of Tori to get a second thought before she could come up with the words. She hmm’d, mmhmm’d, I don’t know’d, and offered similar noises that conveyed half of her attention, but Tori’s mind drifted to the large pile of applicants that would be denied.

*

Back in 2012, a girl had died in her bed in the Delta Xi Nu house. She’d been a freshman and her best friend, a junior in the house, had found her body. The cause of death was uncertain, but the coroner pumped her stomach to find immense amounts of alcohol and painkillers that no human body could ever take. The combination was so toxic that she had to have been dead in hours. The Des Plaines Post wrote an article mourning her death, about the promise that died with her, with scant mentions of a rocky family life, expressed by statements from other Delta Xi Nu members. “Troubled family life,” “Struggled with depression,” “We always worried about her and tried to look out for her, but I guess she never had the strength to come to us,” “Always

drank too much at parties, we didn't know they were alcoholic," and "I don't know where she got the drugs from, it certainly wasn't from us."

According to the article, which was put on the front page of the issue, they held week long candlelight vigils for the girl. When Tori looked at the Delta Xi Nu website, there was no mention of her at all. She wasn't named in the article at all.

She wasn't the only girl to have died in Delta Xi Nu, Tori discovered after combing through decades of articles and issues. On the back pages, there were short paragraphs for articles that described various alleged crimes that matched the one back in November. Many were far worse.

With each loss of a girl, there was a new garden.

*

There was a quiet hum on campus that Luci Grange's parents were looking to sue Des Plaines for negligence and second-degree attempted murder of their daughter. A lawsuit that was being ignored over the campus mail system and by all of the professors. Tori heard their mutters in the hall and in the hush as the Delta Xi Nu girls put up tables to promote charities.

The campus police department assured the girls that nothing was going to happen—"These things happen all the time, and that Grange girl? Probably just alcohol poisoning. Happens all the time"—that their spring semester would wrap up as it always did: painlessly, effortlessly, and with great bombast. By finals, the girls had all but forgotten about Luci and they had the funds to throw a Greek Life gala at the Ironworks Hotel in Indianapolis, where the drinks would be pouring and the rooms would be siphoned off for the night to their pleasure.

And just as it'd happened so many times in the years before, as Tori discovered after months of combing through the archives at the Des Plaines Post office, there was not a word uttered about the girls who once lived in Delta Xi Nu house.

Tori didn't attend the party before finals. Instead, she went to the hospital in Indianapolis where Luci was recovering. She ignored calls and texts, finished her finals and packed up her things for the drive home. She didn't stop to say goodbye to Bekka.

Bekka's lighter was white colored, and Tori's thumb instinctively turned the switch to light up her cigarette. She leaned back against the back wall of the house as she took a drag, then looked up at the fake icicles and tinsels that lit up the the house.

When her mother drove up to the house parkway, Tori clambered into the car with her and all of her things. She left behind her Delta Xi Nu shirts.

Three weeks later, three girls met on the front porch.

That summer, the Delta Xi Nu house burned to the ground.

Olympus in the Dells

Irina saw a snake wrapped in the red hair of a woman while the waves in Poseidon's Rage crashed into the surging bodies, their arms raised towards to the sea foam maw of the white-eyed god. Made out of the sea itself, beard and hair made of white foam and spray, the god reached for the swimmers as the nine foot wave. Screams of delight, revelry and drunken stupor echoed through the park. Irina watched the coil of the snake—a little wisp of a thing, olive-gray and wide, round black eyes—twist in the woman's hair, done up exposing the nape of her neck.

When Irina first saw the snake, its black beads for eyes glistening from the water, she screamed. She wasn't heard over the roar of the park guests nor the rush of the water pouring out of the filters.

The woman twisted in the water, the leopard print swimsuit wet and clinging to her body, she smiled at Irina. It widened, her red mouth perfectly sharp, at the look on Irina's face. The snake lifted its head and opened its mouth, tongue black. The woman sank beneath the water as the next wave crushed through the crowd. She did not arise again. The olive-gray snake, having lowered itself out of the red-haired woman's bun, swam between burnt red legs, and Irina watched in mute shock as it slipped into the filters that groaned and sucked in water to push the waves back up.

"I saw a snake in the water," she told her mother.

Her mother rose an eyebrow, the brim of her hat just barely covering her nose. She sat up in her lawn chair enough to look into the water, lower her glasses, and lean forward to get a good view. Irina felt the sharpness of her mother's scoff in her chest.

“*Snakes,*” tutted her mother. She leaned back in her lawn chair, a glass of pinot gris cupped in her palm. “As if they’d ever let something like that in here. Stop working yourself up over nothing and go for a swim already.”

Irina would not get in the River Troy. Wherever she looked, she saw the snakes. They grew in number as she wandered around the water park, swimming between the inflatable tubes, slipping underneath bodies sated by grease thick burgers, salty fries, and sweet fried bread. They moved with the ripples. They crept up the tubes, slid up the arms of women and young men, then wrapped into the tangles of their hair. The women wore leopard print swimsuits, and the men leopard print trunks. The only person who saw them was Irina.

Her mother told her to get in the water. Irina did not. Her mother told her to take off the sweatshirt and go for a swim. Irina wouldn’t.

Her mother sighed. “If that suit doesn’t fit you anymore, you should’ve just taken the one I gave you. That one is just too tight on you.”

Irina abandoned her barely eaten sandwich, slipped on her shoes, and slid into the spray of the Great Pool of Delphi. Wild cats roared above the shouts and squeals of children.

*

The last time Irina had been to the Dells, she was eight years old and they’d stayed in a lodge with a stone black bear roaring at the guests from the entrance. The wood of the building had the appearance of authenticity, coated with polish and dust. She was in her mid-twenties, now, on the precipice of entering a semblance of a career in archival work at a museum in Indianapolis, when her family goaded her into coming on one last family vacation before the next school year began for her cousins. In a spur of nostalgia, Irina and her family were uprooted

from Indiana to the Dells for a week and a half, their days spent in between the parks and trails. Irina preferred the trails, hikes and the kayaks because it gave her spare time alone, away from the throng of sweat-laden bodies and the stench of sunscreen. She could breathe in the nature around her, the crisp smell of clear freshwater slipping between the tall pines and hills, and escape. The more opportunities she could get away from her family, the better.

The entire immediate family, plus some cousins and aunts and uncles, were present. Polite manners and careful words twisted and crackled with tension between her father and his brother. Her mother watched over their meals with the attention of an owl about to swoop in on a mouse. Her cousins were indifferent, spoiled, taking her sweatshirts, her make-up, and making little comments such as—

“Where’s your girlfriend, Irina?”

—To her father’s great displeasure.

His fingers would curl on the nape of her neck, fingers brushing against the collar of her sweatshirt. He’d smile, “She’s not here to find a date, boys. She’s here to spend time with her family.”

Her father had never touched her with the intent to harm, but she knew he was capable of it. She felt it in how his fingers pressed against the fragile contours of her neck, just over her windpipe. Though she was twenty-four, her father made her feel like she was still in the body of a six year old who cowered like an animal before the boom and crack of her father’s raised voice.

Irina didn’t have a girlfriend, but it didn’t matter whether or not she had one. All that mattered was that her family knew she *could* have one. The potential was there, though she’d never sought it out.

She hadn't left home. She commuted to and from college throughout her entire four years. The wallpaper was still the same pale blue fleur-de-lis that they were when they first moved in, when she was three. *It's better money-wise*, her mother said. *Save on rent, save on utilities: just wait until you have a proper job.* They didn't talk about marriage.

Irina had not let herself think about dating all throughout college and after, not since Chris. Shame and humiliation lingered like a welt in her gut that never healed properly, leaving her feeling discolored, and thus leading her to keep to herself throughout college and after, with only a spare few friends who had stopped trying to tell her to leave her family. Where would she go when all of her bank accounts were also under her mother's name, debit and credit? With no car of her own, because it hadn't been necessary when her college was so close to home that she could take the train or bike? There was nowhere for her to go.

Her gravest mistake other than being caught going down on a girl in the gym locker room before graduating high school was choosing a major that was altogether useless.

"Art history?" her uncle wrinkled his nose. He laughed, the edge of his mouth curled. The foam of his Blue Moon clung to his upper lip. "Are you sure you don't want to go to pharmacy school?" Irina had smiled and said, no, while she dropped the pointed end of her fork into her knee below the kitchen island during that Christmas dinner her sophomore year of college.

He still suggested she go back to school and take up pharmacy long after she graduated. Irina had stopped responding to it since she was nineteen. She contented herself with throwing herself into the endless hallways of ancient art, their scars, histories, and legacies.

With the Vokos family lineage born out of Thràki and the Balkan Mountains, that there was a park named after one of the most famous and smallest mountains in Europe felt like a

cosmic joke. Her parents had thought it was hilarious and went to the Mt. Olympus theme park out of irony. The Vokos family had been to Greece before, but Irina had been so young that she couldn't remember anything concrete of the visit. All she could remember was the smell of salt, sea foam, and olives. Mt. Olympus of Wisconsin Dells was colorful, colorful as those statues would've been in their prime, but the smell of sunscreen and fried food lingered between the ride rails and water streams.

Any moment Irina could get out of being around her family, she took it. Excuses to go to the ice machine, down to the lobby room where the coffee machine was always running, a plate of cookies available for patrons and guests, and a television on low volume for elderly guests to relax in front of. Irina lied about feeling exhausted from the heat, fled to the two bedroom unit, took a shower so scalding it could've melted the skin off of her spine and ribcage, and wandered around the hotel. She didn't bother with shoes.

The carpet sank beneath her wet feet. Pale green edges, sea foam, with a center stripe filled with circles, spirals and coils that furled into eyeballs of red, yellow and green pupils. Foliage in carpet. In the hallways, the roar of the water park and Hades 360 coaster was dulled to little more than a faint rumble. All of the doors to the rooms were closed and the hallway took a slight bend. Irina's walk was aimless. Each door looked the same, each wall standing out at the exact same angle with only a slide curve and bend in the walkway to indicate change. The octagon lights on the walls groaned softly, a distant flicker of the wire as she walked by.

Irina kept walking, but the curve of the walls didn't meet a dead end or stop. It rolled, rolled, and rolled. The outline of her room card key rubbed against her hip from the inside of her

pocket. She looked up and could not read any of the numbers of the rooms. They were an entire floor off from what they should've been. The skin on Irina's arms prickled.

In the gully of the hotel, Irinha heard a bellied growl.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Irina, with a slight jump.

The woman—part of housekeeping, if the bright orange and yellow scrubs she wore were anything to go by—smiled, non-plussed. Her black hair, thick and wild in its waves, was drawn into a bun on the top of her head, and her skin was olive brown. Her eyes were dark green and she leaned on the handle of her cleaning cart, elbows on the rail.

There was a familiar shape to the woman's face, but Irina wasn't sure why or how. She guessed that she had seen her moving her cart over the past few days in between cleaning rooms, it was the only logical explanation.

"I didn't mean to get in your way," said Irina, cheeks hot. "Sorry."

"You weren't, don't worry," said the housekeeper. "I was just about to go to the next floor. I'm surprised you're out here instead of at the pool or at the park. I'm used to it being quiet during this time of the day. I rarely see anyone walking around in the hall at this time. It's somehow much more lively at night, that's my graveyard shift."

And with the swimsuit that she was wearing under her trunks and sweatshirt, Irina was an ill-fitting sight. She pulled them down lower over the lower half of her stomach towards her thighs. The housekeeper only smiled, eyes crinkling.

"I just needed a break," muttered Irina. "Somewhere quiet."

The housekeeper hummed, understanding. It seemed sincere.

“If you need a quiet place to go, you should head down to the bar. No one goes there at this time. First floor, next to the second conference room. You seem to be of age.”

Her smile widened.

“Tell the bartender that Ari sent you, Irina.”

Ari the Housekeeper gave Irina a little bag of complimentary mint chocolates and pistachios, took hold of her maid cart and rolled it down the hall, disappearing along the winding curve of the hallway. Irina looked down at her hands and thumbed along the edge of the bar of mint chocolate. She could feel the freshness of the mint against her lip as she traced over the fennel flower that decorated the packaging, ivy lines coiled around the square packaging before the silver.

She hadn't given Ari the Housekeeper her name.

*

The sun burned through her skin to the bone of her shoulders that next afternoon, sweat, grime and dirt sizzling against the red paint of The Manticore tower, and Irina's stomach rolled with the spasms of her calves. Her twelve-year-old cousin Marcus rolled his eyes when she rushed into the bathroom to throw up her empty stomach.

She hugged the bowl, heaving and breathing in the stench of her own sick, then flushed the toilet. The water sprayed her burnt face, soothing and cool.

The hinges of the door creaked.

“You okay?”

Spittle and acid on her mouth, her nose sunburnt and eyes reddened from the pain of her heaving, Irina twitched and looked over her shoulder: an utter mess and excuse next to the woman standing in the doorway of the toilet cube.

She was even paler than Irina, bright red hair pulled into a messy bun on the top of her head, but looked utterly unharmed by the harsh Midwest sun. Kneeling down, she pulled a packet of tissues out of her purse and offered them to Irina.

The same woman with the snake in her hair that Irina had seen the day before. The woman she thought she'd made up in her head out of heat exhaustion. She was tangible, breathing, her red hair even more vibrant now that it was dry.

Irina pursed her lips, grimacing at the film of acid and its rank taste on the roof of her mouth. "Thank you," she croaked.

Taking the tissues, she wiped her mouth, unable to look the woman in the eye. The woman stayed kneeling, hugging the front of her legs. There wasn't anyone else in the restroom.

"I'm sorry," said Irina, flushing the tissue and handing the package back to her. "I know I look like shit."

The red-haired woman smiled. "The Manticore doesn't fuck around. It's okay. I just saw you run in here and wanted to check up on you."

"You didn't have to do that."

The woman shrugged. "I know. I just wanted to."

"You don't even know me, though. You didn't have to help me."

The woman smiled. Irina felt drunk watching how her lips, full and bright with fuchsia lip-gloss, curled on her mouth. From her angle, she could see the slope of the woman's cleavage

through the collar of her tank top. She had freckles. Irina bit the tip of her tongue to keep from pressing her lips together. She hadn't touched another girl or woman besides herself since that day.

"I do, though. I saw you around the water park yesterday. By Poseidon."

The woman held out her hand. Irina looked between her offered hand and the woman's face, clenched her jaw, and took it. The woman hoisted her onto her feet, helped her smooth down her clothes, fix her hair back into its braid and clean up her face further. The woman kept her fingers curled around her shoulders for a held beat, then dragged her fingers down the slope of Irina's arms, to her hands.

"Thank you," murmured Irina. "Again. Can I—"

She cut herself off. The woman crinkled her eyes, waiting.

"Can I do something? To repay you?"

The woman's smile widened.

"You can meet me at the bar at the hotel at 11 tonight and buy me a drink, if you want to repay me so ad. Only if you're interested, of course?"

Irina swallowed hard. She didn't give a single thought to her cousins who were either growing impatient outside, waiting for her, or had already left to the Trojan kart track. Not to her father, lounging with a beer under an umbrella by the lazy river, or her mother, sitting by the pool only with her feet dipped in the water. She hadn't been on a date since she was seventeen. She'd been too scared to try again.

She had never allowed herself a vacation fling before.

"I am. Interested, I mean. I'll see you there."

The woman's smile widened.

"Don't be late. The bartender still owes you a drink. The mistress says so."

Pushing a bottle of water into Irina's hand, giving a small wave and a cheerful, *see you tonight!* the woman made her exit out of the restroom.

On the back of her head, coiled in her mess of red hair, Irina saw the olive-grey snake and a leopard print bikini top through the mesh in the back of her shirt.

*

When she heard the rise and fall of breath on the other side of the double suite room she shared with her parents at 10:42 PM, Irina brought out her change of clothes and make up bag from underneath her pillow. She walked on the balls of her feet to the bathroom, where she changed into black tights, a thigh hugging pair of shorts and tank top and applied a light layer of make-up, careful not to run the water or breathe too loudly. Before she turned on the lights, she rolled the towels against the bottom of the door. She turned the lights back off before hanging them back up, free of wrinkles.

Positioning her body to obscure the light from the hotel hallway, she held her breath as she opened the door, and slipped out. She held onto the doorknob until the lock was in place and waited by the door, listening for movement through the crack. She held.

Nothing.

Finger slipping away from the door handle, Irina took the stairs. It was 10:53.

She made it to the bar by 10:59, seconds left to spare.

The red-haired woman turned around in her barstool, rolling a roasted chestnut between her fingers. A pair of empty wine glasses sat on the counter. The bartender had his back turned, a

low cut shirt hanging on his shoulders, long coils of black hair held up on the back of his head, cleaning away at the counter behind the bar and then mixing a shaker. The woman smiled wide and beckoned Irina close.

Low strings and pipes played on the speakers, the light warm and dimmed, and vines crawled along the rows of wine and liquor bottles, entwined around the tabs for beer. Fake grapes clung to the leaves and green, fat, dark purple and heavy. Bulls charged and bodies danced on their horns and backs on the painting at the back of the bar-stand.

Irina paused to stare at the mural painted on the wall of the bar, the bottles of liquor climbing the shelves like vines. She narrowed her eyes as familiarity tugged at the back of her skull: the deep brown, reddish colors, the thick lines of angular bodies and the curves of the bull as the leaper danced on its back. The blue fresco background, restored. In the warm light of the candles that lined the counterspace of the bar and the orange of the ceiling lamps, they figures on the mural seemed to move.

“It’s really nice in here, isn’t it?”

The red-haired woman smiled and she patted the stool’s cushion next to her.

“You’re right on time.”

It was when Irina closed the distance and sat in her seat, their knees brushing against one another, that Irina learned that her name was Mae.

“Red or white?” asked Mae.

Irina folded her fingers together to stall their trembling. She tapped the back of her foot against the leg of her stool, muscles thrumming with anticipation that she hadn’t allowed herself to fell in years. She managed a smile, stilted at first, then more natural.

“I’m not much of a wine drinker, so: surprise me.”

Mae’s eyes narrowed, smiling at the edges. “Then let’s do a red.” She curled two fingers around the neck of her wine glass and rose it, without lifting her stare from Irina. “Bromius, give us a good one, eh?”

A pop of a cork and a bellied laugh.

“Have I ever given a bad one?”

Irina didn’t know where the plate of cheese, dried meats and olives came from, or when they’d been placed down, but the sight of the bartender’s face—Bromius, such a strange name—had her gripping the stem of her glass tight.

Bromius smiled at her, making his dimples rise as his dark brown—violet-looking in the dim light—eyes flickered with mirth as he poured their glasses with the practiced arm of a sommelier. His face was young, clean-shaven and bronze, maybe not more than a few years her senior, but he carried the weight and air of a master of his craft in liquor and delight: though Irina was not at all attracted to men, she couldn’t deny his beauty.

The wine he poured them was a dark red, bubbling ruby at the surface, film clinging to the clear glass. Irina tensed under the stares of men, but though he was smiling at her in a manner that could’ve been seen as flirtatious, she didn’t feel afraid. She felt at peace.

The lettering on the bottle made Irina tilt her head, squinting. The label was in Greek script.

“Kotsifali,” said Bromius, screwing a topper in. “Grapes from Heraklion in Crete. Can’t get them anywhere else. Drink.”

Irina’s shoulders tensed, and he laughed.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be charged. It’s on the house.”

Mae cupped her shoulder, rubbing her thumb against the joint of her bone that made Irina sag into her touch, and Bromius winked. “The Mistress told me you would be here.”

Mae raised her glass and Irina rose hers. The Bartender slipped back and started cleaning a glass that had vines etched into the glass, the pipes on the stereo steadily growing. The bar was only a third full: far enough away from the lobby to be a soft hum in comparison to the rest of the building, an amalgamation of men, women and others of various ages. There were several pairs of men leaning in close together, chins just about to brush, in intimate conversation, a young couple of two women dancing to the pipes and strings, several swaying alone, drinking from their cups, merry and languid. Bromius the Bartender mixed their drinks, poured the wine, plated their chestnuts, cheeses and meats, the olives picked fresh.

“Let the poison go down,” Mae smiled.

Irina exhaled and she tapped her glass against Mae’s.

“Let the poison go down,” Irina breathed.

They drank and the wine’s burn sat in her belly.

*

Their glasses were never left empty, the board of cheese and meat in constant supply, and Mae and Irina spoke under the threshold of the bar with their shoulders pressed together. When the olive-grey snake coiled outward and lifted its head to peer at Irina from the top of Mae’s head, Irina paid it no mind.

Mae was a major in neuroscience, a transplant from the brutal cold of Montana—a small town of little more than three thousand with none of the televised charm of the rural mountain-

side, but with just as much judgement of typical small towns. Mae had been homeless for a brief period after being disowned by her parents for being a lesbian, state-surfing from couch to couch until she managed to plant down roots long enough to finish college, budgeting on peanut butter, crackers and coffee until a stable enough job.

“Would you ever go back to them?”

Mae swirled her wine glass and the olive-gray snake tucked its head on the shell of her ear. “They’re as dead to me now as I am to them. Even if I were to go back to them, what’s left for there to say? What would be the point?”

Irina had no answer and drank. Her tongue tingled, vibrations coiling underneath her skin, and muscles loose.

“I want to leave mine behind.”

Mae peered at her over the rim of her glass. “All of them?”

Irina laughed. “My cousins are all way older or way younger than me. I’m not close to anyone in my family. Anyone I was ever close to is dead already.”

The glass was lowered to the bar counter with a soft clink. “Why don’t you leave?”

Irina rolled a chestnut between her fingers, wrapped in prosciutto, and grinned, strained. “To where? With what job?” She took a long swig of her wine, the soft skin of her mouth numbed to its burn. “The job I’m in the running for isn’t even set in stone yet, and my mom’s name is own everything. I don’t even have my own *car*.”

The pipes in the stereo lowered to a murmur. Mae’s hand curled around Irina’s.

“You will, one day. It might just happen in a way you didn’t expect. Mine was hardly a typical way.”

Mae grinned.

“Your Uncle is full of shit, by the way. Being able to tell which ancient artifact or art pieces is from which civilization is pretty fucking cool to me.”

Irina wanted to kiss her and see if she tasted like the Kotsifali grapes or the goat cheese stuffed olives. She pressed her thighs together. Acting on the liquid encouragement, the comfortable tingle of her own mouth, Irina began to lean in. Mae’s smile widened and she met her halfway. Mae tucked a knuckle underneath Irina’s chin to lift it up, adjusting their lips better and more smoothly. She tasted of the sharpness of olives, feta cheese, and the sting of delicious red wine.

Had it not been for the bright light from her phone, Irina would’ve chased the twisting heat in her lower stomach, a faint thrumming, to something more than her own fingers or a vibrator. She looked down at her phone: it was a message from her mother. It was almost three in the morning.

Where are you?

“Fuck.”

Mae grabbed her hand by the wrist before Irina tripped out of the barstool. “Come back here tomorrow at midnight. We’re doing something special and I want you to be there.” A thumb dragged over the joint of her wrist and there was the crinkle of paper against her palm. “I had a really nice time. I’d like to see you again. Will you be there?”

Irina swallowed, blinking, eyes lucid. “Yeah,” said Irina. “I’ll be there.”

She grabbed her phone, crinkled the paper containing Mae’s phone number in her palm, and ran back to the staircase, the last trickles of the wine running down the corner of her mouth.

*

Her name was Christine—Chris, she insisted—and she always gave Irina the coldest water bottles and treated her to ice coffee after practice on Fridays. Irina had been in love with her. Irina hoped that it'd been mutual.

Not that she would ever know, because Chris' parents had pulled her out of school in the middle of their senior year when they were caught in the locker room. She never came back to practice or to class. Irina had lost all contact with her. Irina dropped out of the team after being benched for two months.

“You made a choice,” her mother had said, trapping Irina at the dinner table before she could run away to her room. “You made a choice, and now you have to deal with the consequences. What happens to you next is all on you.”

Her father said nothing, looking away from her with his jaw clenched.

Irina had one of the loudest voices on the volleyball team when she cheered for her teammates, projected across the court when she called for a toss or a block. She rarely rose her voice above a monotone since. The next time she rose her voice was at three in the morning in the middle of a hotel hallway, years later.

Other guests looked out their doors with annoyance, sleepy fury, and confusion—betwixt with worry and concern—to peer at the source of yelling in the middle of the hallway.

“Where were you, it's *three* in the morning—“ her mother hissed. She looked her daughter up and down, ignoring all of the eyes and murmurings of shut the fuck up from the other guests. Displeasure colored her face red. “Dressed like *that*?”

There was a hot lump at the bottom of Irina's throat. “Out.”

“Out *where*?”

Irina clenched her teeth, a vein pulsing in the back of her skull. She didn't reply.

“Answer me, Irina Vokos.”

She bared her teeth in a sneer, the tip of her tongue stained red from the wine. “Which question? I'm not sure which one you want me to answer, Ma. You're kinda throwing a lot at me.”

Her mother threw out a hand to grab her by the hair. Fear punched Irina in her chest and she staggered back.

“What are you, a toddler? After all I do for you, you can't tell me where the fuck you were at three in the morning?”

“In case you missed it,” replied Irina, “I'm twenty-four. I don't need to tell you where the fuck I've been. It's not any of your goddamn business.”

“Don't you dare use that language with me—“

In the walls of the hotel, the pipes groaned and hissed. A rumble growled underneath the carpet. Leopards flashed their teeth on the paintings that decorated the walls of the winding hallway. Irina thought she saw their eyes glittering.

“Is there a problem here?”

All eyes of the Vokos family turned to the Housekeeper. Ari the Housekeeper tucked her hands behind her back, dark eyebrows raised and expression expectant. Her cleaning cart stood behind her. Irina hadn't heard her coming at all.

“This is a family matter,” said her mother, face flushed and tone cold. “It's not any of your business. Stay out of it.”

Unperturbed, Ari the Housekeeper cocked her head. She smiled, a mocking color to her dimples. “Miss, you’re disturbing the rest of the guests. Either lower your voices, return to your rooms and go back to sleep, or I’ll have to call management.”

“Are you *threatening* me?”

“Oh, no, hardly. I’d just hate to have to send you all packing this late in the evening due to noise complaints. Or early in the morning. I’m sure it’d be quite inconvenient for you.”

Her mother shoved Ari the Housekeeper into her cleaning cart, bottles of disinfectant falling out of the baskets and top of the cart. Towels dislodged and fell to her feet. Ari only stumbled once, grasping onto the handle of the cart, and her expression didn’t change. The murmurs down the hallway grew louder and phones were being brought out. Irina’s mother dragged her back inside the room and Irinia saw Ari the Housekeeper give her a faint grin, not a hair out of place.

The last thing Irina saw was Ari the Housekeeper take out a spool of string between her fingers.

*

Her parents didn’t let her out of their sight for the entire day, talking over her during lunch and dinner, ordering mocktails, leaving out a choice of clothes for her, and taking her phone away from her.

“At least *try* to engage in conversation,” her father said. He’d been trying to get mother and daughter to talk for hours: her mother made cold, snippy comments and Irina said nothing at all. Her father pretended that the night before hadn’t occurred at all.

Irina didn’t bother removing her eyes from the pages of her book. She turned the page. She wasn’t reading the words at all. Her fingers shook and trembled, pressing her nail hard

enough for the paper to crease and tear. She couldn't even recall the names of the characters in the book.

All throughout the park, on the water slides and the Hades 360, she saw olive gray snakes raise their heads over the heads and shoulders of the bodies they entangled with. The dots of leopard skin scattered amongst the crowd and Irina smelled the thickness of fermented grapes, their sharpness and bodily warmth, in the air, overpowering the smell of oil, sweat, sunscreen and fried foods.

On the Apollo's Swing, Irina screamed. The crowd below her roared, their revelry rumbling into the concrete and the water that churned and twisted in the water park. Over the swing of the ride, Irina screamed along with a guttural bellow of a heavy bodied, muscular beast.

In the water of Triton's Rage, she saw a flash of red hair.

Her parents promised that they would stay up late enough until Irina fell asleep, so that she didn't take off without their knowledge, cans of coffee emptied in the trash can. But at 11:45, she heard the sound of their steady breathing. The wild cats, dolphins and bulls that danced along the wallpaper watched Irina as she slowly dressed, and walked out of the hotel room. From beneath her hotel bed, an olive-gray snake slithered beneath the door and followed after her.

They were already waiting for her when she arrived exactly at midnight.

The snakes in their hair, vines of ivy that coiled around their arms like bracelets, loose fitting clothes that hung off of their bodies—bodies of every shape—and the leopard print visible on each person. Mae was the first waiting for her, standing at the front of the crowd. There were purple grapes in her hair, wrapped in the bun that held her hair up. Her expression lit up.

“You came.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Her skin trembled as if there were a hive of bees underneath the first layer, but she took Mae’s offered hand and was brought into the circle. Faces she saw at the parks filled the room, all with something in their hair or around their shoulders—the snakes, orchis flowers, thistle, ivy and grapes— frankincense was thick in the air, sweetened by the scent of honey. The sound of drums bellowed in the floor, and pan pipes played: not muffled by stereo, but sharp and clear. There was dancing, feet laid bare and ivy leaves and pine needles fell to the ground, not a single strand piercing flesh. Irina drank it all as if it were the Cretan wine.

She was offered wine, and she drank it. In her frenzy, she saw as the upper floors of the Mount Olympus hotel and hallways twisted, turned, and spiraled, and watched the straggling, tipsy guests lost their way on their walks back to their rooms.

The Mistress of the Labyrinth and her Consort, the Releaser and Ivy-Bearer arrived, his thyrsus in hand and a laurel of grape vines and leaves around his forehead. Honey dripped from the petals of the fennel on top of his staff and along the base. They were so beautiful it hurt to look at them.

The constellations strung in her loose hair as a crown, the Lady smiled as she sat atop the bull that brought her in. Her consort, the Ivy-Bearer, ran a hand through her hair, the curls and waves slipping between his fingers, and his leopard put its head in his lap. “Welcome.”

Irina wept.

In her body, the wine sank into her pores and her blood stream, and she saw it all. The rides in the outdoor park had been turned off and the pools in the water park were laid still. Beneath the concrete, tile, and plaster, gods from across the ocean and relics of a time that refused

to disintegrate rumbled below. The two thousand locals of the Dells closed their doors, locked their windows, and left out plates of apples for the Mistress and the Ivy-Bearer. In the depths of the hotel, the bull-headed starry son roamed in the twisting hallways bestowed to him by a sister who saw him as both monster and brother. The hotel was the maze for which the children of Minos and the children of the Lady of the Labyrinth and the Roaring God could dance within.

Revelry and drunken delight of the guests were their feast. The Roaring God placed a pair of matching stefana upon both Irina and Mae's heads, a snake coiled around Irina's shoulders, and both women drank their fill of the wine offered to them. She began to dance.

In Mount Olympus, Irina and the Maenads cried *Euoi, Euoi, Euoi!* as the shriek of the bullroarer, pan flutes and salphinx played, as the kantharos was passed around, and in the spray of blood and torn flesh. The blood mixed with the wine and they drank, drank, drank.

Appendix

[Transcriber: Melpomene}

1. “The Girl With Thorns in Her Mouth”

- I know of many nymphs and young men who have twisted into branches and bark for safety. I know of more whose blood became beautiful flowers, bursting out of open wounds.
- Whatever seeds that a parent’s life has given them takes root in their child and grows. The trees talk to each other, you see. Roots will stretch out, hiss, sputter, croon and kill to overcome if the trees are not compatible. A parent will rarely know that they are in the act of allelopathy with their child.
- Love can be knowing that you are not the right one to nurture what you’ve begun to grow. Not all hands are built for this. Not all hands can tend to every seed. Love is giving that seed to one who can raise them into full bloom. That seed is not gone forever.
- **Pyracantha:** *pyr* for “fire,” *akantha* for “thorn.” Little white flowers that breathe in the late spring and summer to the arid salt of the Black sea, the rocky Mediterranean. Leaves serrated as a sword breaker, and the fruits are bitter when plucked fresh off of the branches.

2. “The Snow Leopard on Sagarmatha”

- The peak of heaven observes everything on her slopes, the snow that builds along the sharp rock, the ice bridge that groans as feet walk along the steel ladder, and Chomolungma, the Goddess Mother of the World who watches from heaven, keeps the dead to her breast.

- Luck will not protect you on the mountain. It won't save you. On the mountain, there is no such thing as luck. Only chance.
- Green Boots, the Sleeping Beauty of Everest, the bones at the summit, the boney flesh—they see everything. Nothing is unseen on the mountain. Only obscured by the clouds and snow.
- False gurus and fake prophets make much nonsense about the panthera uncia, the ounce of snow, and its cosmic importance. Pseudo astrology and fake tarot bullshit, really. The snow leopard is a solitary and sacred herald, awake with the rising dawn and the dusk, its paws silent and talons barely grazing the black rock. It is the child of the Goddess Mother and it will stare you in the face.

3. “Polecat and the Owl”

- Were you expecting a band of brothers instead?

4. “The Liberata Virus”

- The Holy Lady can give those bristles and take them away, should you only ask.
- You can shave your hairs off of your chin. Some may choose not to. Some may braid the hairs along your chin together, intricate with flowers between the knots, beads of all lovely colors, but the Holy Lady likes gold best. It matches her slippers.
- She's from Galicia. She's from Spain. A Portuguese princess. She's Christian, Pagan, other. She's none of these things and all at once.
- She is here.

5. “Eat Your Feelings”

- **Ximena.** Language of origin: Spanish. Other spellings: Jimena. Origin from biblical name of Simon, which is yet another form of the Hebrew name, Shimon, the listener. “She who listens.”
- She who listens, and then molds and strokes with the tip of horsetails that carry with it the bacteria of an engulfed organism.
- A meal is never just a meal. Food is power. Prestige. Food is family, it is a boast, it is a gift. Food is an oath of good intentions, the possibility for friendship, and understanding.
- Meat was for only the wealthiest in the age where my sisters and I were most known. Meat, shanks of bulls, cows, goats and sheep were burned for the gods, the fat wafting towards the stars and constellations where they watched with their ever present eyes, and the bones shook to tell futures and possibilities. The poor who tilled the arid land couldn't have those cuts. Lamb was the most precious. Lamb was for lords, kings, ladies who listened and observed behind their veils. What did the poor eat? They plucked fresh olives from the trees, sucked until they reached the seed, and spit them out to plant for more. That arid soil was not made for many greens but what they could, they feasted on arugula, cabbages, and cucumbers that they doused with oils and decorated with cheese as they sliced bread and slurped from the cracks in a quail egg. Theirs is a resilient diet. If they could not eat the flesh of the goat, they would take its milk and survive.

6. “The Terror in Lake Michigan”

- Before taking flight on Earthshaker's waters, sailors would, on occasion, take a horse and drown it as sacrifice to him before the voyage. Call it barbaric, if you will. I know horse meat is often banned in some parts of your world, if not the world and country you currently live in, but it's still eaten elsewhere. The horse is his child, of his brood, and to lower the horse into the sea is to let it go home to its father. It's more merciful to let the horse return home than tread over the uncertain water.
- The lamps crafted by the hands of Octavius and Lucius have only just been lifted out of the graveyard that is the Fournoi Islands: I have seen Eurykeion sink far more than the fifty-eight that have been found by archeologists that dive into the water. The islands is the graveyard of these ships, and the salt clings to them as barnacles on the whales that wander out to the ocean.
- Earth-shaker isn't only one entity that lives in the water. There's a reason why Nereus has his many thousands of daughters. Are you so far removed from the lord that shakes the earth, the ladies in the river, the snake in the pond, the blue-handed men of Minch who churn and grab the belly of your boat in the storm?
- There is much at the bottom you cannot fathom.

7. "The Heart Peddler"

- **Oncorhynchus rastrosus.** The saber-toothed salmon, tusks on their noses, on the ridge of a jaw with clear overbite. They lived in the balmy Pacific and learned how to leap across bodies of water just as their descendants do.

- **Mastodon.** Mastós for the tusks that set to come out from the breast, odoús for the toothy color.
- The snow of Mount Shasta hangs off of the slopes in loose sheets, thin as linen. But when it erupts, as it did when a piece of the heart it belongs to was given to a pair of hands it didn't consent to, those thin sheets will strangle.
- 1,213 people lost their homes when Mount Shasta, dormant for nearly a thousand years, erupted one summer, several years prior to these events in this tale I've collected for you. Forty died.
- Shikaakwa has burned many times. Its ashes remember.
- Pure wulfenite does not burn in the light, but the lead colors it as orange as the Sandia at dusk.

8. "The Children in the Floating House"

- **Laurel:** Origin from the Latin lauras, a reference to the laurel trees from whose branches and leaves they would make crowns, a symbol of praise and victory. Phoebus wears it on his golden head of hair as he sings and strums his lyre as well as he does his fearful lovers. Kings and Emperors alike have worn the crown and their blood would always spill, eventually.
- **Gabriel:** Origin from the Hebrew Gabrī ēl, "God is my strength." You will know this name from the archangel who approached the young Mary and announced that there was a little deity growing inside of her. Gabriel is the saint of several denominations, and an angel who protects. When the Christian Lord returns, Gabriel will blast the horn. What did Gabriel and Mary of Nazareth do alone in that room?

- **Valerie:** Originated from the Romantics, from the Latin *valerius*, a masculine sort of strength. The word “valor” also comes from this Latin word. How fixated those Romans were on strength and valor.

9. “Ritual”

- Because the ground and soil is far too rocky to properly bury a body and a corpse is seen as a blight, these bodies are left open for the birds to eat. If the carrion birds don’t reach the body first, the scavenging animals will have their fill. The Wylie transcription of the Tibetan calls this *bya gtor*, “bird-scattered.” You will know of this as a sky burial. There is no need to keep the body. The spirit has already left.
- Formaldehyde preserves bodily tissue and keeps it from decaying more quickly, as the flesh will naturally rot when left exposed. EU countries have banned the practice for funeral purposes due to the detrimental effects on the soil, but Americans seem to love the stuff. I wonder if they would snort it for immortality if it were in the form of powder.
- When my sisters and I were more known, when our names were on the tongue of every artist, the destruction of the body by a pyre was most common in Old Athens. Elsewhere, the dead were buried in groups underground or one by one in the rocky soil. It was the women and girls who tended to the bodies and they were not afraid to see the results of death, what would come for them when their string was cut. To live in our world was to know Thanatos could be there at every corner, at any second, watching and waiting on his beautiful dark wings. He can be wrestled with on occasion, but he’s inevitable.

10. “Assembly Line”

- The first modern ideal of the fraternity—an adjustment and update from the cults to the gods, to their clan heroes, the culture heroes from Heracles and his monument standing in the middle of the Mediterranean, the grave shared by Patroclus and Achilles, to the resting place of Alexander— was Phi Beta Kappa of College of William and Mary. There’d been other secret societies full of men prior to this, of course, but that was the first formerly secret society to truly what you see as a fraternity. Would it surprise you to know that professors and college administrators once found these to be quite alarming and wanted to be rid of them?
- There were several prior organizations similar to Gamma Phi Beta, but it was the first to call itself a sorority, per the linguistic input of Dr. Frank Smalley of Syracuse University (how obsessed you are with us, it’s quite delightful), as these were young ladies. Truly, a fundamental push for the civil rights of their gender.
- Public as they are, how often their ornate houses—copying our pillars and building their houses to mimic and echo our temples—they like to think themselves as mystery cults. But who or what do they worship?
- Every year, there is at least one reported student who dies from hazing.
- In Delaware, during October of 2021, a young man kidnapped his ex-girlfriend, brutalized her, and told her that he would kill her if she reported it. He was a member of Kappa Delta Rho, and as protesters threw their silence in their faces, his brothers ate breakfast and laughed.
- The University of Delaware did not consider this an imminent enough threat.

- On the reality dating show with all of the pomp and circumstance that would make the golden lady of love smile and laugh with mirth, a contestant was found in pictures of herself in an Antebellum dress for a plantation-themed ball. It was hosted by a Kappa Alpha fraternity.
- Sororities recruit based on “values” and common interests. What are those interests, one might ask? They’re not about to tell you.
- There are so many faces and you cannot tell them apart.

11. “Olympus in the Dells”

- How precious the host-guest relationship is: before there was transportation that runs on electricity, engines and fuel, you only had your own feet, a cart, a modest boat, and if you could afford it, a horse. The lines drawn between enemies was eschewed the moment you stepped through the door and you’re given bread, cheese, and wine to dip your bread in. The host cannot harm you, you cannot harm the host: for the time being, survival hinges on your ability to make nice and friendship.
- But there are rules to this, of course. The suitors quickly learned their lesson when the husband and father of the two hosts of Ithaca returned. “Cruel and heartless,” some said, as Zeus Ktesios strikes those who kill their guests. “Deserved punishment,” others said, as the suitors overstayed their welcome in the house of a woman who wanted nothing to do with them. Zeus Xenios watches it all from the sky.
- Before luxury hotels, my sisters and I listened to artists as they recuperated at the hospitals, whispering in their ears as their eyes rolled back and they sucked in the steam of those thermal mineral baths.

- The labyrinth was built for its lady to dance through, winding and twisting and tricking eyes that lingered for too long. Could it be any wonder that my and my sister's master, Dioynsos Euaster, would give her a crown of stars?
- King Penthus was torn to shreds by his Theban subjects and his mother put his head on a pike as she paraded naked with the maenads throughout the wild. The king who sewed the teeth of a dragon into the soil took the head as an offering.
- I have sung this song for my Lord for thousands of years, and I will sing more so long as the choir continues to stand and observe.

Folklore as as Path to Reclamation and Retaking Queer Pain

Trends in storytelling are not the same as formulas. There's a human compulsion to put every little thing into some sort of category or box, some label that exists on a strict linear trajectory, binary or gradient that is easily traceable. These terms and labels, these strict delineations can bring comfort to a constantly tumultuous world, such as being given the word lesbian to identify myself with and give voice to an inexplicable feeling I might not have otherwise had, but they also bring immense harm. Individuals who cannot and will not fit into the strict binary boxes of gender expression and roles know this well, as do those of us who resist following heteronormative procedure, as it goes against our nature. Putting books, stories and tales into specific boxes and categories makes marketing books easier for booksellers, editors, and authors themselves, but they are not easily applicable to every story or literary tradition. Folktales, fairy tales and fantastical stories exist in an odd space in the literary world. Their impact is present in all of literature, even in the smallest of ways and their influence seeps into every form of storytelling. I am always returning back to these old stories, fascinated by their legacy and how their meanings have changed over centuries and how they change in meaning for me: the constant reshaping of themselves to remain relevant and engaging as the world changes and advances.

“To learn the history of fairy tales is to learn the history of myth, printing, childhood, literacy, violence, loss, psychology, class, illustration, authorship, ecology, gender, and more” writes Kate Bernheimer, scholar of fairy tale studies, author, and professor at the University of Arizona in her seminal essay, “Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale” (Bernheimer 64). A folktale exists within the history of the culture it is born from and it can exist outside of it when

something within that story still resonates with a listener generations and centuries after it was first told. The symbols and images found within folktales are also not exclusionary in nature, as Maria Tartar says, “Unlike the private symbols found in literary works of a modernist turn, the symbols of folkloric art are highly accessible to the public imagination, in large part because they are shaped, if not created, by a collective body” (Tartar 81). To say that I am obsessed and fascinated by the magic of fairy tales and folklore is no small statement, nor is it so simple to say that I love them. Since these stories are not privatized or exclusionary, there is a draw and attractiveness to the concept of retelling older stories, emulating their styles, their acceptance but also anxiety of the unknown, the magical and the inexplicable as a part of every day life. There’s an art to fairy tales, to their relevance, their stronghold on every single storytelling culture that exists, and there is a purpose in how their structures are put to the page. The transition from the oral tradition to the written page requires a transformation of the tale itself: as these tales were meant for a wider audience, they were told over the fire by bards, professional storytellers, recorders of history, a grandmother or mother to their children, and retold to collectors who would transcribe those tales onto the paper. It’s only natural that a lesbian woman such as myself would take these accessible stories that are meant for the folk and find myself in them, transform them into a new meaning that can help me and others make sense of pains, anger and trauma that are otherwise difficult to convey through pure realism. This tradition is alive and well, and when I enter this conversation of the folktale tradition, I am reshaping these stories to be more open towards a sapphic point of view as a lesbian woman just as much as I am trying to make sense of the grief and complicated emotions that comes from fraught familial relationships and humanity’s relationship to the natural world.

Due to the communal nature of the folk and fairy tale, there is no true origin or original version of any given story: whatever that original was has been lost to history and time. Even when the Grimm Brothers first published their collection of folktales, their devotion to the oral format of folk-telling was not received well by editors and reviewers at the time of publication, according to Maria Tartar, “The Grimms seemingly slavish fidelity to oral folk traditions— in particular to the crude language of the folk— came under especially heavy fire” (Tatar 16). The emphasis on the *folk* is important here, as that is the main reason why editors and reviewers chafed against a collection that was meant to induce national pride in a rich folk tradition: these stories originate from the common folk, a folk who told these stories not in written form, but over fires, to a group, for a specific audience that was not the educated and wealthy elite. These stories were memorized and circulated by an illiterate, poor majority: of course the initial devotion to the oral form being transcribed on paper would not be well-received by wealthier critics. The Grimm’s collections were written for scholarship, but the fear of the folk holding such narrative power is threatening to an elite class, and so they were rewritten to be sold for children and those folks’ versions were lost in future editions. There are no original stories, no root that we may go back to: all that we have are hundreds of variations across the world. What makes them fascinating to me is that despite the cultural boundaries and borders, on every single continent, there can be found a similar version of tales that have become absorbed into the (white) Western consciousness: Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, the Animal Bride and Bridegroom and Hansel and Gretel. They are changed and defined by the place of origin but there are still overlapping traits that can be found from China to Italy to Hawai’i. While there are more and more recorded versions of these tales being transcribed and published for a more sizable readership, these recorded

versions are not the definitive versions: only the ones that were written down. No single person owns these stories and to apply complete authorship to these recorders of folk and fairy tales is disingenuous. As these tales were told to the people, for the people, this availability to the public means that any person can take these stories and find something in them makes them feel more visible, seen and heard. As a lesbian writer, the stories that have always stood out to me are stories of transformation: “Allerleirauh,” her skin of a thousand coats that she hid herself beneath to escape the incestuous designs of an abusive, mad father. The boy of “The Juniper Tree” whose head was cut off, body chopped to pieces and bones transformed into a beautiful bird to get his revenge against his abusive step-mother. Not only tales of transformation, but stories of escape from men who would do women harm: “Fitcher’s Bird,” the inspiration of my short story, “Polecat and the Owl,” is a retelling of that specific version from the first edition of the *Grimm’s Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The other most well-known tale of escape from violent, dangerous men is the classic “Bluebeard” and all of its variants, a story of which “Fitcher’s Bird” rubs elbows with. It was likely this story, retold by Perrault in the mid-17th Century, and its moral against the curiosity of women that Perrault attached to the end of the tale that most caught the eye of the post-modern writer who would help to codify modern retellings and interpretations of fairy tales for decades to come. “Fitcher’s Bird” is a unique twist on the “Bluebeard” formula in that in the first edition, the three daughters have ‘helpers’ (who they are—villagers, family, or anyone else—is never specified), but in future additions, the daughters are rescued by brothers exact revenge against the sorcerer who kidnapped and killed their sisters. I, too, have made a change in my retelling: there are no helpers and no brothers, but sisters exacting revenge together.

Angela Carter is a writer whose shoes are deep and difficult to fill and no writer, perhaps short of Carmen Maria Machado, has been able to match Carter's writing in terms of style and establishment of trends: trends we are still riding the waves of decades later. It remains to be seen how far her impact will go, but given her prevalence in both how much she's been anthologized and her large body of work before her untimely death, it's still deeply felt three decades after her death by lung cancer in 1992. While she's written many novels and short stories outside of the fairy tale retelling, she's most famous for *The Bloody Chamber*, and for good reason; she used the lyricism of purple prose in its best form to unearth the terrifying acts of transgressions that could be found in fairy tales we deem as classic. At the time of its publication in the 1970s, Disney had not quite completed its domination of the sanitized fairy tale for family entertainment and, while perhaps cliché now, the frankness of exploring themes of sex, violence and taboo subject matters was transgressive for the time in the 70s. "In the Company of Wolves" is her most anthologized and popular piece, a retelling of the equally over-retold and over-studied folktale "Red Hiding Hood" and "Red Cap," but it's not that piece that held my attention upon reading the complete anthology of her short stories, *Burning Your Boats*, during my sophomore year of college. It was "The Erl-King," "The Snow Child," "The Tiger's Bride" and "Wolf-Alice" that most held my attention and proved to be the biggest influence on my writing over the years. All four of these stories deal with the concept of transformation and or the violence of men upon women. What makes "The Snow Child" especially interesting is the perspective of the 'wicked queenly stepmother,' the Countess in the story, and how she witnesses her Count brutally assaulting the corpse of a young girl who was born from snow. The narration of the story is told from her perspective and it is one of frankness: cold, perhaps brutal, but honest. "Weeping, the Count

got off his horse, unfastened his breeches and thrust his virile member into the dead girl. The Countess reined in her stamping mare and watched him narrowly; he was soon finished” (Carter 92). She is not a kind woman by any means. This is no retelling of the Snow-child where the woman is kind, nurturing or by contrast, evil. She is a woman with complex emotions and deep, searing flaws, which are definitive of the women in Angela Carter’s writing, and she is exposed to her Count’s truly disgusting nature, which is observed with cold frankness. Angela Carter’s women are cruel, sexual, they murder forest spirits with his own hair and transform into tigers, have sex with wolves, and return to the well because the human world above is far too cruel and hostile. Beneath her sprawling language is a commentary on the transgressive act of women acting upon beastly and animalistic sexual desires, straddling the border between human and beast and the lines between sex and violence. Angela Carter wrote *The Bloody Chamber* as a rebuke against Charles Perrault’s moral fairy tales after being commissioned to translate his collection, where each and every fairy tale ends with a clear, didactic moral that young girls and children were made to follow. While Perrault was overly worried about the sexual appetites and behaviors of young women and girls, Carter saw the violence (which had been added by Perrault in his retelling of these stories) and the sexual friction in these stories and brought them to the forefront of her tales. She wrote two versions of the archetypal Beauty and the Beast tale, and she make one clear divergence in one version: in “The Courtship of Mr. Lyon,” the eponymous Beast turns into a man at the end, but in “The Tiger’s Bride,” the Beauty becomes just as much of a beast as her animal bridegroom and finds liberation in it. “Nursery fears made flesh and sinew; earliest and most archaic of fears, fear of devourment. The beast and his carnivorous bed of bone and I, white, shaking, raw, approaching him as if offering, in myself, the key to a peaceable kingdom in

which his appetite need not be my extinction” (Carter 67). Instead of being fearful of the Tiger’s desires as well as her own, the Bride of the story finds peace in his offering, that his appetite does not necessarily make him evil or lead to her death—instead, she finds liberation and sheds her human flesh for tiger fur. That fear of our own sexual appetites is deeply felt in the queer community due to centuries of hostility and oppression, and making peace with that fear and finding liberation in our sexual desires is a prevalent theme in all of my work, most deeply present in “Olympus in the Dells.”

Much has been said in academia about the connection between the queer community and monsters in fiction: whether it’s the creature from the Black Lagoon, King Kong, and various other monsters of classic Universal, but the line between the animal instinct and human instinct has been thin since the art of story-telling first began. Stories of animal bridegrooms have been a point of fascination for me since I was a child, and while there are just as many stories of animal brides, the animal bridegrooms struck me as most captivating due to their millennia long history, the viciousness of the animal forms they can take, and the emphasis on compassion in modern adaptations and retellings of these stories. I have found myself in monsters and the animal bridegrooms in how they so often express their loneliness, self-loathing and hatred of their own bodies and desires, particularly in modern retellings—a classic, nigh cliché experience of anyone who lives on some sort of margin, and is an experience deeply felt as a lesbian woman. The mere act of being something other than cisgender and heterosexual is an act of transgression, and one of the greatest transgressions in fairytales and folklore is the act of a woman marrying a beast. While “The Courtship of Mr Lyon” is impeccably written and lush, it’s the less interesting between the two as it’s the fairly conventional retelling by comparison. “The Tiger’s Bride” how-

ever has the heroine embrace her carnal desires as she shows herself naked to the Beast, a tiger (whose inner humanity is ambiguous, if he was ever human at all to begin with), and allows him to strip her of her human skin and grow fur beneath it. “And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur” (Carter 67). In this version of Beauty and the Beast, possibly one of the first and only so far (that I have found: I would love to see more if they are out there), the Beauty not only chooses to stay with the Beast as he is, but also become a Beast herself—although she has, truly, always been way. It is a rejection of the sexual and behavioral standards of women at the time period and this embrace of her transgressive desires and wants has made it a pivotal source of inspiration to me in my collection of short stories. My women and girls throw up thorns out of anger and frustration, they grow beards, they are allowed to seek and fulfill their vengeance after their death, and they kill men who threaten and harm them. My women, girls, and non-binary characters are allowed to feel their desires, express them, and live as figures of transgression, where their freedom is found: busting down the notion that fairy tales and folk tales are meant to be purely moral tales against transgression.

Folktales, fairy tales and mythologies are all stories of transgression and also how those transgressions are often corrected: they live in a realm of moral dubiousness, and these stories on the whole can be said to prescribe behavioral standards. Maria Tartar, a scholar of folktales at Brown, disputes this as a hardline rule as these stories are often ripped out of their original context—an oral tale that changes from teller to teller, and often from performance to performance, just as plays do— and given to the hands of someone else, typically with an agenda. The Grimm

Brothers and Perrault had agendas in their relaying of these old folktales, and their sources vary and are personalized by that person's telling of the story: there is no one single version, while we often, as consumers of these tales, fall prey to ascribing the 'original' version to these male writers. It is an erasure of the original storytellers who, for the Grimm Brothers, were women and grandmothers—hence the phrase, “old wives’ tale.” Even the violence of the Grimm’s brothers versions was an added element that did not necessarily belong to the ‘original’ (whatever that may be,) that more directly punishes wrongdoers and transgressive characters: these punitive revisions were not present in first editions of these stories they published. These transgressive characters on the whole were female characters, female-presenting characters, and women: the punishment for their perceived lack of virtue were dire, and from the first edition to the next dozen, biological mothers and their abusive behaviors are stripped of their biological connection to their abused daughters and children and given to the birth of the evil stepmother: a cliché that still has its claws deep into our literary unconscious. Biological motherhood is an equally, and sometimes more, complicated relationship and one that I explore in how toxic it can be for the children at hand, particularly in “The Girl With Thorns in Her Mouth.”

“The Girl with Thorns in Her Mouth” is not based on any specific folktale or fairy tale, but an exploration of how much girls and women are associated with nature, flowers, and the earth. The concept of the Earth Mother, Gaia, or Mother Earth is a common figure in mythology and folklore, but the desire to soften that relationship and make it explicitly feminine is a recent development. The short story is also inspired by a graphic novel series from Japan wherein a girl vomits out flowers due to unrequited love, a fictional disease called ‘hanahaki.’ The thorns that Isis, the titular Girl with Thorns, is not suffering from unrequited love but from being forced to

repress who she is and to keep all of her anger, frustration and confusion tempered inside of her body. And her body reacts accordingly in an aggressive manner by making her grow thorns in her mouth, throat, and chest, and making her throw them up and spit them out when it becomes too much for her. While the piece can be read as a grand metaphor, since the other characters do not remark on the thorns she spits out, with the thorns being representative of her anger, I chose to write this piece as an elevated fairy tale because the format allows for magical, fantastical things to occur without needing to justify *why* they are happening to begin with. As Kate Bernheimer writes about fairy tales, the magic within the form of a fairy tale story does not require nor need explanation for it being there: it is a wild thing that exists and **will** exist without needing to explain itself. The thorns allow Isis to show her being a transgressive character because she's angry about being shoved into boxes by her mother and by society at large that don't feel like her authentic self: her mother might mean well, but Isis suffers as a result of this controlling nature and it culminates in a self-destructive magical, chronic condition, made further complicated by Isis coming into her sexuality as an adolescent lesbian. The fairy tale format allows for her to express this anger and rage in a way that can be communicated to the audience by Isis having a fantastical power directly connected to the wild of nature. Nature is just as dangerous as people are, and far more unknowable (explored in my "The Terror in Lake Michigan"), and the connection to nature that Isis has is meant to convey the extremity of her emotions. The wild unknowability of magic that's so prescient in folktales is brought to the surface in my work as a means of the young lesbian trying to make sense of who she is in an environment that won't let her.

The fairy tale format and its allowance of fantastical things allows for me as a writer to use fantasy elements as a means of conveying extreme emotion in a way that a realistic fiction

literary style cannot. “The Girl with Thorns in Her Mouth” could not function as it does as a story without the thorns and her ability to grow them. While that piece does not explicitly retell or adapt an older folktale, it is unmistakably inspired by the inexplicable way that magic and magical abilities manifest within the story: not just for Isis, but her half-brother, Wyatt, as well, who ends the story gifting his half-sister a flower made from his tears. “Polecat and the Owl” is a much more explicit retelling of a fairy tale: specifically, “Fitcher’s Bird.” “Fitcher’s Bird” is a lesser known variant of the Robber’s Bridegroom and Bluebeard stories. Much like the latter two stories, it features a young woman about to marry a man with an unscrupulous past, far much older than she, who gives into her curiosity and uses the key he gives her to enter his secret room. In the room, she finds the corpses of all the women he’s married and killed. In many variants, the girl cries out for her older brothers and they come to kill the Bridegroom and save her. “Fitcher’s Bird” takes a twist in that the girl has two older sisters who, instead of being seen as rivals or lesser than the youngest, are victims just as much as she is. She uses her cleverness to reanimate her sisters, trick the sorcerer who killed them, and then she calls upon her older brothers to kill the sorcerer—at least, in later editions of the story by the Grimm Brothers. As previously stated in this essay, those brothers did not exist in the first edition, but were mysterious ‘helpers.’ As Catherine Tosenberger puts it, “The heroine skillfully manipulates images of true and false brides in order to subvert patriarchal authority. She uses assumptions about normative femininity—in particular, the demands for women to be obedient, subservient, beautiful, and especially, silent—to systematically unman the villain, thus destroying his power over her” (Tosenberger 208). The girl has a much more active role in “Fitcher’s Bird,” using her cleverness and trickery to get out of a disastrous, fatal marriage and it can certainly be read that the

Fitcher's end is a form of revenge she takes on him, even though she herself does not directly lay the final blow on him in any version, nor do her sisters. "Polecat and the Owl" follows the general pattern of the story with grand deviations: there are no brothers to come rescue the youngest daughter, nor are there helpers, and the sisters three all turn into birds, with the oldest sister—the sister who was kidnapped and murdered first—being given the right to kill the sorcerer herself. In contrast to the first edition of the story, the daughters in my retelling have their agency as characters brought to the surface, and their bond with one another is of the utmost importance, leading to their revenge against the sorcerer and those who allow him to commit his acts of violence being justified.

None of the sisters are given names and the characters themselves are relatively flat in terms of depth: this is an intentional choice as it is meant to follow the fairy tale format. While the sisters are given no names but titles in regards to their birth order, they do show some depth of character in their love for each other and the anger that the youngest feels when she's lost her two older sisters. These sisters feel no love nor attraction to the sorcerer, who appears to them as typically trusted male figures of authority and abuses that authority to get what he wants: their devotion is only to each other. When the youngest responds to his flirtations, it is not out attraction, but a form of manipulation to get what she wants: what she ultimately wants is her sisters returned to her and revenge. The sisters of the original "Fitcher's Bird" disappear after the youngest puts their body parts in a bag (where they speak to distract the bridegroom) and are only mentioned as having sent the brothers/helpers to the wedding party so that they could kill the sorcerer. "The story is a symbolically cohesive narrative of a wised-up heroine systematically unmanning a villain who represents an ultimate goal of patriarchal authority: the power of life

and death over women” (Tosenberger 211). In “Polecat and the Owl,” the revenge is brought forth by the three sisters working together, with the oldest (the first victim) being allowed first kill. While it is certainly a retelling, there are details given within the story that place “Polecat and the Owl” in an ambiguous time period. The language itself is reminiscent of the flatter, yet whimsical style of the fairy tale as described by Kate Bernheimer, but some modern details such as the cultivation of honey, police officers, cars and other fine resources the sisters have slip through. This is an intentional choice I’ve made to create a timeless experience of reading: the story could be set in a more medieval period and it could be read in a far more modern light at the same time. The beauty of fairy tales and folktales is that while they can be seen as being rooted in a cultural past, a timeless story will still resonate with a modern, contemporary reader, and this was my intent and philosophy behind “Polecat and the Owl.”

“Fitcher’s Bride” is a strange, lesser known Bluebeard variant that I return to as often as I do “The Juniper Tree” (a personal favorite of mine), which is typical of my taste. The stories that captivate my attention the most are stories that are unafraid to be strange, if not magical, and dangerous without feeling the need to explain themselves or justify their existence. While there are indeed stories that require explanation and justification for the strangeness and magic that’s alluded to, the short stories by Karen Russell and Carmen Maria Machado feel no need to justify themselves and they have earned this right. Both of these writers are in conversation with the tradition that was begun by Angela Carter, whom is a clear inspiration and influence on both writers. Her influence is deeply felt in their writing, their propensity for strangeness and being apologetic about it. *St. Lucy’s Home for Girls Raised By Wolves* is a great deal rougher than Karen Russell’s later work, showing a reluctance to move away from the voice of a adolescent

boy or pre-pubescent boy child, but the collection serves to demonstrate what Russell would later sharpen in her work: Florida and all of its oddities, quirks and strangeness that's so characteristic of the region comes alive through Russell's influence from folklore and fairy tales. Though few of her short stories are actual retellings of folktales in the way that Carter's stories in *The Bloody Chamber* are, or even re-examinations of urban legends akin to Machado's "The Husband Stitch," the charm of Russell's short stories would not have manifested the way they have if not for the direct influence of folktales and fairy tale style and format. With ensuing short story collections, Russell's voice and style only sharpened further (I, admittedly, cannot say that this charm extends to her one novel-length work, *Swamplandia!*). Florida is a character in of itself in Russell's short stories, and even when her story is not set directly in Florida, the environment comes alive through her odd characters: characters that have the same flatness and oddities as any character that's stepped out of a truly bizarre folktale and fairy tale. There's depth alluded to in her characters, but her protagonists are purposefully flat and have base motivations behind their actions. Ava is a younger sister who jealously vies for the attention of her older sister in "Ava Wrestles The Alligator," but while Ava herself is a flat character, there's a depth to the story itself and the central conflict that is conveyed through the weirdness of the story. Ava is in direct battle with her sister's ghost boyfriend, who never makes a proper appearance in the story in a concrete way, but his presence is alluded to. "Her boyfriends possess her in a different way. They steal over her, sinking into her ears and mouth and lungs, stealthy and pervasive, like sickness or swallowed water" (Russell 5). The story can be read as a metaphor for abusive boyfriend and manipulative partners who attempt to drive wedges between their lovers and their lovers' families, but "Ava Wrestles the Alligator" stands on its own as a comedic ghost story with an edge of

danger. The eldest daughter is rarely the hero of any folktale or fairy tale: the position of the special daughter belongs almost exclusively to the youngest, who is the most clever, beautiful, smart and gifted. The same applies to “Ava Wrestles the Alligator,” as the older sister is not a character so much in herself as an object of conflict and desire: one desire being sexual and consumptive, and the other being one of sisterly, familial possession and love. The sister herself welcomes this conflict as she goes against Ava’s wishes and desires, much to Ava’s frustration, but while she herself is not developed (though depth is alluded to), she is integral to the story as a whole. The language of the short story roots itself in a recent past: allusions to technology, the concept of theme parks about alligators and wrestling them, the setting of the swamp, and the slang that’s native to white settlers of Florida and its swamps. It is a modern Florida folktale.

Russell’s later short stories are far more polished, sharp and confident in their strangeness. The first collection I ever read by Russell was her second collection of short stories, *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*, and the improvement of her style is shown in the first short story: the titular “Vampires in the Lemon Grove.” It is here in this collection that Russell fully embraces the weirdness of folktales, monsters, and transformation. From the transformation of girls in a silk factory into silkworms as a cutting critique of consumerism and capitalism, to the transformation of old age and loneliness and blood hunger that becoming a vampire brings. I hesitate to call any short story collection ‘fearless,’ but I cannot deny that *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* feels far less afraid to embrace strangeness: a writer who is not afraid to be strange and use strangeness to discuss existential questions, emotions that cannot be expressed in a ‘realist’ manner, is far more engaging to read. I remember the short stories in *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* far more than I do the stories in *St. Lucy’s* (with about three or four exceptions) for the fact that

Russell is unafraid to embrace the unreal and fantastical to drive her characters, their stories and their possible messages. I will not be able to forget the chilling ending of “The Graveless Doll of Eric Munis” for quite some time: a story that is a chilling, cautionary folktale that draws in elements of horror to describe the consequences of petty teenage cruelty. While there is no clear resolution or moral at the end of the story, the ambiguity and the relative flatness of the characters, the pointless, banality of the cruelty enacted upon Eric Munis is indicative of the fairy tale style. As Russell’s career continues, she leans in further towards this fairy tale style and embraces it, leaning further into the past and timelessness of the form to create stories like “Bog Girl,” a twisted one-sided romance involving a corpse and a teenage boy who thrills at the chance at being able to own someone. “Bog Girl” is similar to stories of the animal bride: women who take the forms of animals, their original forms, and often have their pelts or skins stolen by the men who wish to marry them and have the chance for sexual intercourse. While the Bog Girl in question is a bog body, a phenomenon that is not uncommon in the peat bogs of Ireland and Scotland, where bodies will rise up out of the mud, perfectly preserved for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. *Orange World* is the collection that “Bog Girl” belongs to and it follows the trajectory of the animal bride story to a beat: a young man finds a beautiful girl, he takes her skin and brings her home, marries her (or in this case, imagines a fully-fledged relationship), and when she finds her skin (her voice), she’s returned to the wild that she came from.

Animal bride stories are found across every single story-telling culture around the world. Much has been made in terms of psychological studies as to why this seems to be the case, and some I find myself agreeing with: anxieties about marriage, anxieties about just how well someone knows their partner, what secrets they might hold, a desire to own a person and know every-

thing about them, as well as plain old misogyny that echoes throughout the millennia. While Bog Girl is not an animal, she is treated similarly to an animal: she cannot speak for herself and she is carried out of the bog and around the boy's school as if she were some small animal for him to show off to his friends. What he enjoys most about her is that Bog Girl cannot speak for the majority of the short story. He simply imagines what she might say, what her bland smile might be speaking to him, and he imagines that she loves him just as much as he seems to believe he does her. They do not have sex nor have children, as many of these animal bride stories have, but she is still kept captive by him as the story continues. While any person who carries around a corpse would be cause for alarm, his mother is less concerned with the fact that Bog Girl has been dead for over a thousand years, and more that she is much 'older' than her son and thinks that her child is growing up too fast. The fact that Bog Girl is dead and a corpse is far less of a concern than the stereotypical fears about women and beautiful young girls. Similar would be said of these mysterious animal brides in folktales and fairy tales, and like those animal brides, Bog Girl is left adrift as she's 'married' to the boy who fished her out of the bog, a relationship imagined by the boy. Until she manages to find her voice and the horror of her being a corpse dawns on the boy. He shows no remorse no disgust with himself over his imagined relationship with Bog Girl, but horror at her, at the state of her body, and all she can do is give one-word replies, moans and screams. Eventually, she is brought back to the bog and she sinks back into the peat, where she belongs: just as a selkie dons her skin and returns to the ocean once more. Russell enters this tradition and conversation by bringing forward the natural strangeness and beautiful oddities of her native Florida, the confusing mazes that are relationships (romantic, familial, platonic), and nature, an element that is a great part of my own work as well.

Folktales and fairy tales serve a dual purpose in every story-telling culture: they are expressions of social anxieties, fears, cultural mores and norms, as well as a means of telling a damn good story. The story of Bluebeard and his brood can be taken as a cautionary tale: for men like Perrault, it's for women to not give into their curiosity about their husbands as well as based in violent stereotypes about the East and men from foreign countries. The blame is fixated on the women themselves, while from the lips of the female storytellers and the common people whom these stories are collected from (and edited to appeal to the Christian, heterosexual and masculine power structures who would buy the books from the Grimm Brothers and Perrault), they can be read as women telling young girls to be wary of men that they don't know well and to not be caught under their spell of charm and charisma. In subsequent editions, even the small details of the stories the Grimm brothers wrote down and adjusted changes in order to sell more books. While the Grimm Brothers were originally interested in collecting folktales and fairy tales for the sake of building a sense of German nationalism and pride in their culture, when Christian reviewers accused the Grimm Brothers of appealing to pagan beliefs in their first edition of the collected stories, many elements of the stories changed to appeal to a wider audience in order to make more money via mass appeal. In "Fitcher's Bird," the brothers who rescue the youngest sister of three daughters are not, in fact, brothers: they are mysterious 'helpers,' who are not implied to have any familial relationship to the girls who were brutalized or forced into marriage with the sorcerer. Who are these helpers? The first edition version of the story doesn't indicate who these helpers are at all: they could be townspeople that the daughters are originally from, possibly consisting of family members just as well as other relations who have lost daughters, sisters, wives and friends to the sorcerer who killed them, taking righteous vengeance for their

loss. These helpers are not law enforcement nor government officials, but possibly just ordinary townsfolk who were sick and tired of losing important people in their lives. These helpers might not even be human at all: they could be animals or even far more relevant to the history of folktales and fairy stories, they could be spirits, creatures, and those whom we would call fair folk.

Ayakashi, youkai, the hidden people, the fae, the fair folk, domovoy, taniwha—almost every single story telling culture has a variant of the populous that is something other than human, belonging to the wild and the unknown. They might live in the woods, the waters, the sea. They might live in the air itself. They can appear as human, animal, or something else, they can go unseen and to trifle with them without due respect is to dance with danger and violence. Who are these hidden people? It could be easily chalked up to mere superstition of a primitive people—and yet, even in Ireland today, there are laws against the paving of roads over what are traditionally seen as fairy circles. People will bow to an termite out of respect in places where the Hindu and Vedic religion thrives. Filipino culture still engages with both the creator gods and the lower gods despite the Catholicization of the country after centuries of colonialism, invasion and forced westernization. More subtly, that, at least in the Western hemisphere, black dogs and cats tend to be the lesser adopted animals from shelters due to old beliefs associated with the color. Black shuck, cu sidhe, and the cath palug still haunt us now, although they take a different form now. Kelly Link's short story collection, *Get in Trouble*, invokes this idea of the hidden folk, these nature spirits born out of natural phenomena and the great, existential unknown, in the first short story in the collection, "The Summer People." The Summer People in the short story are not called by the name that we in the west might call fairies, but they are kin: they are respected and given refuge by the protagonist, her father, and the girl who eventually becomes her friend.

They know that they must stay and manage the houses that they stay in every summer and that they are to be respected, not to stay at the houses over night, to not fall under the spell of their charming songs and most of all—to not be fooled by their human appearances. ““You can still go away, though,” Fran said, not caring how she sounded. ‘I can’t. It’s part of the bargain. Whoever takes care of them has to stay here. You can’t leave. The don’t let you’” (Link 24). While “The Summer People” is not a specific folktale retelling, it’s engaging with this great unknown populous who appears in various forms all across the world. They are simply accepted as existing within the short story, with their own unknowable morality, beliefs, loves and wants—and they wreak great vengeance if they are wronged. While they are not seen as visibly in my own work, bar “Olympus in the Dells” where the Maenads are modernized in a Midwestern water and theme park and the Greek Gods are alive and well, their presence is felt. They exist on the margins just as lesbians and sapphic women do, and they are the helpers who will aid my characters, should they respect their power. The main unnamed character of “The Heart Peddler” knows this, as the spirits of the places and cities they travel to offer gifts that must be respected: their attempts at selling their hearts leads to catastrophic consequences, though these spirits are never directly seen. It was a lesson they had to learn prior to the time the story itself is set and one they carry scars for; for nature itself is where the hidden folk live.

It’s easy to dismiss stories that emulate fairy tales, folktales and fables as mere fantasies that are relegated to the commercial fantasy shelf: when criticizing a story for its happy ending, easy endings and sentimentality as too much like a ‘fairy tale,’ and due to Disney’s stranglehold on sanitized versions of these old stories, it’s a way to dismiss a story as childish. In this sense, a story that is childish is therefore dismissed as lacking in quality. Disney’s commercialized, safe

versions of these stories are only one version and they are not *the* definitive version of these stories: the nature of folktales and oral storytelling demands that it be available to all and there is a definite draw to folktales that lead writers to come to them over and over again. As centuries pass and new forms of storytelling come forth, so do new versions and retellings of these stories, and so do their literary forms which change and adapt to the times. Since every storytelling culture has a rich history of oral storytelling, so too do new styles and genres: fabulism, magical realism, surrealism, fantastic realism, and genres that slide into more speculative and fantastical have a direct lineage from this practice of storytelling. Even the postmodernist writers borrowed elements from such fantastic tales, as folktales and legends are also a way in which to make sense of a world that feels completely broken. While it can be easy to dismiss fairy tales and folktales as childish, there is a reason why they are retold again and again: there's a draw to them in their simplistic language and flatness of characters, that fantastical elements that are simply true and known, that best explains something about the confusing world around us. With every retelling, they must change to adapt to a new audience to still be relevant and have resonance to that audience, who will then retell that story again and change and adjust the details accordingly to make them more accessible, more relevant to the world and society that they are being told to. As such, it's natural for the style of the folktale and fairy tale to be appealing for those on the margins: the fantastic nature of the stories can best represent the unexplainable and the confusing in a world that is actively hostile to them. I'm drawn to fairy tales and folktales because of the casual violence, danger and triumph within them and how representative of deeply confusing and angry emotions they can be, how transformative they are and the fluidity they engage in. Angela Carter was compelled by the thin, blurred line between beastly natures and humanity, and the sexual

tension within that blurred liminal space. Kelly Link's endings are non-existent and do not care to explain themselves because old stories simply *are* and do not need to explain themselves. As I enter this conversation, I have absorbed what these authors and so many others have brought and given me as a reader and folktale aficionado: when I dive in these old traditions and stories, what I bring out is a place for other lesbians and sapphics such as myself to find themselves, to shape these stories to find ourselves in them, and keep their relevance alive. These stories speak to my emotions and best express them, for they are just as wild and unapologetic.

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