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Daughters You Could Not Burn

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THE DAUGHTERS YOU COULD NOT BURN

By

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B.A. Middle Tennessee State University, 2014

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in English)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2018

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By Alex Terrell

Thesis Advisor: Dr. David Kress

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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This thesis is a collection of eight original stories that explore the intersection of the Black female body and magical realism. This work uses fiction as a means to explore such issues as Blackness, Woman-ness, Witch-ness, birth, death, mothers, sisters, southern space and the vagina as both a force of destruction and construction. From a research perspective, the thesis is in conversation with the African American Oral Tradition of storytelling using elements of southern folklore and myth as a motif. This includes legends of the “boo-hag” from the Gullah region, haints, and the “loup garou” from New Orleans. Other themes present are themes of sexuality, sexual awakening, wounding, healing, goddesses as a reflection of woman, silence, silencing, water, flight as escape and identity.

The central question this thesis seeks to ask is: Why aren't Black woman represented in magical realism spaces? This work is an attempt at providing a space for the Black feminine to exist in a fictional space outside of the master-slave cultural narrative. This thesis also seeks to ask and answer questions about Black masculinity and how Black Masculinity is seen in relation to the Black female body.

DEDICATION

For Idalene, Geneva, Alberta, Teresa and all of the other women in my family both living and dead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my committee members, Dave, Greg, Ryan, and Margo for agreeing to serve on my committee and for reading this weird creature of fiction. I'd like to thank Dave for asking me "Why magic?" so that I could answer "Because we are magical." I'd like to thank Greg for telling me my writing should be out in the world. Thanks to Nick for reading draft upon draft upon draft of everything and being such a generous reader. To Shelby and Kris for reminding me that writing is solitary work, but that you don't have to do it alone.

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“SHE DONE MESSED WITH THE WRONG WITCH”: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Somos las nietas de las brujas que no pudiste quemar. I came across this picture (see Figure 1) on social media. Women were championing the saying as a war cry against the forces of systemic oppression. They’d translated it into English and then transmitted it across the world to get women into formation, as Beyoncé would say. However, I was more struck by the fact that this saying was in a language I could only partially understand. Among these words, there was only one that stood out to me: *brujas*. Witches. Since I was younger, I’ve had a fascination, maybe even an obsession, with witches. I’ve seen every television show and movie about them. Read dozens of books, both fictional and informational, about them. You could say, I’ve acquired a literacy with witches and witchcraft as a focal point. We’ve been regaled by images of Sabrina the teenage witch and the sassy sister-witches from *Charmed* on television. Maybe for some the word “witch” conjures images of *Harry Potter’s* Hermione and her big hair.

What’s more, witches have been synonymous in popular culture with white women who have an air of mystery about them. These women are meddlesome, beautiful, and always using their powers for good. But these witches are a far cry from the archetypal witch-crone figure. They don’t have warts on the end of their noses or hooked chins. Regardless, they subvert the myth of the witch and the woman. They pushed back against the archetype of the witch in favor of a more progressive vision of woman. Robert Rapley writes of the archetype:

[witches] were usually old women, village women – as most people lived in villages – often cantankerous old women without men left to protect them, poor widows, wrinkled with old age, with the hooked nose and pointed chin of a person without teeth. (4)



Figure 1: Girl in protest



Figure 2: Angela Bassett portraying Madame Marie Laveau in *American Horror Story*

This is the image of witches most people encounter, but this is a tradition of witches with its origins in European thought. Historically, Black women have not been portrayed as “witches” but rather as Voodoo practitioners and conjure women. The image of the conjure woman was “born in the antebellum south, a kind of mediation between African religious and spiritual customs and Christianity” (Stanley 150). She arose out of slavery and the slave’s hope for better times to come. Stanley writes:

If Christianity offered the African slaves salvation and peace in the next world, then the conjure woman represented immediate benefits. She functioned as hope within their present conditions. (150)

The conjure woman as a vessel for hope has been replaced in popular culture with fake bones and dime-store Hoodoo. Never mind that the differences between Hoodoo and Voodoo far outnumber their similarities. I say all of this to say that Black women are never “witches,” but rather a strange marriage of the African traditions slaves brought with them to America and the forcing of Christianity onto them by their oppressors. You will never find a Black witch in film and literature, lest she be from Louisiana and she be Creole, lest she be a voodoo priestess. These Black witches are never found in affluent communities. A shining example of this is in Ryan Murphy’s *American Horror Story* where he introduces mainstream media to one of its most notable Black witches.

In the third season of *American Horror Story* showrunner Ryan Murphy re-created a mythos with Voodoo Queen Madame Marie Laveau (see Figure 2) at the forefront. She had long braids in her hair, she sat on a wooden throne in the back of her hair salon, she made deals with the Loas of Louisiana Voodoo. She was ageless, beautiful, and aware of her place in the witching

world. She was relegated to the ghetto though, and Murphy did not equip her with active powers of telekinesis or fire-starting. Her magic was one with its roots in the herbs she used. She sacrificed goats and all of the other things typical of Hollywood portrayals of Voodoo. Her character represented the continuous struggle between Black people and white people in her community. The crux of her appearance in *AHS* came when one of the white witches on the other side of town asked her for help with a fertility potion. This scene comes after the head witch of the white witches has come to Marie's shop and destroyed her wigs with her active power. In this scene Marie is powerless to stop her. Marie tells the witch who comes to her for help that it is "too late for tears; damage is done." This moment represents the problem of how witches are defined in mainstream media. It is precisely this thing that first drew me to the idea of witches, or brujas, as sites of oppression. Like white feminism, white witchcraft is often portrayed as exclusionary to its Black sisters. Even the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans Marie Laveau is no match for a white witch. Still, the head of the white witches says something that speaks to the identity of "witch" as a shared experience of oppression. She says, "When witches don't fight, we burn."

For all of my fascination with witches, it was not until I was older that I realized this identity of witch-ness, like Blackness, carried with it a history of oppression and ostracizing. I did not know that witches, like women, were often killed at the hands of men or by extension of them through patriarchal means. The woman in this picture has painted this onto her skin. She is surrounded by other women. They are shirtless, in protest. *Somos las nietas de las brujas que no pudiste quemar.* This translates to *We are the granddaughters of the witches you could not burn.* From this saying, I realized that the women in my collection were not the granddaughters of the witches, but they were the daughters of them, because women, particularly Black women, have never been safe from the fire of systemic oppression. Black women have not often been seen in popular culture witch

narratives, but they have always been subject to the fire. In my thesis, I interrogated why Black women must always burn. I wondered what would happen if they fought, if they flew, if they killed.

Using the motif of witch, loosely, I've drafted stories that deal with Black witchy women, their vaginas, their lips (both on their face and below their belts), their magic, their witch-ness, their woman-ness, their monstrosity. These women are never called witch, save for the curse of a man to his woman when she angers him, but they are subject to the same systems of persecution that have historically sent women to the stake or the gallows. Witches, like Black folks, have hanged, have been hunted, have died under the white, male, patriarchal hand. The similarities between witch and Black are many. At the center of my thesis I seek to explore this throughline between Black woman and witch, between witch who rides the phallic broom and woman who lets a man crawl inside her, between women whose lineages are implicitly linked to their own deaths, whose desire is deadly, whose tongues have been cut out and who have still become queens. The stories in this collection tell the stories of the daughters who would not go to the fire.

~ ~ ~

In Which We Are Shapeshifters

This section contains "Black Dog" and "All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk." These stories speak to the nature of the witch figure as a shapeshifter. In "Black Dog" the main character, Io, is in the midst of a type of transformation. For Io, it is either transform or die. I derived this story from the myth of the black dog, an omen for death.

In "All Skinfolk Ain't Kinfolk," I take the title from Zora Neale Hurston who said, "All my skinfolk ain't my kinfolk." Hurston was likely speaking to the idea that all Black folks are not her

allies. I took this phrase and paired it with the myth of the boo hag--a haint/ghost who “rides” a person’s skin-- and I made the main character’s wife, Doll, a villain. This myth of the boo hag originates from the Gullah region.

In Which You Are Inside the Vagina

This section contains “When All He Wanted Was Warmth and Room” and “Ophelia in Ecstasy.” Both of these stories speak to the idea of the woman as a symbol for both construction and destruction. Like the witch figure, the vagina has both the ability to give life and heal (“When All He Wanted” and to kill (“Ophelia”).

In “When All He Wanted Was Warmth and Room,” I take up the idea of the vagina as the birthing canal and the cave. I play around with the idea of trauma against the Black body and also with how the vagina is the point by which all things both begin and end metaphorically. “Ophelia in Ecstasy,” takes its title from the novel *Mariette in Ecstasy* by Ron Hansen. This story explores the woman’s desire in intimate space. Ophelia, the protagonist, has a strange affliction that causes the deaths of men around her. This story explores the myth of *vagina dentata* and the man’s fear of the “poison pussy.”

In Which We Are Familiars

This section contains “The Last Mujina” and “The Absconding Swarm.” Both of these stories are about girls embracing their inner selves. They are pupating and becoming. This section acts as the “witch’s familiar” in the sense that these girls are in one way or another beasts or bees. They are monstrous. “The Last Mujina” explore Black identity and what it means to be at war

both literally and metaphorically. “The Absconding Swarm” explores themes of silence and silencing. This section also explores the identity of girls at the cusp of their sexual awakening.

In Which We Are in the Sky

This section contains “Queen of Heaven” and “Immortals.” The witch figure is most often depicted as flying on a broom. Lyndal Roper writes of the witch’s flight:

Flight is the attribute most closely associated with witches, and it is the hag astride her broomstick or pitchfork, or riding backwards on a horned goat while her loose hair streams in the wind, who has planted herself in the Western imagination. (104)

Both “Immortals.” and “Queen of Heaven” explore the myth of flight by way of someone leaving like the wind (“Immortals.”) and by physical flight (“Queen of Heaven”). This motif of flight appears in both “Immortals.” and “Queen of Heaven,” albeit in different ways. “Immortals.” explores the myth Cupid and Psyche. “Queen of Heaven” explores multiple myths of sky goddesses like Inanna, Anat, Isis, Astarte, Hera, and Asherah. These goddesses are often both goddesses of love and war.

1. IN WHICH WE ARE SHAPESHIFTERS

This section contains “Black Dog” and “All Skinfolk Ain’t Kinfolk.”

Black Dog

She would awaken in the woods. In sunlight. Underneath trees. Laying on rocks.

Roots.

Exposed to all manner of elements. Leaves twisted and mashed into her hair, she couldn’t feel them on her scalp. This was a reminder that her hair was not her own. That it belonged to the girls in India who cried when their heads were shaved. That their crowning glory could be bought and sold for 79.99 a pack at Lovely’s on Bright Street. She’d only needed three packs.

She found that there were no tracks from small animals or large ones. No drag marks. And no explanation for the scratches on her arms and ankles. The bottoms of her feet were stained black like she’d been dancing around in pitch. Her fingernails which had been short last night, were now long. Had shaped themselves into claws.

She stood on unsteady legs, her knees knocking together from the weight of her own body. Out the corner of her eye, she saw several versions of herself dressed in all white and as a buzzing behind her eyes settled into a slow ache, she thought, *how did they follow me here?*

But this wasn’t today.

~ ~ ~

The night wrapped its great arms around her and she remembered it now. The porch. And how when she was little that she had asked Momma why she was painting Grandma Pearl's porch blue and Momma had said, "Haints can't cross water. The blue confuses them."

So, she avoided very blue water. This included beaches and swimming pools. As she'd watched Momma run the paintbrush over rows of chipped paint, she remembered thinking that she might be a ghost because no one ever seemed to see her and how strange and wonderful it might be if she couldn't cross the porch. But she was able to plant her feet firmly on those dried blue planks. She was a real girl after all. Or maybe haints were just smarter than Momma thought. She didn't understand until she was older that being a real girl didn't mean you couldn't be invisible. Even now up on the roof, she was a ghoul.

Her eyes drifted over sweating bodies and strung lights as she took in the scene of the rooftop bacchanalia. The crowd was a mixed bag of hipsters, indie kids, pill-pushers, and weed dealers. It wasn't even midnight and almost everyone was wasted and writhing in agony against each other. Or maybe they just looked that way to her with their sweaty shirts clinging to their backs, hair greasy under knit caps, denim jackets dark blue from drinks being spilled on them all night. Io thought they looked miserable, but she didn't like dancing. Though, she was sure she hated the city more. She hated the way smoking a cigarette somehow tasted worse when the chemicals mixed with city air.

Io realized early on that she had played the night to its full potential. She had a few shots of whiskey at the bar and bought a dime bag of weed off Slim Jimmy. She'd waited patiently for him to finish getting off with the pale faced girl in the bathroom and he'd said, "slide the money under the door." This transaction had taken place over thumping bass and underground in The Attic

where Io had had her first drink with Sola Delgado when they were sixteen-and-some-change. Sola had told Io to push her skirt up a bit before they went in--*Let them see your legs, Io*--and Io had waited outside of this same scratched up bathroom door while Sola lost her backdoor virginity to Slim Jimmy who never discriminated based on age, he said. But that was when Io and Sola were Sola-and-Io. When they were fused at the hip like a chimera of bone and sinew and hair all one color. Sharing the same breath. Now, Io rarely saw Sola, except for the occasional glitch in the Matrix when they were in the wrong place at the same time. Usually this was only for a few seconds before Io lost sight of Sola's bouncing curls pulled high into that infamous ponytail, another head in the crowd.

When Slim Jimmy opened the door, the smell of sweaty body parts and hair filled the space and this was about all the night could ring out, Io decided. He put the baggie in her hand, lingering there longer than she would have liked. His fingers, burnt from smoking joints to the bottom, passed over Io's palm slowly.

Thanks, Jimmy, she'd said.

Up on the rooftop, Io watched phantoms of herself walking back and forth. She was standing by the couch wearing a leather skirt and tights, a shirt that showed her stomach and when she talked, a silver ball sparkled on her tongue. Io-Leather-Skirt laughed with her whole body at a joke someone told and the crowd consumed her.

Another one was standing near the makeshift coat rack, this time wearing jeans and a sweater that fell loose in all of the right places. This Io stood with better posture and her lipstick was a shade darker than Io-Leather-Skirt's lipstick. She talked easily with a couple of girls that were perhaps prettier than each other in no particular way. Neither were prettier than her, but Io

couldn't see this. Io-Leather-Skirt watched through keyholes in arms and legs as she was brought down further by the small crowd. Io-In-Jeans didn't notice Io-Leather-Skirt's demise, because she was admiring herself in the reflection in one of the girls' glasses. Io-In-Jeans was cornered by the white girls with talks of a trip to Panama City Beach, and eventually, she disappeared into the wall behind her. Io-In-Jeans's untimely departure was witnessed by Io-In-Red standing near the drink area flirting with three guys.

Io watched those same spectres fall off the rooftop, run into the door, and nearly crash into other people before she slipped back in her skin. She looked down at her shirt, the color of bland chicken, and her thighs clad in leggings that were loose from too many wears. Her hair was pulled back. She wore too much make-up which covered patches of dark skin and craters from years of picking at her cheeks. She watched the night pass in front of her, she knew she had gone unnoticed yet again. That she had been little more than a wall fixture sitting crooked and undisturbed. She knew the spectres would have fared better than she, because she was barely there. And they were much more than ghosts.

In that moment, she came back to herself. For Io sometimes the walls of the world were fuzzy and she found herself wading through a daydream. She looked around the rooftop and took in the scene before knocking back one last shot. As vodka hit her tongue, her eyes were drawn over to the door. To a man.

The man wore nice clothes. Autumn colors were a compliment to his deep brown skin. With full lips and a prominent nose, he was beautiful. Did he know he was? Did he notice how eyes drifted to him? How the rooftop drank him in?

She thought she smelled him. She thought then that she could almost taste him. Pheromones? Were those real? Did they apply to humans? Weren't humans also animals? Yes, she could almost taste him. But she couldn't place the flavor. Like *presque vu*, Momma would say. Having that thing on the tip of your tongue. Momma's tongue was a creole one. When Momma spoke, it conjured smoke and mossy Cypress trees. Tupelo trees. Sentinels of the swamp. It conjured the bayous and *what did you say gal?* Io hadn't been to the bayou since she was small. She hadn't remembered the swamp except through peepholes in Momma's tongue. But she was cityside now. Long gone from those dirt roads. From plantation homes.

She thought still that she could smell him. Not really him, but what parts of him came through the air. She thought then and wondered if he could smell her from where he was. Could he almost taste her? Would he want to?

Usually the whiskey did the job, keeping that dark voice out. But sometimes, when the moon was full, she found herself in stranger tides. She found that dark voice poking holes in her mind that turned to a thousand tiny mouths that said, *He'll look you up and down and then pass you up for one of these white girls.*

But the man was still alone and she watched him. The way he moved took up space. And not just for the sake of occupying space, but because his body—which looked both powerful and full of grace—required it. He didn't look at her. He also seemed not to notice how she stalked him with her eyes low or how every girl up on the roof tracked him.

And then his eyes settled on her, which unsettled her. She'd been made. She buttoned her coat and wrapped her scarf around her neck tighter and headed for the door.

"I'm Jude," he said as she passed him.

She almost turned to see who he was talking to.

“This is the part where you tell me yours,” he said. She could hear his smile as he spoke.

“Io,” she said with her back to him.

“Eye-oh.” He said her name slowly. “Unusual name.”

“No stranger than Jude,” she said. “It short for Judas?”

“Nah, just Jude,” he said. He broke away from the party. “This party is kinda...well, it ain’t shit.”

“Hasn’t been for a few hours,” she said, still with her back to him. She kept her jacket closed tight, because she’d become aware of her body then. The burden of being noticed.

She didn’t hear him move, just felt him moving closer. His body heat emanated toward her, sliding through the kinks in her chill like a hot comb. But who noticed ghouls?

“You wanna go somewhere?” he asked. “To talk, I mean.”

She turned to him then and said, “Uh, no.”

He stepped closer to her. “Can I at least give you my number?”

“What for?” she asked.

“So, we can talk.”

“Ghosts don’t talk. They only moan,” she said.

He looked at her like she'd knocked some of his wind out. "And I was worried about being forward..."

They didn't say anything for a moment.

"You're weird," he said and though he wasn't sizing her up, she felt like she could read his mind. Their bodies seemed to be leaning into one another like planets falling into the same inscrutable orbit. Momma had always said you'd know when a man wanted you.

"I have to go," she said.

"Graveyard calling?" he asked.

"Something like that," she said turning away. She passed the fallen spectres on the way out. They stood in a group, hands on their hips, heads shaking. Their bodies still bore the traits of their deaths. One of them said, "What's *wrong* with you?"

~ ~ ~

Io settled in on a bench and watched buses pass, not catching any of them. She hadn't even looked to see where they were going. She thought of Slim Jimmy and a little about Sola, but mostly about the many ways in which a night with Jude *could have* gone. It wasn't long before the other Ios showed themselves and took turns hitting her on the back and saying, very close to her ears, "He was out of your league anyway." Sometimes their voices were so loud that she was sure other people could hear them. She counted passers-by, but as Jude came into her line of sight, she realized he was still in her crosshairs. She put her hood up and hid herself as he passed, only to get up and follow his tracks to Johanna's Coffeehouse. She stood on the other side of the glass, because she felt safer there.

Was the glass there for his protection or for hers?

Turns out, Jude wasn't a coffee man. He preferred tea, with lots of sugar. Io watched as a blonde-haired girl tore several packets and mixed them in behind the counter. The girl leaned in to him, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She bared her chest for him to notice. She had the most saccharine sweet smile Io had ever seen. Io was sure that smile was sweet enough to sugar Jude's tea by itself.

Jude sat in the corner alone and Io watched him flip through a book that rested on the bookshelf beside him. She imagined him inviting her in. She imagined what they'd talk about.

"I like sweetness. It's my kryptonite," he'd say.

Io took her tea without sugar and her coffee black. "My mom said sugar is of the devil."

"Where's your mom from?"

"Below the Mason-Dixon line."

He'd laugh then. The kind of laugh that caught in the person's chest and clawed at your insides, splitting them. Io supposed she hated those kinds of laughs. Those kinds of interactions especially. Perhaps any real interaction.

"You look...pensive," he'd say after a few sips.

"I am," she'd say. "I'm just thinking."

He'd lean into her in a way that muted all of the noise around them and knit them up tight. "What are you thinking?"

“I dunno.”

“Not forever, I mean. Just right now,” he’d say.

She’d shrug. “Honestly?”

He’d nod.

“I’m thinking of why I came here with you. I don’t know you. I’m not sure if I like you,” she’d say.

“Fair enough,” he’d say, taking another sip.

“But more so, I’m thinking about our relationship. And I don’t mean we’re in a relationship. I mean how we are in relation to one another.”

“Go on.”

“Like how every time you meet someone, even if you just bump into them on the subway or accidentally knock into them on the street, it’s a relation-ship. It’s like they’ve seen you and you’ve seen them. Probably for the first time in your life even though you’ve been stomping around in the same places probably for a while now. Or maybe not at all. Or maybe they just got to town and you had the audacity to run into them. To leave your impression on them. And for them to leave their impression on you. Like, who do you think you are, right? Who do we think we are?” She’d take a sip of her coffee and come back to herself. “I usually don’t talk that much. Sorry.”

He’d lean back in his chair and stretch a little. “I’ve been told that I have that effect on people. They just bear their souls to me. I like to listen.”

“It shows,” she’d say. His eyes were almond shaped. She’d let herself admire them then, but only a little.

“I was just gonna head home in a few,” he’d say then. “You’re welcome to come. No expectations.”

“No expectations?” She’d wonder if then was the time to tell him she’d never slept with anyone. She’d decide against it.

“None.”

“Momma told me not to go home with strange men. She said strange men turn into strange animals.”

“Momma might be right,” he’d say.

From there, Io would walk home with him and he would show her his skin. She’d see that it was made from flesh that smelled like warm spices and that it tasted like cayenne pepper. She’d realize that was the taste she couldn’t place and that he held robust flavoring within him. Io would find this out. Jude would find out that Io held honeycombs. That she was a stinging thing. That she was prickly and also soft. That her skin was electric. And how they arrived at this moment where they both realized they wanted each other would be more of a convergence of limbs and soft strokes. Teeth and hair and scratches. Warmth and wetness and the rush of blood. She’d climb the walls of him and he’d welcome her mouth with tempered muscle and veins. Together, they’d make a chimera even if only fused at their spines and where their hips met. It would be then that Io wished for that cold night air and its chill to find them under the mountain of blankets on Jude’s bed. She imagined that his loft was artfully decorated, but she’d only see his pillow.

~ ~ ~

Io walked, feet beating hard against pavement. She passed houses, banal driveways, and sprinklers that were still on. Midnight showers. On her left, she stopped short and stood under a canopy of trees. She saw the moon pierce through clouds and smog and bathe the woods in white. It must have been there, covered in moonlight, where she first sensed it. It was a barely-there sensation that made her ears perk up like a dog whistle singing tones only beasts could hear. She couldn't make it out amongst the trees. Partially hidden by branches and the rest of it by shadow. Or perhaps the rest of it wasn't there. And maybe it never was.

She felt it walking close, and sometimes far away. Fast, and sometimes slow. On all fours and on two feet. On all fours again. With its eyes to the ground. She listened for its feet and for its breath. For its pause and its start. It tracked her, never moving in front of her. But in the periphery, it rested. An intangible shadow thing lurking, prowling. Its body seemed strong. She imagined visible breath from the cold night puffing through its nostrils. A long, forked tongue. It followed at a hundred yards away. It kept its distance and she did not look at it. She did not hear it stop. And though she wanted to, she did not relieve that tension in her neck to turn to it. Where were the Ios now? Had they been run off by this lurking thing?

It felt familiar, she realized. Like something she had known. Like something that she almost knew. Or had perhaps once known. That Which Followed stalked her home.

She let herself in the house, keys knocking against her wrist as her hand shook. That Which Followed waited and did not draw closer. She did not look for it in under moonlight. She did not look for it when she was on the safe side of the door or when she closed her window before bed. She left it waiting for her down below.

~ ~ ~

That night she dreamed of a dark body covering her own. Of strong legs prying hers open. Of her welcoming it. Of sharp teeth dragging across her skin. Of warm breath. Of cold wind. She dreamed of the blue porch.

~

When she awoke in the woods, in sunlight, underneath trees and laying on rocks, an ache had set up shop in between her thighs. There was a buzzing there. Honeycombs. Like a hive lived there. Like she'd been colonized.

~

She rinsed the dirt off first and then touched herself in the shower until she felt her breath hitch in her throat. She finished, but the buzzing returned with a pointy reckoning that almost stung. She clenched. She squeezed.

She was strategic when taking out her weave, which was ruined by the mud. She clipped out the pieces of thread that held the weave together and let the whole thing unravel in the sink. What was left were the coarse curls of her hair and tender scalp. She kept the nails long.

~ ~ ~

She had a hole in her stomach when next she woke. It needed filling. For breakfast, she ate eggs and a piece of steak from the fridge, raw. She ran it under the sink in hot water to get the ice off. She thawed it and spiced it.

Momma came down at a quarter after seven wearing her bathrobe and her head scarf. She wore full makeup—*Io, I can't leave the house without my face on*—and big pearl earrings. She kissed Io on the cheek. “Didn’t hear you come in last night.”

Io scooted forward on her stool and crossed her legs one way and then other. “I got in late.”

Momma slid the coffee filter in and closed the top with a snap. “You be careful because the news said there were some robberies a couple of nights ago and some man was talkin’ about how he saw a coyote or somethin’ like it in the woods.”

“We don’t get coyotes,” Io said. A lightning strike snapped through her making her shiver below the waist. She throbbed.

“I know,” Momma said. “Where’s mine?”

“Eggs are on the stove,” Io said, uncrossing her legs and then crossing them again.

Momma busied herself with the business of making toast and putting her cold eggs in the microwave. She poured herself a big cup of coffee and sat down beside Io.

“Since when do you eat your meat rare?” Momma asked. “It’ll make you sick.”

Her walls thrummed against each other. Buzzing. Rippling. “I like it like this.”

“Since when?”

Buzz. “Trying something new, Momma. That alright?” The meat slid through her teeth easily, blood filling up the cavity of her mouth with each piece. But she wished it was warm. And that it was fresh.

Momma tore into her toast. “I guess, but don’t come cryin’ to me when you get sick.”

“I’m already sick,” Io said.

~ ~ ~

Each time she woke up in the woods, she’d dreamed about a black dog standing over her. This reminded her of a story Momma told her on her sixteenth birthday about the *Rougarou*. Momma told her about how when Grandma Pearl told it to her, she called it the Swamp Wolf of Nawlins. Grandma Pearl told Momma that the Rougarou wasn’t a what, but a who. Grandma Pearl told this story to Momma on the porch right before Momma left for prom. Grandma Pearl pulled Momma close and said “In ‘dem trees, it waits. Watchin’. It’s hungry. In the swamp. Dat thing.

“It can smell a man on ya,” Grandma Pearl told Momma. She said that when it caught the scent of a girl who was now a woman, it saw her blood. Grandma Pearl didn’t know that the only thing that watched Momma was her cousin, Perry. Or that Momma had lost her virginity in the backseat of Aunt Rena’s car. Perry: age twenty. Momma: age twelve. Details: unclear. Momma had left the part about Perry out. She’d just laughed to Io and said, “Just an old story.”

~ ~ ~

In class, the buzzing moved from between her legs into her head and her chest. She felt the prickling of small hairs protruding from places that it had no business being. Her bones moved under her skin, popping, muted, a mortar and pestle grinding in her sockets. She rolled her shoulders. They rolled back.

And on her walk home, she felt That Which Followed, following closely. Perhaps it had never left, but just retreated when the sun chased the shadows off. But under moonlight it was relentless and it stalked her at a closer range, but she did not look at it. She didn't know much about it, but what she did know of it, was that it was the same height as her.

~ ~ ~

Io sat in a bath, because that seemed to ease the buzzing in her stomach. She searched “buzzing, head, stomach, legs, vagina” on her phone. It returned no results.

~ ~ ~

The buzzing felt sort of like bites. Like a thousand tiny mouths hummed on her skin. Like bees mining her body for suitable nests. The buzzing spread between her thighs, and to her hair, her nails and her ears. It was also accompanied by an itch that was in the deep tissue of her skin. This was soothed, slightly, by laying on the bathroom floor and excessive masturbation. This did next to nothing except increase her affinity for bloody, sinewy, raw meats. She picked up a pound of steak and chicken livers from the grocery. She ate them out of a brown paper bag while Momma was at work.

~ ~ ~

Io sat in a bath, chest buzzing, and searched “black dog” on her phone. It returned several results.

~ ~ ~

When she woke up, she was sweating. She turned on her fan and went downstairs for water. She wandered down, holding tight to the banister, searching for the last step. Momma was sleeping on the couch when she passed, but she saw something in shadow moving near.

That Which Followed stood over Momma on two legs with claws long and sharp perched just above her torso, back hunched, hair sprawling from its body. A mane of black hair. Its teeth dripped saliva onto Momma's head.

"Stop," Io said. "Leave her out of it."

That Which Followed didn't move. It kept its stance, but pointed to the door. A few seconds later, the door crept open soundlessly.

"Okay," Io said.

Io wandered past the park and down Bright Street to the wood's edge, trailing That Which Followed at twenty paces. That Which Followed walked into a clearing of trees on two legs. Once she passed through that invisible mouth, that threshold, the buzzing stopped. She imagined that the woods were the swamp and that these were one and the same. Wasn't a swamp just the woods drowning? But this swamp had clear blue water instead of the murky green it should have been. Bluer-than-the-porch water. She backed away from it.

"It isn't supposed to look like that," she said to That Which Followed. To the Ios. "Why is it so blue?"

That Which Followed circled her then, nipping at her ankles and snarling. It urged her in.

The Ios raised their voices and Io thought how wonderful it might be to see them die. She unzipped her dress and stepped out of it, and let it sink underwater. She waded further in and could see her wavy reflection in the water. She looked so unlike them. And the water felt nicer than she thought it would and warmer. She could hear cicadas in the trees. She could feel the swamp water touching her ankles and then her knees. On the bank of her imagined swamp sat her phantom selves dressed in white. Sacrificial white. Sacrificial rites. One held a knife. One held a spear. Their faces were half naked and half tribal paint. They wore many rings.

“The water is so nice,” she said to the Ios. She knew they could not stand for her to enjoy something without them enjoying it more. “Come in.”

Io invited them in one at a time. The swamp changed green as they entered and stained their white clothes. She pushed their heads underneath the water. She held them there for many beats. Beat. Beat. Beat. Io-In-Red succumbed. She’s dead. And when one was done, she invited in the next. Io-Leather-Skirt. She struggled more than her sisters. But the flailing eventually stopped. Io could feel each death in her own body. She felt the pain and then the release.

That Which Followed met her at the swamp’s edge and allowed her to take its hand. She realized that the hand she held was first a claw and then her own soft hand. And then nothing. She saw Jude sitting there on the bank, watching. She felt the bones in her arms elongating and her skin spreading to meet the new demands of *this* body. She let her neck crack and split. She let her feet lift off of the ground and rest on her haunches. She let the black hair crawl to her fingers and then her toes.

This body was wondrous. It was trees and dry ground. It was solid rock and steel. She let a feral howl pass her lips and she let the water capsize her.

When she came up for air, which was quite some time, because she liked the swamp floor, Jude sat there still.

“Yes,” she said. “I’d like to go somewhere with you.”

All Skinfolk Ain’t Kinfolk, or I Am an American Woman

He only ever lasted for fourteen minutes. He only spent that long inside his wife and he did this an average of twice per week, so he spent a total of twenty-eight minutes inside his wife and ten-thousand and fifty-two minutes outside of his wife. At least that was how he’d counted it. He’d told his wife this over breakfast. She’d made him his favorite toast from his favorite bread that she bought down at the Save-A-Lot. He told her this mathematical figure while she painted her long red nails a brighter shade of red that his momma said made the folks at church think that she was prostitute, but that was the people at church thinking that and not momma, of course.

He told her about how long he spent inside of her and she said, “That’s okay, Hezzie. I don’t mind it. I don’t like it much when you sweat all on top of me anyhow.”

He stared across the table at her. She wore her sleep bonnet on her head and she’d forgotten to wash off that little drop of drool from the corner of her mouth. She was still pretty to him even with the drooly mouth.

“Why does it smell like burnt hair?” he asked her, taking a bite of his toast.

“Because I’m boiling hair,” she said pointing to the small pot roiling on the stove. “It’s for my ponytail. Marsha bought too much hair at the hair store and she gave me the extra. I’m making me a ponytail.”

He ate his toast and watched her take the hair off the stove and pour it in a colander in the sink. She wore the pink robe with the pashmina-style front and her furry slippers, the ones her toes stuck out the front of. He watched her scoop the little rods with the boiled hair out of the colander and onto a towel.

She unrolled the hair carefully, wet nails be damned, and she showed him the long track of hair that was now curly. “Look, Hezzie! It’s pretty! I’m gonna make a nice big ponytail for our date tonight!”

He sipped his coffee and said, “Sure, Doll, sure. I can’t wait to see you in it.”

She took an industrial sized bottle of Spritz-Hold-N-Grab and sprayed the boiled curls oooooohhing and ahhhhing with each one she unfurled.

~ ~ ~

Doll did her hair up and she hid the tracks so Hezekiah couldn’t even see where her hair ended and the fake hair began. She presented herself to him wearing her tight electric blue number that she’d lifted from Saks in 1987. It had the fancy bejeweled shoulderpads and she’d decked herself out in costume jewelry and a faux leather studded mini purse. Her face was made up with green eye shadow and her lips were painted the same red as her nails that she’d somehow managed to keep from getting smudged. Usually Hezekiah could hear Doll cursing from here to the Mississippi when one her nails got caught on one of her zippers. She’d usually say, “Zip me up, Hezzie” afterward with a frown on her face. She could never figure out why he didn’t volunteer his hands. He didn’t have three-inch fire engine red nails to preserve.

Doll stood under the top light in their bedroom like it was a spotlight and let Hezekiah take her heavenly visage in with every inch of his eyeballs. Her pose said, “Ravish me” and “Eat your heart out, Hezzie.” She posed like she was one of those 90s girls on the Calvin Klein commercials where their express purpose was to sell a pair of overpriced white underwear. Doll’s express purpose was to remind Hezekiah of what he had and that she’d given up a different life for him. That she’d left Ron, the used salesman, in 1994 for Hezekiah and that she’d likely regretted it ever since because Ron made more money than Hezzie did. She told him this with her cheap eyeshadows because she wanted him to know she couldn’t afford the real stuff. Or maybe he just wanted a reason for why she still wore Wet-N-Wild eye shadow and why every shade she owned was so garish.

See, Doll had never really left the eighties and instead clung to the decaying cache of 80s clothes she’d carted around in a special trunk outfitted with temperature control to keep the moisture out of them. Doll had to keep her clothes in tip top shape. Her high ponytail gave way to crimped edges and fried-and-dyed blonde hair and Hezekiah wanted to know why Doll thought she could pull off blonde hair. She was way too dark for that. And wasn’t the fry-and-dye getting a little old what with those defiant gray hairs still sneaking out at the edges? But somehow even with a bit of lipstick running over her lip line, Doll was still pretty to him. Just not with that dress on.

Now, they didn’t fight much because they knew where each other’s buttons were and stayed off them for the most part. Hezzie’s was that he didn’t like when she massaged his butt during back massages and hers was anyone saying anything critical about her clothes. Hezzie’d been married to Doll for ten years and had never once said he didn’t like the way a thing looked on her, but for some reason he’d got it in his mind at that moment that he was going to tell her he didn’t like the electric blue dress. It might have been how the smell of boiled hair had stayed in his

nose way past breakfast or how she was still wearing that garish green eyeshadow that she knew he hated. Even though he'd seen her in the electric blue a thousand times, today it looked like a blue cloth sack fitted around her body and he found the look of it didn't agree with him. Or maybe it was how none of the colors on her seemed to match. He couldn't be sure about the cause, but he knew that he was going to say something. So, he did.

“Don't you wanna wear something else?” he asked. “I mean I like it, but you always wear that one. Why not something else? I'm taking you to Red Lobster, so maybe something black?”

Doll set her lips into a straight line and Hezekiah could see the wrinkles around her mouth deepen. “What'd you say?”

“I mean I like it, it's just that you always wear that one when we go to The Sizzler,” he said.

Hezekiah could see all of the twinkly stars and all of the glitter in her eyes dim and falter. “You don't like the electric blue, Hezzie?”

He shrugged with his hands in pockets. “I dunno. Maybe not.”

Her eyes got big then and she stepped out of her heels. She walked over to him slowly passing from under her spotlight. “I got this little number at Saks Fifth Avenue. It was the last one in stock. Limited release from the Bayonetti collection.”

He shrugged again.

“I got this at Saks!” she said and then she lunged at him. Before Hezzie could duck, Doll had balled up her fist and socked him right in the mouth. Knocked him down. Knocked him on his ass. The last thing he saw was her toenails and then blackness.

~ ~ ~

He awoke to find Doll on top of him. She'd moved him to the bed now and tied his hands to the wiry side of the bedframe. She leaned over him, panting over his face like a pooch. Her breath was hot and wet. She smelled like Big Red cinnamon gum which reminded him of his grandmother. When she breathed, it was as if he could see the pores in her face opening. Her skin quivered when she inhaled and when she exhaled, she drew some of his breath in. His breath, also hot and wet, funneled into her mouth, but it was as if she took something from him when she did this. Like he felt somehow weaker from it. And then there was the fact that her eyes lit up some unnatural gold color when she did this that made him wonder how hard she'd hit him. Her lipstick had bled even further past her lip line, but she was still pretty to him.

“Hezekiah,” she said in a low voice. Almost a growl. “Why don't you like my dress? It accentuates my waist. It makes my breasts look big. It makes my ass look like I'm twenty-five.”

“Why'd you hit m—” he started.

“Shut up!” She slapped him in the face. “Don't say anything.”

She spoke to him through her teeth. Her teeth had red lipstick on them that looked a little like blood in the dim room. She panted some more and then felt around his pockets. She found his phone.

“What's the password?” she asked.

“Momma's birthday,” he said.

“Momma’s birthday,” she said in a sing-songy voice. “Momma Momma Momma. Momma’s boy.”

She started looking through his messages. Found nothing. Then moved to his pictures. Pictures of food.

“Why do you have so many pictures of food?” she asked.

Hezzie tried to wiggle his way out of the zip tie that she’d bound his hands to the bed with. “Stay out of my pictures, Doll.”

She laughed at him. A laugh that he could hear originating from the pit of her belly and traveling up her throat. She kept looking at his pictures until she came upon a scene.

“Well,” she said. “I see a video here. Let’s watch it together.”

She turned the phone toward him and then nuzzled in close to his face smushing his cheeks against hers. She pressed play and he knew already what it was, so he turned his head. This was a video starring Hezekiah and Dione Dolorian from church. In the video, Hezekiah was giving it to Dione from behind, doggy-style and staring into the lens of the camera with a huge smile on his face. He slapped her ass and Doll shrieked like something feral at the sound.

“Hmm,” she said. “So, this is what you like?”

He said nothing, but looked at her. He couldn’t figure out any kind of lie to tell. He couldn’t think of anything really except for that he was a damn fool for keeping this trophy on his phone.

“Huh, Hezzie?” She shook the phone at him. “This?”

She duct-taped his mouth shut, slid off the bed, and put her heels back on. She grabbed her leather studded mini purse from the nightstand and said, “I’ll be right back.”

~ ~ ~

Doll left the house for around two hours and when she came back, she called down the hall to him. “Hezzie! I got a surprise for you.”

Hezzie saw Dione Dolorian peek her head around the corner before she came in. She wore the dress Doll had worn earlier that evening—the electric blue. She wore her high heels. She strolled into their bedroom and stood in front of him. She was shorter than Doll and a few shades lighter too. Her hair was cut short into a bob and she wore a deep wine colored lipstick that Hezzie thought Doll never could have pulled off, because maybe it was too classy. Doll was all about the glam and the trashy glitter.

“Hello, Hezzie,” Dione said, but when she spoke it was Doll’s voice that came out of her mouth. “I’m going to take the duct tape off your mouth now because I want your honest opinion.”

Dione pulled the duct tape from around Hezzie’s mouth. He tried to cover his mouth with his hands to stop the sting, but he realized then that his hands were zip-tied to the bed posts. His face stung where Dione had ripped the tape off and some of his beard hair was stuck to the adhesive side of the tape.

Dione moved back and turned around for him. “Well, what you think?”

“Why do you sound like Doll?” he asked.

She smiled, her teeth stretched against her lips. “I am Doll.”

“Where is Doll, Dione?”

Dione came closer and said, “I’m Doll. I’m just borrowing Dione’s skin. You like?”

Hezzie’s eyes bucked at Dione. She climbed up on the bed and sat beside him.

“What’s wrong, Hezzie? I thought you liked Dione?”

“Untie me,” he said.

“Dione” pulled the dress up and over her head, but she left the heels on. “Wanna touch?”

“No,” he said.

She jiggled her boobs. “I know you want to touch her again.”

“No, woman,” he said.

She climbed onto his lap, straddling him. He twisted away from her, but she held his head in place. She said close to his mouth, “You like me as Dione?”

“No and I don’t know what kind of shit y’all are pulling, but I’m done with it,” he said.

“Untie me.”

“Dione” spoke. “I’m Doll.”

“How can I know that?”

She slid off his lap and then turned her back to him and he saw a long, red line where the flesh from both sides of the seam met.

“Zip me, Hezzie,” she said with a laugh. “Zip me up!”

His eyes followed that seam between the valley of her shoulders down to the small of her back. And his stomach turned. It looked a little like that pull apart candy, Twizzlers, but before you pulled it apart. The world felt fuzzy or maybe his head just felt fuzzy from the sight of open flesh.

“It was hard pulling Dione’s skin off her and then when I tried to put it on I had to wiggle into it,” Doll said. “It was like putting on jeans that’s too small.”

Hezzie felt warm piss pooling in between his legs while he looked at the bloody seam.

“Oh lord, man,” Doll said. “You done pissed yourself.”

“Where is Dione?” Hezzie asked then.

“Laying in her bed,” Doll said. “Looking like a burns victim.”

“Where is Dione?” His voice had started shaking now and he hadn’t known it could do that. His teeth were chattering against each other even though the fireplace was burning on the other side of the bedroom heating the whole room up.

She sat beside him and rubbed his stomach with Dione’s hands. “Do you like it when Dione does this, Hezzie? Tell me what you like for her to do.”

~ ~ ~

Hezzie looked at Dione’s skin in a heap on the floor. The room was starting to smell like dead flesh and his darling Doll stood in front of him wearing no skin at all. She looked like something out of a medical book too. Just standing there in front of him, all muscle and sinew. She

was red and white and blue. Blue for the veins. Red for muscles. White for the tissue. She was a real American woman.

Hezzie had started trying to figure out ways to make this all make sense. To make sense of Doll as she was now. He'd settled on the seam down her back being called Pull-Apart Candy and she was an American Woman. He even thought he could hear Lenny Kravitz's "American Woman" playing somewhere in the room getting louder every time he looked at her. He imagined Doll with no skin wearing a jumpsuit made of the American Flag and singing "American Woman, duh duh, stay away from meeeeeee! American Woman, Mama let me beeeehhee!" and then maybe a little staccato version of Shania Twain's "I Feel Like a Woman," but only the chorus.

Hezzie wasn't able to speak because the sight of his Doll made him piss his pants more than once, but he laughed a little to himself. He pictured her in a cowboy hat and cowboy boots. He made Doll, well, a doll. A paper doll with different one dimensional clothes. Since she loved clothes so much and the whole reason for this whole thing was because of it, it only seemed natural to see her like this. But he saw that the only thing worse than Doll wearing Dione's skin was her wearing no skin.

"Who should I try on next?" she asked him.

He said nothing and looked down at the pool of piss that had made a wet spot on his pants and soaked deep into the layers of their mattress. They'd have to get another mattress at the liquidation outlet if they survived the night. One with the plastic still on.

"Should I surprise you?" she asked, giddy. Guttural. "Yeah, I'll surprise you."

And so, Doll left wearing no skin and came back wearing Felicia Fitzgerald. Felicia was a beautiful woman that Hezzie had looked at many a time in church. He loved how she always wore high collars and scarves. Though he couldn't tell Doll, he often fantasized about what Felicia looked like underneath all those layers of clothes. She had a big rack from what he could see through her silky blouses. She hadn't kept the baby weight on.

Doll strolled into their bedroom wearing Felicia's skin in the electric blue dress. She turned for him under the top light—her spotlight still—and modeled the dress for him. Felicia had long curly hair that grew out of her scalp and Doll was loving the length.

“I like her hair, Hezzie,” she said to him. She raked her fingers through Felicia's scalp and the scalp slid off her skull a little. “Sorry, haha!”

Hezzie watched from the bed with his eyelids mostly closed. “Please, Doll. I never slept with Felicia.”

Doll-Felicia crawled onto the bed, over the piss spot and sat on Hezzie's lap. “But you wanted to.”

She unzipped the electric blue dress and inched out of it in the bed. She laid it softly on the nightstand and sat on Hezzie's lap naked. She pressed Doll-Felicia's breasts together and brought them closer to his face. With Felicia's skin on, Doll *was* Felicia. The only thing left of Doll was her voice. But as she moved closer to Hezzie, he let himself be absorbed into the fantasy. Her breasts were big like Felicia's even though Doll had a smaller chest. She even kind of smelled like Felicia. Hezzie thought back to when he sometimes sat beside Felicia at church and how he could smell that sweet perfume she wore. She smelled like some kind of fruit. Doll-Felicia smelled a lot like that same fruit now but with something copper-like underneath.

“Go on, Hezzie,” Doll said through Felicia’s mouth. “Lick me.”

He felt his tongue coming out between his teeth. If he was being honest, he’d always wondered what Felicia tasted like. He’d wondered how her tongue would feel on him.

“Go on,” Doll-Felicia said. “Take a bite.”

She pulled one of his hands free from the zip tie. Hezzie didn’t know Felicia was so strong. He let her pull his other hand free. He let her wrap his hands around her body and her skin felt amazing to him. It was softer than Doll’s whose back had been marked up by her daddy’s belt from when she a kid. She grinded into Hezzie’s hips, a very skilled woman, Felicia.

“Touch me,” Felicia said in Hezzie’s ear.

And he did. He let his hands explore her legs and her hips and then he pressed his fingers into her back. His fingertips slipped inside that fleshy, bloody seam and he pushed her off of him. She fell from the bed onto the floor with a heavy sound. She was solid matter when she hit the floor. He looked over the edge of the bed as much as he could with his ankles still bound to the bottom two metal bedposts. She’d fallen on her stomach and her back lay open, the seams come undone.

“Felicia, err, Doll?”

Doll rolled over, Felicia’s skin had gone askew from the fall. The eye holes weren’t lined up all the way and so he could see some of the red and white peeking through where the eyes should have been. “Do you like me like this too, Hezzie? Let’s call me Felicia Redux!”

He stared down at her on the ground. She smiled at him though her mouth wasn't where it should have been so he could only see a bit of her teeth. Then she moved the skin back in place and looked up at him. From here something like a terror gripped him and he couldn't look at her anymore, so he turned his head.

He heard some shuffling around on the floor, then Doll stood, red and white again. Anatomical and skinless on the dark side of the room. She rose from the floor like some zombie or an undead thing with new life.

"Mmm," she said. "I forgot how good it felt to walk around like this without the hassle of skin."

She circled the bed a couple of times. She walked slowly with perfect posture. She grabbed his legs. He flailed his arms at her. She growled at him, something unnatural that had strong vocal chords. Something that made sounds from the gut. Something that was feral and maybe even ancient.

"What should I try on now?" she asked. "Should I check the reserves?"

She walked over to the closet and pulled out her trunk. She kept it padlocked in the off chance that Hezzie was feeling curious. She'd told him that she kept her oldest fashions in there where air could circulate at all time, keeping the clothes clean and cool. She said this was the best way to keep clothes and since Hezzie didn't know anything about clothes he took her at her word. She pulled the trunk from the closet and plucked the key from inside her jaw. He'd always wondered where she kept it. She'd told him "A safe place" when he asked.

She unlocked the chest and looked into it like there was a pit of gold and silver in there. He'd never seen her with that much pleasure on her face, certainly not from him. He realized then that he'd never seen his wife delighted. That she'd never looked back him with the kind of love that she did for the contents of her trunk. She reached inside and pulled out a neatly folded article that was wrapped in plastic.

"This hasn't been worn since before I met you," she said. "It's my favorite...well, it's my favorite me."

Hezzie was able to see after some fragile handling, that she was holding another skin. She showed it to him. She held it up to herself like it was her wedding dress. She smiled at him, but without lips, of course.

"After so long, you forget which skin was your first one or if you ever even had one at all," she said. "But, this is my earliest memory of skin."

He watched her step into each leg of the flesh, the hair on the scalp hanging forward like a blowup sex doll.

"Please, don't," Hezzie said. He wasn't too proud to beg her.

"Hush up now! Or I'll put the mammie one on!" She paid him no mind. "I love this one so much. It reminds me of my mother."

Hezzie watched her reform herself in front of him. He watched her breasts go from small to medium and her thighs, which were somewhat narrow without skin, filled out. Her arms, small without skin, were now firm and strong. She was Doll revisited. She was Doll in the form of something divine and he really was looking at something heavenly then. Her skin was the blackest

he'd ever seen it. The hair was big and coarse, almost the color of coal. Her lips were a lighter brown with a few pink spots that pigment forgot and they were wonderfully glossy. And her eyes were light brown and looking back at him. She was the most beautiful thing. He couldn't have even imagined something like her. He couldn't have even dreamed her up. He felt in that moment that he didn't deserve to see her.

She walked over to where the full-length mirror stood and he was sure she was admiring herself. She rubbed her hands over her stomach and she fluffed her hair.

"I wore this skin so long," she said. "I was afraid to take it off, but my mother told me if I wanted to keep it I couldn't wear it every day or I'd ruin it. So, I kept it folded up for thirty years. Hmph."

She stared at herself for so long that Hezzie almost forgot who he was looking at. She walked out into the hall and brought back in her Doll skin, the one he'd met her in. She walked over to the fireplace which still had some fire left in it.

"I was going to take the mammie skin out," she said to him. "But that mattress can't take anymore piss."

"You want Doll back?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said. His voice came out strained now and it almost cracked like a young boy in puberty.

"Say your goodbyes," she said before throwing the skin into the fireplace. It burned unlike how most things burned. It burned bright and hot and filled the air with the smell of baked skin.

She reached around both sides of her head and removed the skin that Hezzie had named “Heaven” in his mind, and she slid out of it. It was the one that had truly fit her best.

“I thought of giving myself to you in this skin,” she said. “But you don’t deserve it. Never will.”

And like the Doll skin she’d burned, she set fire to Heaven too. She watched it burn out and simmer into embers like a brick of charcoal. The ashes scattered all over the bedroom, making a fine dust in the air.

“If you breathe in, you might be able to taste her,” she said to Hezzie.

She gathered Felicia’s skin off the ground and then threw it into the fire with a howl. “Bye, Felicia!”

She nearly laughed herself to death at that. And Hezzie watched her cackle like a witch, her muscles contracting there. She was the anatomy of a laugh.

She looked back at him lying on the bed. A mess of piss and with his pants unbuttoned. He watched the ashes settled under the top light. Doll clicked the light off and spoke to him.

“I thought long and hard about which skin to leave you with tonight,” she said approaching the bed. “But then I realized, you just like me au natural!”

And she jumped on him, her red, white, and blue covering him in the dark.

2. IN WHICH WE ARE INSIDE THE VAGINA

This section contains “When All He Wanted Was Warmth and Room” and “Ophelia in Ecstasy.

When All He Wanted Was Warmth and Room

He distributes himself inside me like this:

His right arm makes an arch under my ribcage, his hand balled up into a fist.

His left arm, he folds at the elbow in front of his stomach. Sometimes he lets it slide down my right leg. His navel lines up with mine.

His right leg and his left leg are squeezed together and they are housed in my left leg. His feet make a sharp point that rests just above my left ankle.

His head is in between my lungs.

His hair itches my collarbone.

When I breathe, I can feel him there sometimes, taking in the same breath. I can feel him settling like the walls of an old house. The short fibers on his head, a hairball sitting phantomwise in the column of my throat. My legs are open wide. He’s crawling all the way inside me. I can no longer see his feet or any part of him. But I can feel him, first slipping from me, then

he’s gone.

~ ~ ~

We usually make way for Sundays. We let Friday be his night out. Saturday is date night. And Sunday is the one we make way for. We don't go to church anymore. He said I was too evil to go to church. I told him he liked the inside of a woman too much to worship anything other than pussy.

He cooks dinner on Sundays, but tells people I do it. Always a little bit afraid that them fools he plays pool with on Saturdays will ask him if he's *funny*. They'll ask him he's gay because he cooks dinner. They'll ask him if he watched the game. He'll tell them I gave him head during halftime, which I usually don't. Usually. The next time we are watching the game he'll push my head down into his lap and then he'll let it go. He has to try. For them.

On Sundays, he gathers me up from the bed and hands me my coat. He waits for me in the truck. It's gotten rustier every year since his daddy died and left it to him. He's too proud to admit he doesn't know a damn thing about trucks. So, he lets it rust. That honey colored paint keeps on rusting into a nasty brown color. The holes in it sometimes make my flesh crawl. My eyes follow the cracked sidewalks and I watch the shape of the landscape change when we pass into the good part of town. We go to the nice grocery store on Main Street. You won't find black folks in there except for us, most times.

We shop for whatever he's going to cook. We don't buy extra. He gets the good bread and a pound of something from the deli. And, when he sends me over to a different aisle, I usually come back to find him chatting up the new stock girl or the girl who brings in the dairy. Today, it's the stock girl who maybe isn't as new now as she was two weeks ago. Her apron is stretched tight across her breasts and her hair is strawberry blonde with frizzy ends. He doesn't seem to notice her ends. She's freckly and pale faced. She reminds me of my Aunt Clara. But Aunt Clara is

redboned. This girl's white. She's taller than me, maybe like a model. She's holding a crate of yams. He carries on talking to Stock Girl until she sees me holding a bag of dried apricots near the cart. She smiles at me and then disappears behind the revolving doors.

“Did you get the fruit?”

“She's got split ends,” I say.

I see a young woman holding a baby walk by us. We exchange smiles, and she presses the baby hard against her chest. I settle back into myself and let the burning subside under my skin. He's probably going to do whatever he's going to do with Stock Girl. Hell, maybe she'd become one of his side chicks. You know, the ones he thinks I don't know about. Maybe this one would give him a bad case of Oral Herpes that he'd eventually give to me, but not right away. I'd make him kiss me when I had a sore, and we'd still have date night on Saturday. And he'd talk over the TV. And Sunday, we would go shopping for dinner, and he would make something good.

~ ~ ~

His mama calls at midnight. She always does this.

I can hear her voice, rough from too many cigarettes and a thyroid surgery. She crackles through the phone.

“I dreamed of you,” she says. “There was blood all over you and there were scars on your back.”

“I'm sleeping, mama,” he says. He's leaning over me, the chord to the stationary phone wraps around my body as he leans into it. His face is twisted up into some kind of contortion.

“You were holding a basket,” she says. “But there wasn’t anything in it.”

“I’m hanging up now, Mama,” he says.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too,” he says.

I know those words are like a fire poker in his mouth. He leans on me farther, crushing his arm into my side, and he puts the phone back on the hook. “How did she get our number?”

I say nothing. I know he doesn’t want me to say anything.

He slides down under the covers until his head is on my stomach. He presses his face against my navel. I could have sworn he said, “Let me in.”

~ ~ ~

In the morning, he tells me we’re going to have to go see his mother. So, when he’s in the shower, I pull out my list. Any good trip needs good music. These are his mother’s greatest hits:

Things That Have Happened When Meeting with His Mother: A Soundtrack

1. The song where she tells me her name is Claudia when he was in the other room. (1st time we met)
2. The song where she produces a pill bottle and makes me open it because “her hands were weak.” (3rd time)
3. The song where she throws up on his shoes when we take her to lunch. This song is the color of hotdogs and stomach lining. (10th time)

4. The song where he sits farther from me than he normally does and doesn't talk to me until we were back in the truck. (Every time)
5. The song where she calls me Jade, instead of my actual name. (Almost every time)
6. The song where she steals 40 dollars out of his wallet. (Most every time)
7. The song where he asks me why I keep calling his mother Claudia because her name was Marie. (50th time we met)
8. The song where when we go to the counter to ask to see her, the hospital staff informs us that she's been missing since this morning and that they were doing everything they can to find her. (Too many times)

These are the songs we listen to in silence. While I listen to the sounds of the water hitting his scarred back, I think of which song she'll add today.

~ ~ ~

"Looks like snow," he says looking out the window. "At least, that's what the news said."

He likes to talk about shit that doesn't matter when we are going to see his mother. He grips the steering wheel and grinds his teeth. He cusses to himself.

We visit the front desk and the nurse tell us that his mother's run off again.

"I pay you to keep her in here," he says to the nurse.

"She's slick," she says. "Lifted a lighter off one of the doctors too."

He looks at me and I look at the nurse. "Call us when you find her, please."

The first snowflake hits the car and I put in a mixtape called “Things That Have Happened *Because of His Mother.*” This one is the one where we look out the window and wonder where on Creation she is. This mixtape is one we’ve been putting together for last couple of years, and it carries a tracklist of our favorite times:

1. The song where I had to make him another cake for his birthday last year because I saw his mother spit on it.
2. The song where we had to sift through the classifieds for six Sundays to find temporary work because the hospital bills had rolled over into Collections.
3. The song where we sold my vinyl collection, the only surviving artifact from my father. I wanted to save the Motown, but I didn’t.
4. The song where we downsized from the house to a two-bedroom townhouse.
5. Then an apartment.
6. The song where he started working for an autobody place. And then he started working security on the weekends, too.
7. The song where some nights, I have to shake him awake because he fights in his sleep. He says, “She’s burning me!” and then I remember the scars on his back and how his skin changes from brown to light brown to almost white where the burns she gave him never healed up right.

~ ~ ~

The hospital calls us at midnight.

“Yes,” he says into the receiver. “I understand.”

Beat.

“So, you still don’t know where she is?” he asks.

Beat.

“Call as soon as she turns up.”

Beat.

He hangs up and crawls back into bed. “She’s somewhere out there in the world,” he says. I touch the scars on his back. He clutches onto me. “She’s coming for me.”

If she finds him it won’t be like how it is when we visit her at the hospital. Out in the world, she’s a wild woman, not tranquilized by the narcotics and the antipsychotics. The only thought in her head is *him* on fire. She told the doctors that the Devil gave him to her. That Satan took her into barn behind her house. That they rutted like animals on the dirt floor. She told them that he was born in fire and that he needed to be given back to the fire. She says that’s why she burned him.

I look at him holding onto me and I think to myself, *If them fools at the pool hall could see you now, clutching onto me, what would they say about you?*

I don’t ask him what the hospital said. I let him lay his head on my stomach and push my nightgown up. I feel him pulling me under like low tide. Sinking me into the bed under his weight. He feels big in my arms.

“I have to hide,” he says. He is a grown man saying this to me, but with a boy’s voice. It was like his mama was still standing over him with that can of gasoline and the matches. It was like it all happened just yesterday. I tell you though, I never met a Black man who didn’t love his mama. Even if she clawed out his eyes, they’d would go looking for her.

He moves down to my thighs.

“She got you scared, huh?” I say.

“I’m not scared, I just don’t want to see her when she’s like that,” he says with his head between my thighs. I hear “Hide me.” He puts his mouth on my soft parts and looks up at me as he does this. I’m wet. It’s a reaction. Not something I am in control of. And I sometimes liked the look of a man who’s afraid. That’s what made me wet.

When he touches me like this, I sometimes drift off thinking of how it was before his mother lost her shit. We were happy once, I think. But maybe he’d always tried to find something in me to heal him. But I’m not a witch, though he called me one once. Used to say I could spell a man with my eyes. But these hands, these hands of mine don’t heal. Don’t carry magic or spells. I’d laid hands on him more than I can count, and those scars still marked up his back.

This body, oh, this body was a temple that he went to pray to several times a day. Tried to bury himself inside me. Never mind if these walls were already coming down.

~ ~ ~

Snow keeps us in the house for three days and he wakes up screaming every night. She’s coming for him, she’s burning him, she’s me. In the dream he can’t tell us apart. I’m not sure he can tell us apart in real life.

We lay in our room, the space heater in the corner kicking up dust. He puts his head on my chest and lifts my shirt. He pulls my breast free and puts my nipple in his mouth. He sucks it until it is raw, but I leave him there clutching it.

“It doesn’t taste like anything,” he says. “It tastes like how skin tastes. Baby just go crazy for it.”

“Milk comes out when babies suck, fool,” I say. I wonder if he was breastfed as a child.

He squeezes my nipple. “I bet I can make some come out.”

I move his head away and push him off.

“Fine then,” he says. “Be evil then.”

I hate when he calls me evil. I remember once that he told me that the reason that Black men always went for white women was because they weren’t so evil. “They’ll let you suck on them,” he’d said. “They’ll let you nibble on them. Sistas are just evil. Always trying to catch you in a lie. Are you evil, too?”

“Are you?” I say out loud. I’ve forgotten where we are. I don’t know where I go in my mind when I’m with him.

“Am I what?” he says.

“Nothing.”

I guide his hand up my dress, and then I pull my underwear down and use my legs to inch them off until they are under the covers at the bottom of the bed. I let him feel around. I never tell him where the spot was, but he always finds it. And when he finds it, he finds his rhythm. And I like his rhythm. I also like when his mouth is occupied because he can talk the horns off a billy goat and I sometimes get tired of listening to men go on like they do.

He slides two fingers inside me. And then he introduces more fingers than he normally does. He knows I'm not into it, but he does it anyway. He likes to say I'm uppity when I tell him I don't like his fingers inside me. *You act like redbones*, he likes to say. *Uppity as hell*.

I hold onto his back. Feel those rough scars. When I open my eyes up enough to see the world again, his arm has disappeared under my nightgown all the way to the elbow. But it feels no different to me. It just feels like him. Like his hand is there.

"Can you feel all of this?" he asks.

"It just feels like your hand to me," I say.

He pushes his arm farther up into me and he's deep enough then to touch the space in between my lungs.

When he pulls his arm free it's iridescent.

~ ~ ~

His arm is iridescent for two days. He scrubbed it with a piece of burlap.

"What's inside of you?" he asks. "What's up in you, woman?"

"I don't know," I say. "Never been that far inside myself."

"I wonder how far up I could go," he says.

I don't know how to make sense of it; how he could get his whole arm inside of me without killing me, of how I'd just stretched myself open to accommodate him, of what my body had done.

He falls asleep with his arms around my waist as if I'm going to make some great escape. I dream of escape routes and leaving him lying in a heap. I trace the shimmering places on his skin and listen to him cuss his mother out in his sleep. That night he calls her a schizophrenic whore.

~ ~ ~

The doorbell rings a quarter after one a.m. and we are watching *In the Heat of the Night* reruns. We both look at each other because we both know the only person who would ring a doorbell at one in the morning is someone desperate.

"It's her," he says.

I walk over to the door and look out the peephole. "It's a pizza guy. He's at the wrong house."

He doesn't say anything, but he turns off the TV and goes into our room. I follow him in there and he's sitting on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

"Can't fucking live like this," he says.

He flinches when I touch him.

"She's out there somewhere and I'm in here acting like a punk ass," he says. "I should be out there looking for her. She's probably gone to the old house. Gone looking."

I pull him closer to me and we lay back on the bed.

"Can't fucking live like this," he says again.

I hear "hide me."

“Wish there was just somewhere I could go,” he says. “Just get the fuck away from her. Get away from everything. All this fucking snow. Somewhere warm.”

He rubs my stomach. He kneads it like dough.

“A fucking cave on another planet,” he says. “A black hole.”

He kneads my stomach and he feels around. Puts his hand between my legs. He pulls my underwear down over my legs and puts his fingers inside me. And then I feel pressure.

“Somewhere deep,” he says.

I’m swollen. My body prepares itself for sex or some other sensation. It starts with his two fingers again. Eventually, he’s able to get two arms and his head inside me and then his shoulders. This is a sensation of mostly pressure and some stretching. I knock on my stomach.

“Can you hear me?” I ask.

“Mhmm,” he says. He sounded like he has food in his mouth. Like he is underwater. Like swimming. It isn’t until his torso’s inside me that I feel myself expanding and I wonder just how the hell I’m doing this. I wonder if I’ll split open and be left in two pieces. I wonder if it’s actually water in there.

I open wide for him and I push his feet farther in.

He feels like a foreign body. Like the doctor’s gloved fingers when you’re getting checked out.

When he does this, it brings memories to me, some my own and some I think come from him. I experience the passage of time as a thing. Like how a thing that has no awareness of time

would experience it. He feels heavy in me like I've ingested a dump truck. My legs are immobile. I can barely move my arms. So, I lay there, wetness pooling in between my legs.

~ ~ ~

Someone's knocking on the door when I wake up. I feel weighed down, but not as heavy as last night. My limbs and my legs are sore and I feel something like morning sickness in my stomach. And then I look at myself in the mirror as I pass the bathroom door. I look the same, but there is a man inside of me. There is he and me and then he in me.

We walk to the door and open it. On the porch, we see the neighbor shaking mail at us.

"They keep putting your mail in my box," she says.

I take the mail from her. "Thanks."

I make us soup. We eat it in front of the TV, but this time there is silence and I can hear what the people are saying because he's not here to talk over the news. I think this is the best way to get the news.

I carry him inside me all day and it's almost as if I am alone because he has gone so far that I can't feel him anymore. He's off on his own now. And I'm eating cake by myself and watching the TV. And it's blissful and even when the programming shifts to the televangelists, I listen to their sermons like they're lullabies.

I can't measure the silence in the house, without him there running his mouth about one thing or another. I think forgot the sound of my own breath when I'm alone.

The hospital calls after dinner and says his mother is still on the run. They tell me that she hasn't taken her antipsychotics in four days. They tell me she's delusional. They tell me to look for fires and I start to wonder if he's worth getting burned for.

~ ~ ~

It's Sunday again and he's not here to wake me, so I get myself up. I listen for the sound of him showering. For him getting water all over the bathroom floor and walking into our bedroom with all of himself hanging out. For that familiar sound of him saying my name.

But there's silence in this house after all and I like the sound of my own breathing better. I masturbate and I don't think of him. I touch myself while the sun streams through the slits in the blinds and casts light onto my body.

I take his truck and go to the grocery store on the good side of town and I take my time shopping for dinner. I buy meat and bread and greens. Fill the cart with wine and Cheetos. I see the Stock Girl from last Sunday stocking milk in the dairy section. She smiles at me and without him there, I can see how pretty she is. How her breasts are something deserving of admiration. I watch her breathe and imagine touching her how he would. I'm not sure if these are his fantasies or my fantasies, but I can see how he'd chat her up. Her with those freckles and frizzy hair. She smiles at me a little and I smile back. And she goes back behind the revolving doors.

~ ~ ~

At night, I can feel him picking at my insides like he's mining for gold. I can't tell him that all the gold I have I've already given to him. That I've been stockpiling the best pieces of myself and giving it to him in bite-sized portions.

I imagine him with a pick axe stabbing into my sides, but it doesn't hurt. It just makes me feel like there's someone building something inside me, some structure that I don't have the blueprint to. It's an unauthorized project he's undertaking. Making scaffolding from my ribs. Maybe even a little lift that can carry him from one part of me to the other part. I wonder if there are any places in me that he hasn't been.

I can't think of one.

~ ~ ~

And so, there's another knocking at the door and this time it's his mother. I know this before I even get up. I see her wily hair standing up on top of her head out the peephole.

I feel him pressing into me and it seems like a warning. I open the door a sliver and say, "Empty your pockets."

His mama is still in her hospital gown, but she has on a pair of blue jeans and a leather jacket over it. I talk to her through the door. She rummages around in her pockets and lays her lighters down in a row. She's got eight.

"Marie, the folks at the hospital are looking for you," I say.

She's jittery-looking. Her eyes are bugging out of her head. "Let me in, it's cold."

"I know that's not everything," I say.

She puts another lighter and a matchbox on the stoop. "We" let her in. We hug her. We offer her a mug of tea. He's very still. He doesn't move.

"Where's my boy?" she asks. Her eyes are looking in all directions.

I feel him shift.

“He’s gone for a while.”

“Well,” she says taking a long drag of tea and then pulling out her flask. “When’s he coming back?”

I feel him slipping.

“I’m not sure.”

“I’ll wait forever,” she says.

He’s gone. He’s beyond the feeling place. Beyond my bones. He’s somewhere inside me that even I can’t go. *Does he deserve that type of shelter?* I think to myself.

I go into the other room and phone the hospital. I think about driving her back myself, but the last time we did that she almost made us run off the road. She’s only allowed supervised visits.

She’s eaten lunch and dinner with *us* by the time they send someone around to get her. I hug her before she leaves and she says very close to my ear, “I spit on his toothbrush so he can have a little of me inside him. Don’t tell him, okay?”

I promise I won’t tell.

When she’s gone, I hit my stomach. “Coward.”

He hits back.

“So, you *are* here?” I say.

He hits again.

“Come out,” I say.

He stirs.

“Come out,” I say.

He doesn't listen to me. He doesn't move. Does not vacate the premises though I've served him his papers.

He's in places that I've never been in inside myself.

~ ~ ~

On the third Sunday that he's away, I start a new playlist called “I Am Going to Purge You” and it's made up of mostly wordless tracks. It's a collection of sounds like the sound of me throwing up until only my stomach lining is left. The sound of me dry heaving over the toilet.

The sound of me trying to drown him. I drink an ocean. I throw up from all the water.

The sound of me trying to cut him out. But I don't know exactly where to make the first cut. I act as if I can extract him through vivisection.

The sound of me beating my stomach with a sock full of loose change.

And the last song, this is the best song, it's the song where I tell him to get out.

But he responds with silence and something weight down on me as he redistributes himself inside me.

My body is made of stone. I've got mortar bowls for armpits and pestles for elbows.

~ ~ ~

I walk around our house holding my back. He's pressing into me. Holding me down.

"Come out," I say.

Beat.

"Come out," I say. My teeth grind into each other like mortar and pestle.

Beat.

"Get out," I say. "She's back in the hospital!"

I feel something pulse. Like my whole body is a pulse now. My heartbeat throbs in my chest.

I don't want him here. I don't want him setting up cities inside my bones. I don't want him building inside me. I'm not Mother Earth. I never said he could build on me. I feel my blood roiling and moving through my body.

"You survived," I say to him. "You lived and now you are living off me."

I feel myself opening up, but I know he is still gone. I hear whispers. Rushing water. I hear my birth which is also a kind of death. I feel myself pulling him out as if by some invisible tendon. Something that feels like both flesh and phantom. I pull and he resists. All parasites resist. I push. I pull him down. I open myself up. I pull him down. My head feels heavy like all the blood is rushing to it. Like I am hanging upside down.

I push and I see something cresting. A sac full of light pink fluid that shimmers.

I push and I see stars wheeling overhead. I see my sons and daughters not yet born.

I push and I see the face of my father. Of my mother. I see the fire. I see him in the bathtub of fire. I see his mother there holding gasoline. I see the fire.

And he comes out of me in the sac of fluid. He takes up most of the bathtub. The water overflows onto the rug and I leave him there. He's sleeping. Maybe he is still dreaming. I look at him then. His arms and legs are tucked into his chest. His hair moves back and forth in the water as he draws in shallow breaths. Constellations stain his skin. Orion is stamped across his forehead.

I rip the sac open and my water flows out onto the floor. He says, "I was warm."

"I am not a chrysalis," I say. I look at him and he looks back at me. Not a scar on his body. No sign of his mother on him. "You took my metamorphosis from me and maybe I was saving that for a rainy day. These hips—"

I show them to him. "--are no longer a home for you to reside in. There is no more room for you in me. You took up too much space."

Ophelia in Ecstasy

Right before I fuck them, I say to myself "he'll be last one" and then I remember that I'm not seeking intimacy now. I want flesh. And I'm okay with my desire swelling, because I've been gyped more than once by men who couldn't make a woman come. They don't know how a woman sounds when she is in ecstasy. They leave me hungry. A pit opens up in my stomach and I kiss him deeper than I should. We are one-time lovers, but this meeting of bodies is something that I need.

Tonight, he says "I've never been with a Black girl before" and I grind my hips into his hips over the layers of our clothes. I don't care if he makes me a fetish. My palms are pushing up into his chest. He is on top of me, his belt buckle pressing into the skin on my stomach. He is

stimulating me through our clothes. Then he slides his fingers inside me. That first invasion is like static shock.

“How does that feel?” he asks me.

I don't know what to say. What do I usually say?

“It feels fine,” I say.

He breathes into my mouth. He is working up a rhythm and he thinks he should try this without clothes. He unbuckles his belt and pulls his pants down just enough. I feel him hardening in between my legs. He's pressing it into my underwear. He is asking for entrance into the middle passage of my thighs.

A bead of sweat drips into my mouth and I've tasted him then. I've tasted the salt and so he's already inside me before he's even gotten his dick out.

There is always a moment where I can feel them hesitate. Like their bodies can sense what is waiting for them. As if there is some preternatural sense of preservation their bodies don't have language for. I'd tell them if they asked, but they never ask. They never looked for any sign that this wasn't what I wanted. They assumed that my body was made for this. That when my mother formed me inside her, thread by thread, she programmed me for this. In their minds, I am always ready for them. A hole. An opening just for them.

This one doesn't ask before pushing himself inside me and for a moment I think "yes, this worth it." At that moment when they first enter me, it fills me up. I'm full. And the rhythm. Its becomes a throbbing and then a beat.

We find our beat and it thumps through the dark room. All the light has gone except the light that is in us. We are the only things of light in the room. He is awash in red and blue. He's a

cold blue thing that is heating up to red. I am awash in purple, a mixture of these phases of him. I am watching a man climb toward his highest peak. I am a mountain.

We move together in the darkness, feeling the give and take in our bodies. Opposite entities working in tandem. How gravity works differently in different bodies. How gravity feels different in bodies in motion. I feel him coming to that moment. He knows he will come soon. He tells me. He sticks two fingers in my mouth and I bite them a little.

"I'm coming," he says.

I tell him to look at me and he does. He brings his face closer to mine. We share breath.

"Oh," he says. He's making the "O" face. It is perhaps more attractive than most. He is making the "O" face now and his chest is rising and falling against mine. We are sharing our breaths.

"Ophelia," he says between thrusts.

~ ~ ~

My father said he named me Ophelia because when I was born, my mouth was open in the shape of a perfect circle. The first "O" name he could think of. He said I reminded him of my mother. That I carried her in my eyes. She'd left me her lineage there. But now I know it was because he must have seen how fatality seeped out of me like it did her. How there was something lethal about us. How we were Poison Girls. Powerful assassins who could slay a man with just a look from our green eyes. They argued about it sometimes. About the poisonous flowers my mother liked to grow. And, of course, about the hole in her chest.

One night when I was little, my father's yelling kept me up. I heard my him say to my mother, "It's that hole in you. It's that hole that I can't fill. Right there in your chest!"

I'd looked down at my own chest and saw my breasts, nowhere near maturity. Nowhere near flowering and with no opening there. But this thing my mother had, it made me wonder where it came from.

I asked her once about it when we were watching television after dinner.

I said, "Momma, why is there a hole in your chest?"

We sat on the couch in that same spot that we'd worn down into a slope. She squeezed me tighter and said, "I was born with it."

"Will I have one?"

"You already do," she said. "All girls are born with one." And then she knit her lips together. I'd yanked at the bottom of her dress while she was cooking the next day. Tried to make her tell me, but she shooed me away. Told me, *Ask your father since he thinks himself an expert on most things.* So, I did.

I asked him how long her hole had been there and he said he suspected a long time. *A long time, Ophelia,* he said. *I didn't put it there though.*

My mother's hole was in between her ribs. Turns out she'd been split open by repeated wrenching out of the heart from the chest cavity. That the men my mother had known before my father had left her open and glistening with fresh blood. Now they were stomping around somewhere in the world with my mother's blood on their hands having left that hole there for my father to close. He tried tying it up with twine, but it kept coming apart. Fleasy seams that wouldn't stay closed.

He'd thought of breaking the bones and resetting them with fresh air and country roads, but my mother was a city woman. Dirt roads made her slow and she had always been prone to bouts of aggression in captivity. He took her to buy those poisonous plants she liked. He let her make a garden in our new backyard. But she went crazy out there with the beasts and with the dark that stretched outward so far that she couldn't see where the woods started. She heard things howling outside our back door. Or maybe she was howling. So, we moved her back to the city and my father told her to keep her opening covered so the city dust didn't get inside her.

My father was a curious sort of man. In another life, he might have been a surgeon or someone who cut dead things open to see how they worked. He liked to study things. The first real thing he studied was my mother's opening. He made note of it. Of how wide it was and how deep it went into her chest. He measured it for the first few years and then he did what any good man would do: he filled it up with stuff. He packed it with flowers every Friday and money from his high-paying job and dirt from our vegetable garden. By the time my mother saw this, she'd already made the decision to run off with a butcher who worked in the deli in her old hood.

Run over by a car at noontime soon after. She was carrying a bag of bloody meats and wearing a little black dress like she was already dressed for her funeral.

When I saw her in the morgue, the mortician pulled back the white sheet, specked with drops of blood and I looked at her chest. I looked for her hole. For her wound. I looked at her crashed in skull and how her head was lopsided now. I dreamed of planting flowers there. The poisonous kind she liked. I dreamed of stuffing something beautiful into the pain.

~ ~ ~

He stuffs himself into me farther and I am feeling some pleasure only now. I am only starting to climb that mountain that he is almost over the edge of. His heart beats faster than mine and I take his face into my hands and I watch what's living in him fade from his eyes because in that moment I've killed him.

I feel him come and then clench. He is stone still. He lays on top of my body, jackknifed and stiff. The first phase of death is called *pallor mortis*. It's when all the blood in the body realizes that whatever sorcery that kept all of your organs moving is no longer bewitching you.

He is still warm when I push him off me. I close his eyes which were perhaps the most beautiful thing about him. Or maybe they are more beautiful because they are fleeting. Because they are expiring.

I lay in the bed next to him and touch myself as he begins to decay. I make myself come because they never can. They never last long enough to bring me to that moment. So, I take care of myself like I always have and I leave them stiff in their beds with a smile on their faces from these little deaths.

And this is how it always goes. I've done this eight times. The FBI classifies you a serial killer after you kill three people. Sometimes I watch reruns of shitty crime shows where an old white man chases down the killer all while telling America to hold their daughters tighter. They always find the guy painting weird masks made of human skin or building shrines to white women in their mother's basements. They always have a name that sounds kind of like Randy or William. Bottom feeders who work as janitors or tech support and who actually probably have a 401k. So, I can't relate.

~ ~ ~

So, I'm in a basement. A church basement, so it's not the same thing as a serial killer and there isn't a shrine here except the ones we build to our addictions. I stand up and from this vantage point the ladies look like mere mortals. They aren't the Saint Lisas and Saint Joannes they all act like they are, but these women are the godly types. The kind who say things like "This is a place where god can truly hear you" and "come as you are to Christ." I've never really been a religious person, but I think I liked the ritual of it. I liked the way we started at the same time and how we were made to hold these meetings in the basement of a community church. I liked that there were cookies and shitty punch. I even liked how the lights flickered over our heads, eclipsing our halos when we talked about how we'd almost relapsed twenty times last week. And in between my legs, a loaded weapon, and they didn't even know I had it.

This group was Narcotics Anonymous for the religious. They called it Christ Compels instead and they served better coffee than real NA meetings. It was a women's group, so I wasn't a threat to them. They couldn't die inside of me. I could not kill them with this hole.

"I'm Ophelia," I say.

"Hello, Ophelia," they say all together.

"It's been a few weeks since I came to one of these meetings, but I felt like I needed to come," I say. I take a sip of punch. "It's been a rough few weeks. Haven't really been able to leave my house. Too afraid of...everything, ya know?"

They nod, their white faces looking up at me. Their eyes scanning over me. They don't like how low-cut my shirt is. I think I wear these low-cut shirts because I know how indecent they think I am and it's arousing to me. I have to get myself off some kind of way.

“I almost relapsed the other day,” I say. “I saw this guy who reminded me of someone from my past and I really wanted to sleep with him, but you know I can’t. So, it was pretty messed up for me to even think about doing it. Anyway, it made me think about the first time I ever slept with someone.”

They all think I’m a sex addict, but the reality is is that I just need someone to hold me accountable for my actions. Who better than the godly types, right? Today, I tell them about when I lost my virginity and while I tell them, I can see that they are imagining this. That they are imagining me. The fading 1990s paisley print wallpaper morphs into green walls. The church basement turns into Laz’s room and Laz is there, touching me again, right behind my knees.

~

It’s the summer of 2006 and I’m in Laz’s bed.

“You gon let me put it in you?” he asks me. He’s kissing my neck and all I can smell is his cologne.

I was a late bloomer. Well past eighteen when I first fucked someone. I met Laz at Pixie’s downtown. He was too old for me. He looked better through the haze of drinks and a little weed. He moved through the crowd toward me and I saw that he was why my momma said, “Keep your dress down.” He was the sort of man that didn’t date. The kind of man who’d never learned to make love to women. Laz was someone who fucked women.

Now, we were in his room, and I’d already taken off most of my clothes except my underwear. We lay mostly still, he cupped one of my breasts in his hand and said, “They are the perfect size.”

He slipped his hand in between my legs and felt around. Used his fingers to explore. I didn't like it much, but he didn't notice. He put his head in between my legs and I thought to myself, *My God, it is worth it.*

"You're tight as a drum," he said. "I'm gon have to open you up."

He parted my thighs and pressed his dick against my stomach.

"Feel that?" he asked. "All cuz of you."

I didn't tell him it was my first time because he would have enjoyed it more. I'd always thought this was how I'd lose it though, in some dingy apartment with a man too old for me.

He was fast. He came six minutes after he started, but before he did, I felt something passing in between us, our bodies slowing down into suspended animation. I was seeing myself outside of my body watching him thrust into me so slowly that I could have counted every hair on his head.

And then he came inside me and I could feel it running down my leg. And then he lost his breath. I couldn't feel his chest moving. I shook him. I said his name.

"Laz," I said. I shook him again. "Stop playing around."

I pushed him off of me and put my head on his chest to listen. I checked his pulse. I checked mine.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I said. My chest felt tight like my ribs were pressing into my heart. I could feel my pulse in my ears. I walked back and forth in front of the bed for a few minutes half expecting him to sit up, but that might have been worse.

I looked at him and I said, “What did I do?”

I wiped the cum off me with a towel and I sat beside him for a while. His eyes were glassy and open. He stared straight up into the ceiling and I slipped out the back door. I was a backdoor kind of ho. And that was the first time a man died inside of me.

~

Images of Laz’s face stain my memory. There are two images that lay over one another like photo negatives. The first is his face in ecstasy and the other in expiration. I blink and they move out of my mind and then slide back in like I am looking at microfiche. I don’t know which is his real face.

I finish telling the group my story which is mostly like this one, but without the expiration part. I never tell the women about the expiration. Only the ecstasy. I don’t tell them how I felt that Laz had gyped me. How he had robbed me of the thing that made sex worth it. Of how he still owed me an orgasm.

“So, that guy I saw the other day reminded me of my first time and some sick part of me wanted that again,” I tell the ladies.

“We are all sick,” one of the women says.

“Yeah,” I said. “I looked into a procedure where they will actually close up your, uh, your vaginal opening, but I would have to leave the U.S., so I decided against it. But who knows, ya know?”

“You are as God intended you, dear, but with more sin,” another of the women says. “Plus sex addiction is one of the hardest to kick. It’s not your vagina that’s the problem, it’s your mind.”

I want to tell her that she’s wrong and that my vagina *is* the problem, but I don’t. “Thanks, Lisa,” I say instead.

“I’m Joanne, dear,” Lisa says.

~ ~ ~

On my way home from the meetings I used to stop by the graveyard, go to one of the gravestones and sit near them. I’d think of the last time I’d seen the man alive. I’d think of the ecstasy they experienced while they were inside me. I’d see their microfiche images and I sometimes felt myself under my skirt. Sometimes I was wet from the thought of it. From what they had started but hadn’t finished. At least they got some good from this opening. At least they left the mortal coil in pleasure. I was happy for them then.

Never having the chance to experience the kind of release they did marked me in some way. It made me a starving woman. Like my mother, I became prone to bouts of aggression. I’d visit their graves at night and whisper curses at them or beat the graveyard soil with my fists. I planted poison flowers next to their gravestones.

Why couldn’t you last long enough to make me come? You’re not worth the guilt. I’d say these things to them.

Sometimes I’d lay on top of their graves and touch myself, but it wasn’t the same as someone else touching me. These dead men have made me a wanting woman. And every man looked like meat to me. That was then when I was still relapsing.

Now when I left a meeting I went to the grocery store and prayed that the cute checkout guy, Joshua, wasn't at the registers when I went to pay. He usually was and he always waved me over to his lane. Whenever there was meat around, my senses heightened in a way that was almost god-like. Like I was something omniscient. I thought I could hear the hairs growing out of my head or how Joshua's pulse picked up when he saw me. Like a creature, I could sense it.

"Hey, Ophelia," he says. "Did you find everything you were looking for?"

I couldn't answer that question out loud so I thought it. *Now, I have.*

"Yes," I say. "Thank you."

We didn't make small talk, but we couldn't keep our eyes from roaming around the planes of each other's bodies. I could feel my body getting itself ready. I wouldn't describe it as adrenaline. It was something more than that. I tried not to focus on it because if I did the images of Laz came back into my head. Could he smell how I was made from graveyard dirt? How no matter how long ago I'd gone to visit them, their dirt was still under my fingernails? I think to myself, *Is it worth it for the release? Is it worth his life?*

"10.83," he says.

Everything comes back to me and I'm still in the grocery store. He's still alive. I give him my money and I wonder what his microfiche images would look like burned into my brain. He smiles at me and he is lovely and I think, *It might be worth it.*

~ ~ ~

I drink wine and I sit in front of my full-length mirror with my legs open. My opening looks fine. The skin around it is normal. I like the way it looks. I think I've always had a kind of preoccupation with it since I was a kid. I masturbated at a young age even before I knew what it really was.

I gave my first blowjob when I was thirteen. First handy at twelve. Once I was watching the news with my mother and some white man who'd been convicted of raping Black girls around my age told the judge that Black girls matured faster than white girls. I wondered if that was true, but I didn't ask my mother. I think that was when I realized my hole wasn't like hers. Could it be filled with flowers and money? I realized then that there was already something out there to fill it up. There was no stopping this invasion. I decided I'd make my hole my mouth instead. The other one, I wanted to keep for myself. Like the gypsies, I called this the "The Great Trick."

I became Ophelia with an open mouth with a tongue I kept behind my teeth. I offered them my mouth. I decorated it with colors that matched me in between my legs. They wouldn't know the difference. I painted my mouth dark brown, nude colors, dark pinks. I made my own colors and the boys didn't even realize I'd duped them. I'd cheated them out of my real opening. And the boys were grateful for it each time they baptized me. When they sprayed it across my face, I was christened. *Hail Mary full of cum.*

They made the "O" face. They made the "O" with their mouths and they said my name. And I stopped them there. I pushed them back. Let them cool off. Kissed them with my mouth open. Let them touch me how they liked over my clothes with their boy hands.

But men. Men became accustomed to a woman's wiles. Couldn't be duped like boys were. When men made the "O" face, the "O" was for orifice. My mouth wasn't their favorite opening.

They saw through my lip colors. They felt around for the real thing and when they found it, they died inside of it.

~ ~ ~

“You have to kill what doesn’t serve you, ladies,” Lisa-Joanne says. I’m at the second meeting in two weeks and I still can’t stop thinking about Joshua. I can’t sit with my legs closed because I’ve rubbed myself raw. Lisa-Joanne is standing in front of the group wearing the same outfit she wears every time we meet, but she’s changed her hair today. She’d flat-ironed it and it’s longer now. When she turns, I can see the pieces she missed curling under the straighter hair.

“I went to take a drink and I saw Jesus shaking his head at me,” she says. Tears form in the corners of her eyes and for a moment she is almost pretty. “He was so disappointed in me. I sent back the drink and ordered a seltzer water instead.”

We all clap and Lisa-Joanne pretends to be humbled by her experience. From this vantage point, the flickering light above Lisa-Joanne’s head is something like a counterfeit halo. The God in her is striking the devil in her and I’m fairly certain that she doesn’t believe in either of them because when you’re an addict, you only believe in the addiction. Lisa-Joanne is too afraid to let it all go because who is she without it? After all, who am I without this opening?

“Thank you, Joanne,” we all say, except I fuck it up by saying Lisa.

“Ophelia,” Lisa-Joanne says to me. “Would you like to share?”

I stand and this time, I’ve worn a tight dress instead of a low-cut shirt. I’m pretty sure that Lisa-Joanne might be into me because she looks at me like I’m the drink she sent back.

“Sure,” I say. “So, there’s this guy that works at the grocery store and I’m probably going to end up fucking him and I know I shouldn’t but I probably will because it’s sort of killing me not to, ya know?”

“Uh, Ophelia, this is a group for women dedicated to *recovery* not passive acceptance,” Lisa-Joanne says.

“Shut up, Lisa,” I say. “Anyway, it’s not passive acceptance. I’m a realist. I’m an animal. I have needs, Lisa. We all have needs. So, fuck this shit.”

I don’t actually say any of that, but when I stand to give my testimony I instead say, “I just wish someone would make me come. Is that so hard to ask?”

I don’t wait for them to tell me to leave before I gather my stuff up into my arms. I know I won’t be welcome back into the group. The women all look at me with varying degrees of judgement. I know that’s their real addiction.

I wink at Lisa-Joanne on my way out and I could have sworn I saw her shiver in her worn out sweater. For a moment, she was almost pretty when she cried. I wondered if she knew that. I wondered if she knew that her opening was in her eyes. If I had looked at her for a few more minutes, I would have seen chrysanthemums growing from her eye sockets. Decoration for her skull.

~ ~ ~

“Is it here?” I asked my mother pointing to my ear.

She laughed at me back when she was still able to laugh. “No, it’s not your ear.”

“Where then?” the television was still on and we were watching the tail end of the news. I could hear my father putting the leftovers in Tupperware containers in the kitchen.

“Fi,” she said. She knew I hated that nickname. “You’ll know where yours is when you get older.”

“I wanna know now,” I said. “I want to cover it up.”

“It is covered,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Ma, where is my hole?” I asked louder.

“Shh,” she said. She looked down at me. Her keen nose was so much smaller than mine. I’d inherited my father’s big nose. She had the sharpest features, but she was so beautiful. Even with her hair in her nighttime scarf. I’d wanted to look exactly like her. I still do even now.

She moved closer to me. “We all start out with it in the same place, but sometimes it moves. It migrates. When you get old, no one notices it anymore. Men don’t even see it where it used to be. Now they see it in your mouth. You’re mouth that is always nagging them. Or your eyes when you’re too emotional. They just want to see it filled by them or closed. That’s how they like to see it. Okay?”

That night I looked for my mine, but I still couldn’t find it. I looked everywhere and I couldn’t find my opening. I even thought at that young age that it might have migrated right off my body. “She’s a liar,” I said turning off my flashlight from under my covers. “A liar.”

~ ~ ~

After my premature exit at the meeting, I roll around town trying to avoid the places where I'm most tempted. I have a coffee at the shop near the park and then I find myself in the parking lot of the grocery store.

And there's Joshua sweeping near the automatic doors at the front of the store. I press my palms against the glass. He smiles at me. I motion for him to come outside. I've never been great at small talk. I wait for him to finish sweeping.

He sneaks out the back and there are almost no words exchanged when we start kissing. I always let myself be swept away by this false intimacy with men. I let them fall into my orbit. He presses me against the cinder block wall. I for the first time in a while I feel weightless. I feel like I am not dragging eight bodies behind me with every step. Right now, I'm alone. The only bodies that matter are these bodies in motion. These bodies in the throes of life right now. Joshua kisses me like I thought he would. Softly, but with some kind of stinging. He is aching when I touch him.

"Let's go to your car," I say.

"It's parked around back," he says.

I race him to the car and we laugh because it feels good to do that too. We get into the car and he lets the seat back. I climb onto his lap. He touches me everywhere with my clothes on. He pushes the crotch of my underwear to the side and he's inside me before I realize we are both breathing harder. Guilt lives in this moment. In the moment when I remember that they won't survive me. But what I need lives here too.

I cling to his neck and I control the pulse for once. I'm taking more than I give. I grind into him and he's starting to make the "O" face already. I slow down and then I start to feel him. Really

feel him. And I feel myself cresting over something. I feel myself approaching the edge, but he's making the face. "O" is for orgasm.

"Don't," I say against his neck. "Not until I come."

"I'm coming," he says. "I usually last longer than this."

And then I feel him clenching. He grabs my thighs. I speed up.

"I'm almost there," I say. "Don't!"

I pull his face to mine and when he comes, the image imprints behind my eyes. And then he's gone. His breathing is shallow and then it's gone.

He makes nine.

I wonder what his gravestone will look like. And I'm full of him, but not full. I hit his chest. I beat his chest.

"Why can you enjoy this but I can't?" I ask him. "Don't I deserve this? If I have to live with it after don't I deserve this?"

He doesn't answer me. The life has gone from his eyes and his husk stares into the expanse of the windshield. He is still hard inside me. I shift to get off of him and it still feels like before when he was still alive. The skin is losing warmth, but he's still hard.

I move up and down on him. I keep going. I deserve this. I grip his stiff neck and I work myself back up to the edge. And as I am coming, I feel something open and my wetness washes over him. I am coming and *Yes, this is worth it.*

And he has breath again in that moment. He is breathing again. He hardens inside me more and I ride him until my legs are shaking. He holds me close to him and I look at him, at his pale face getting its color back.

“That was...I’ve never felt anything like that,” he says to me. “One minute I was here and you felt amazing and then it was dark. Did I pass out or something?”

I say nothing. When my breathing returns to normal, I climb off him and get out of the car. I leave him with his pants undone and with the strangest smile on his face. He calls after me, but I don’t listen to him because the sound of my own pulse is almost too much.

~ ~ ~

I carry a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a shovel in the other. I jump the fence of the cemetery and find the gravestone of the last guy I killed. His grave is in the clearing near the big tree. His soil is still kind of fresh from a few months ago. The grass hasn’t grown all the way over him yet.

I plunge the shovel into the soil and dig until I hit wood. I’ll dig them up. I’ll dig them all up and they’ll make good on what they owe me.

3. IN WHICH WE ARE FAMILIARS

This section contains “The Last Mujina” and “The Absconding Swarm.”

The Last Mujina

The last reported sighting of a Mujina was in 1959 in Honolulu, Hawaii at the Waialae Drive-In Theatre in the women’s restroom.

~ ~ ~

The call comes in around ten minutes to six and I hope it’s my dad. Though, he doesn’t usually call long distance. The phone rings and I think about what I’d say to him. He’d probably say, *Did I wake you up?* and I’d say, *I’m already awake.* I have a hard time sleeping when I’m alone in the house. The walls seem to move or maybe it’s just the way my shadows mimic me. These things distract me from sleep. And, then the insomnia.

I lay in bed and watch the sun crest over the tops of trees. The phone’s still ringing. The A/C coughs lukewarm air through the vents. I listen to the birds strum up their racket outside the window. I start not answer it, but I’ve always had this irrational fear that something terrible will happen the one time I don’t. That it will be something real like a chance to be on a cringy reality show or someone I know has a flat tire and they need me to come and get them. That someone I know has died by gunfire, car crash, drowning.

“Hello,” I say into the receiver expecting a fake trip to some exotic island. Instead, the voice of my mother.

“Moriko,” she says. Her voice is sterner than I remember. “It’s your mother calling.”

“I know your voice,” I say sitting up.

She pauses for a moment, lets silence stretch there.

“Okasan?” I say. I should have called her “ofukuro¹.”

Her Japanese is faster than mine. Faster than I remember. “Your father is ill.”

She’s so uppity. So, *official* when she talks to me. I sit all the way up. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she says. “He was in a meeting and he passed out. He’s mostly been sleeping. They released him from the hospital because his vitals are stable.”

I feel that tension in my chest, the same tension I felt when he told me he was leaving for Osaka a couple of weeks ago. Osaka is the farthest he’s ever gone from me. We’ve been a lot of places together. Taken a few trips to Sweden, the Netherlands, Nairobi. We spent our summers on foreign soil because Hawaii was always bloated with tourists in the summer months.

“He’s staying with me and Hideo now,” my mother says. “So, no reason for you to come.”

Hideo, the magician².

Whatever magic Hideo had in him, my mother was compelled by it or maybe it was just how nice his suits were. Then again, she’s always been good at hiding her real face. Hideo, the magic man and my mother, the illusionist.

“Why isn’t he staying at the hospital?” I ask.

¹ My mother explained it to me like this once when I was little before I really learned the language. We argued about boys calling the house too late at night and I called her “ofukuro.” I’d heard Japanese boys on the island call their mothers that. I knew it was something. “You call me ‘okasan,’” she said. “Only boys have the right to be vulgar to their mothers.”

² Someone who comes to Honolulu a decade ago on business and leaves the island with something that doesn’t belong to him. Most common thing taken: Mothers.

My mother exhales into the receiver. She sounds bored. "I'm paying by the minute for this call, Moriko, so can we stick to the important parts?"

"Yeah," I say. I take a breath. I'm never bold with my mother. "Well, I'm coming there."

She sorta snorts. "No need. A doctor is coming to check him out tomorrow and I'll call you when I know more."

I stand up. Straighten my shoulders. I will be bold with my mother. "I'm coming, so you won't have to call me. When can I leave?"

"It's not necessary," she says.

"I'm coming," I say. I feel a great unsettling raising in me. I think of my father. "I need to be with him."

My mother doesn't say anything for a while. I can hear other people in the background. It's busy wherever she is. A lot of times, I catch myself imagining what she's doing. I imagine her in cafes or nice restaurants. And then I imagine her with Hideo. I am sick when I imagine this. I've never seen the man except for the occasional Christmas card with their faces inside a Christmas wreath.

"Aren't you paying by the minute?" I ask. I shut my eyes and wait for her to thwack me on the head with her wooden spoon. Like somehow, she can reach me all the way from there.

"Respect me," she says. In her mother tongue, my mother has a silver tongue. She's direct and even a little arrogant. In English, she's compliant. Not as confident in what she says. So, she speaks in Japanese most of the time. Now, she isn't speaking at all.

I say nothing.

“Fine,” she says. “I’ll buy you a ticket. You can leave tomorrow.”

I say nothing.

“Pack enough for a week,” she says. “What you don’t pack, we’ll buy.”

“Has he asked me for me?”

She laughs real dry and then says, “Why do you think I’m calling?”

~ ~ ~

I do my eye makeup like the girls do theirs in Japan, but I look silly. A phony in pastels. The shades Japanese girls use don’t go with my skin. Pastel pinks make black skin look clownish. I am Moriko the clown. The girls in Japan try to make their eyes look bigger. I try to make mine look smaller. I want to lose my eyelids too. I get my hair chemically straightened and then cut into fringe bangs at the salon. The girl asks me a few times if I was sure that’s what I want. I say, “Yes.” I say, “Can we lighten it too?”

~ ~ ~

My flight lands at Kobe Airport just before dinnertime. I sleep through most of the flight and I open my eyes in time to watch our descent onto the artificial island. I gather my bags from the carousel, and immediately I notice how I tower over everyone. And then the looks. Strange stares and side-eye from other passengers near the baggage claim. I watch colorful luggage snake around the conveyor belt. I do not look back at anyone.

Some people look as if they are awe of me like they've just encountered some foreign goddess and they aren't sure how to pray to her. Others may look at me with a mixture of worry and something else unreadable, but they all wear uneasiness on their faces like papier-mache masks. Or maybe it's my face that's stuck in an unreadable mode. My lips that are pressed into a hard line. I am a girl. I am a girl with a body. I am a foreign body.

I'm not particularly tall, but in Japan I am a giantess. My arms are too long. My legs could climb over everyone else. Black Godzilla³, if you like. If I have to be Godzilla, think I can play that part. I just have to learn to screech. Yes, I can be a kaiju. A creature still learning how to scream.

~ ~ ~

My mother sends Hideo for me. He holds up a sign that says "Ikeda Moriko" on it near the entrance. He is taller than most people I've seen. Taller than me and with a sort of stoniness that makes him look like he's considering something. I wave a little, not too eager. This is Hideo the magic man after all. He will not for a second think that I am comfortable with him. Hideo was my mother's husband. Houdini in dress slacks.

He puts my bags into the car and we exchange hellos. He is nicer than I pictured him and he smiles more when he talks than I thought he would. He's got some kind of charm about him that makes me feel funny if I think about it too long. Is this his trick of choice?

"Your mother wanted to be the one to get you, but Shirou asked for her to stay with him,"

Hideo says.

³ Once me and my mother watched Godzilla in black and white. My mother smoked her cigarette and then she said, "I never understood why the monster's skin is so black. It was white people that dropped the bomb on us." (circa 1990)

I look out the window as the cosmopolitan parts of Kobe drift farther away. We're headed into the country parts where trees strangle the landscape. Hideo's car, with its heated leather seats, takes the backroads smoothly.

"He's doing okay," he says after a few minutes of silence. "Your dad."

I say nothing. I watch trees blur by, a smear of hunter green fills up the window.

Hideo says nothing and he turns up the music a little. I can feel him looking over at me every once in a while. He fixes his lips to speak, but he doesn't say anything else until we're way into the countryside and central Kobe is a distant thought. He wears a nice button up shirt. His hair is parted on the left side and smoothed down. He's handsome. He's got an expensive watch and a wedding band on his finger. This is my mother's husband. I think about biting off his finger with my teeth.

~ ~ ~

My mother's house can eat ours two times and still have room. Hideo's car careens up the long driveway and the house takes up more surface area in the windshield. I feel sick. I haven't seen my mother in twelve years. I mean, I've seen her, but just impressions of her. I've seen her in photos. She sends me postcards whenever she goes on trips. Writes me these little riddles that take me until I get the next one to solve.

I never write her back, but I practice writing like her because the way she put words on paper is like something in old war movies when women wrote letters to their men in the trenches. My mother's handwriting is from wartimes.

But that isn't her. These are her silhouettes. And here is Hideo, having been loved by her for over a decade now and still in one piece. And there is my father, blown apart at impact. My father wasn't made to withstand her. She is something from wartimes.

"Your mother made dinner," Hideo says. "She's been cooking all day."

I say nothing. He helps me get my stuff out of the car.

"I wish it were under different circumstance, but it's good to meet you," he says this to me in English. He doesn't know that Japanese is my mother('s) tongue. He doesn't know it's my mother's tongue in my mouth. That this is her doing. I switch to Japanese. "It's very good to meet you."

I bow my head to him a little. He bows back.

~ ~ ~

I stand in the entrance of the house watching Hideo take off his shoes. I look for the house slippers. He watches me, wondering whether I know this. Wondering whether growing up in America has taken my mother's customs from me. These customs I've inherited from her that should never have been taught to me. These customs that did not belong to me, but they are in my body. In my bones. In my mouth.

I take off my shoes and his brow unclenches. He hopes I don't see this relief wash over his face.

"I'll go in my socks," he says scooting a pair of slippers over to me.

This house is made in the traditional style. The floor is paneled and each room is separated by opaque sliding doors. This house looks like our house back in Hawaii. The color scheme is the same, the only difference is that it is bigger and hollower. So, she brought our home across the sea?

“Your mother insisted on traditional-style,” Hideo says. “The only place that looks like it’s from this century is my office.”

“Where is my mother?” I ask.

“With Shirou,” he says. “Last room down the long hall on the left. Next to the bathroom.”⁴

~ ~ ~

I run my fingers over the doors and the walls. Shoji. My mother used to tell me stories about these translucent doors. The house my mother grew up in never had traditional Japanese doors, but her grandmother’s house did. She told me about how she used to watch the shadows go across them like a puppet show. That she liked those kinds of doors best because there was just no telling what you’d see on the other side.

Soft light glows behind some of the doors that makes this a hall of paper lanterns. Hideo disappears upstairs and leaves me to roam around the house in house slippers that are a bit too small for my feet. I pass five rooms before I get to the one my father’s in and then there’s a quickening in my chest. It feels like a hummingbird beating against my ribcage. This bird, enclosed in fences made of my ribs. Will he be pale?

⁴ Bob Krauss, a reporter for *Honolulu Advertiser* reported that an eye witness was using the women’s restroom at the Waialae Drive-In Theatre when the witness saw another woman in the bathroom combing her hair. The witness reportedly got close enough to the woman and when the woman turned to the witness, the woman had no face.

I walk silently. It was my father who taught me to move lightly upon the ground⁵. I walk further into the room and I see my mother sleeping on a chair in the corner with a small blanket covering her legs. Most people when sleeping look more peaceful, but my mother looks sweeter when she's awake. When she sleeps, she can't control her face.

My father looks the same sleeping as he does awake. Like something painful has blown through him. Like underneath his shirt will be a basketball-sized hole where my mother once was. I wonder what they looked like before Hideo. I can't remember because I was too young to know all those times they laughed together were as the ticking of a timer winding down. And like nuclear war, our implosion was inevitable.

I hear Hideo's quick feet coming down the stairs. He says something, but I can't hear what he said. It sounded like a curse. I hear the front door open and close. I hear my name.

"Moriko," my father says.

"Moriko," says my mother.

My mother stands when she sees me. She's never done that before. Why start now? She lets the blanket fall to her feet like she's forgotten about the thing. I bow to her and she bows back. Her bow is lower than mine, but we both pretend we don't notice. I realize she looked different in the pictures she sends. Less statuesque. In front of me, she looks the same as the day she left us on the island.

Her hair is curled in that 1940s-style she always wears and she wears red lipstick. My father says she pretends to be from wartimes. That she's always existed in a time separate from me and

⁵ My father tells me this is how he learned to be an invisible man.

Dad. She still paints her nails red too. That same shade that she'd told me I couldn't wear because it didn't go with my skin tone. She doesn't smile at me. She just stands in suspended animation looking back at me, my father's bed in between us. I go to my father. He's clutching the duvet in his hands and he pulls me into him. I hug him harder than I ever had. For a few moments, I forget she's in the room.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," my mother says.

She leaves me with my father. His hands are shaky. He's sweaty above his lip.

"You should have let me come with you," I say.

"I'm regretting it already," he says. "When I was on the plane I was thinking about what would happen if that was the last time I'd see you. I don't know why I thought that this time."

I hug him again. "What happened?"

"I dunno. One minute I was giving my presentation and the next your mother is standing over me. I thought she was a demon in the ambulance. And I saw you standing near me when they were putting me in, but you weren't grown like you are now. You were a little girl again. It made me think about when I first saw you. That day at the adoption clinic when you were sitting with the nurses at the nurses' station coughing your lungs out."

I look past my father's face. I play with a loose strand of thread on the duvet. "I don't remember you there."

“Your hair was in a ponytail. Ducks on your hospital gown,” he says. “You were breathing so hard, but you just, you breathed. And then you coughed. And you breathed again. You were so determined to breathe. I said to myself ‘that’s my kid.’”

I don’t know what to say when he talks about the adoption. I don’t like being reminded that I didn’t come from him. That our DNA was different. Our skins. He likes to remind me that he didn’t choose me. That I chose him. But I know what choosing me had meant for my father. I know my grandmother and grandfather haven’t spoken to him since 1991. I was adopted in 1991. I know what it all meant for him. That’s why I chose him when my mother called me years after she’d left Hawaii. She asked me to come live with her. But I chose him. I don’t have any room left for my mother in me.

~ ~ ~

We eat dinner mostly in silence. Hideo comes down late because he’s packing for his business trip in the morning. He’ll be gone for five days, he says.

My father takes his meal in his room. My mother and I spend the first ten minutes spooning food onto our plates and the rest of the time, we ignore each other. Our silence is different from the silence that I had with Hideo in the car. This is a pure silence. A sentient silence borne out of fear, of not wanting to say the wrong thing, of thinking food will be better than the conversation. This is a silence made of mothers and daughters.

“This is good,” Hideo says awkwardly. He takes another bite. He smiles at my mother and my mother chews harder and slower than she ever has before and so do I. I will not hurry off. I will make her face me.

“The doctor will come see him tomorrow,” my mother says.

I nod. I look at Hideo. He’s handsome, well off, looks younger than my mother, and still used a napkin tucked into his shirt as to not stain his good shirt.

I look at the house. The beautiful walls, the opaque doors, this nice table my dinner is resting on. I am eating my mother’s cooking. It tastes like the twelve years between us. I look down at the taro in my bowl. I pick one up with my fork. Bite into it. I chew it for so long my jaw starts to hurt. I wonder the if I am savoring the taste of the taro or the taste of my mother.

~ ~ ~

After dinner, I read on the back porch and my mother interrupts me one chapter in. She lifts a potted plant up that’s by the door and pulls a plastic bag with cigarettes and a lighter out.

“Want one?” she asks me.

“No,” I say. “It’ll kill you.”

“*It’ll kill you,*” she says. “That’s what everyone says. But has anyone who says that ever see anyone they know die from it?”

She lights one and takes a long drag. “I’ve always wondered that.”

I say nothing. I read my book.

“Hideo doesn’t like when I smoke,” she says. “Told me he’d leave me if I

I shrug. Why is she telling me this?

“Hideo says your ride from the airport was pleasant. I’m a little disappointed,” she says. “I expected a little attitude.”

I say nothing.

“Then I thought of how you are my daughter and how you live with a closed mouth,” she says. “I sometimes think of how Ikeda Aiko—”

She points at herself, “—could have only given birth to a daughter who lived with open mouth.”

She still claims my father’s last name?

I say nothing. I grip my book harder. I want to tell her how I could never have been birthed by someone who’s mouth only knows how to tell lies.

“You sounded bold on the phone,” she says. “Where’s that girl?”

I shut my book hard. I turn to look at her. I imagine a million war crimes committed on her body. I imagine my mother being blow apart by walking through a minefield. How would you like to be blow apart, Ikeda Aiko?

She takes another drag and then puts out her cigarette in the potted plant. “Who taught you how to be so demure? Aren’t you an American girl?” she laughs. “You really are Ikeda Shirou’s daughter.”

“Good night,” I say getting up. “Ofukuro⁶.”

⁶ “ofukuro,” deriving from “fukuro” meaning “bag” or “sack.” Historically, in Japan mothers maintained the money and possessions of the family in bags. The bags hold things that are sacred. Historically, mothers carry us in their wombs/boxes/pussies/vaginas/bags/amniotic sacs/souls. Thus, my mother is an old bag.

~ ~ ~

Today, me and my mother drive into town to pick up eggs and milk for breakfast. My father is sleeping, so we leave him there wrapped up in all his blankets. We explore town for a little while, Mom buys street food and we have tea at a bistro that's just been built. The place is called Midori's and they have good tea.

We don't talk much and I don't know why she asked me to come with her. She just looks at me over the rim of her tea. I look at her hands. They are so delicate. They look different wrapped around a wooden spoon. Some of the patrons look at us, but she doesn't seem to notice.

I go up to the counter for another cup and the guy at the counter asks me in English, *Are you African?* I tell him I'm American. That seems easier. He smiles and I start to think he's sexy. He has smooth lips and light brown eyes.

He tells me his name is Hitoshi then he asks, *You want to come hang out with me and my friends?* I'm surprised by this. I look back at my mother who's watching from the table. I tell him yes. He writes down his phone number. He tells me he gets off work in four hours. He asks me to wait for him.

"Make a new friend?" Mom asks me when I come back to the table.

"He just wants to hang out," I say.

"Well, are you?"

"I guess," I say. "He gets off in four hours."

"You've got time to kill," she says.

She shows me her favorite book store. She buys me a comic book. She picks up some medicine for Dad because somehow, he's developed a cough overnight. We walk close to each other but we don't talk. I know that we won't talk about why she left. That's not the kind of story this is. It's not one where we come to some great understanding of each other. We don't reunite at the end of this story. I wonder if I've ever really felt close to her. If her ovaries hadn't been septic, she would have had a kid on her own. I sometimes feel that kid in between us.

I catch her looking at me when she thinks I don't notice. She's looking at me like I'm a minefield. Like she's waiting to step in the wrong place.

We take the long way back to the car through the park and I can't help but think that every man who passed us by has known my mother in the same way my father and Hideo have. I keep looking at their faces and picturing them in peculiar sexual positions. This makes me sick. And the heat makes me feel sick.

I put the bags in the car and Mom says, "Want me to come back and get you tonight?"

"I'll take a taxi," I say.

She gives me money for cab fare and I realize that she has a lot of money and no one to spend it on. I wait until she's out of sight and I double back to the bistro.

~ ~ ~

Hitoshi only wants to speak in English and I only want to speak in Japanese. His English is pretty good. My Japanese is better than his English.

“How is your Japanese so good?” he asks me. His accent isn’t as heavy as Hideo’s is when he speaks English. He tells me my Japanese is almost flawless. He says it with this kind of slant to his mouth like he’s being slick about something. Like there’s a secret just there, in the corner of his lip.

“My parents are Japanese,” I tell him. “I’m adopted.”

He looks at me. Tilts his head to one side. “My sister has the same bangs as you.”

We walk through the streets of Kobe and I decide I don’t want to remind him of his sister. Who wants to get a blowjob from their sister? I look at Hitoshi and I decide I want to give him a blowjob. I want to know how Japanese boys taste. I lick my teeth inside my mouth. I flick my tongue over my canines.

We talk about the roads. They are so clean. No trash on them anywhere. We talk about the red-light District in Tokyo. He says he can show me sometime. Tells me he can show me Aokigahara forest where people go to kill themselves. I tell him fine, but I don’t want to visit Hiroshima and Nagasaki because I’ve seen enough bombs go off. I feel stupid comparing myself to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as soon as I say it. Then he looks at me, holds my hand for a second and he tells me I look like I’ve seen a war. I tell him about how I’m from Hawaii and how war is just all I’ve known. That I belong to two soils⁷ that have both seen war.

Neon lights buzz in windows of a few places that are still open. Hitoshi stops inside of a convenience store and buys us beers, and he almost squeals when he sees salted peanuts on the shelf.

⁷ souls.

“There’s never salted peanuts,” he says.

He buys them and other things he thinks Americans will like. I don’t tell him I have a peanut allergy. I don’t eat the peanuts.

He takes me back to his apartment and I expect to see some of his friends there, but I find an empty loft decorated like a piece of found art. There are busted tires acting as chairs on the floors, messed up street signs drilled into the wall, a nice couch, and Christmas lights strung from the ceiling. I imagine myself living in an apartment like this. Big widow looking out over the city. Kissing boys on this couch. Inviting people back for a drink. Speaking Japanese to them and then impressing them with my English. Hiding my face enough so that they can’t see that I don’t belong here.

We talk for a while and then he puts on a cheesy romance movie. He tells me about how Meg Ryan⁸ is his favorite actress and he’s seen every movie she’s ever been in. I watch Meg Ryan’s shiny face go across the screen. I ask him if he has a horror film. He says Japan has the scariest horror films. Turns out Hitoshi is a chickenshit and he can’t watch scary movies because they give him nightmares.

We hang out on his couch and I move closer to him. I’m waiting for him to kiss me and then he asks me if I have any pretty friends in America and I tell him no. I tell him I don’t have any friends. And he says, *now you do* then he kisses me. His lips are chapped and he gives me tongue before I’m ready and I lick his teeth and then I bite down on his spongy little tongue. I taste a little blood in my mouth. He pushes me away.

⁸ He keeps getting Meg Ryan and Reese Witherspoon confused when we talk about them. He thinks all white women look the same.

“Itai!” he says. That’s the first bit of Japanese he’s spoken all night. He scoots away from me and touches his tongue where I bit him.

“Sorry,” I say.

He curses and he says he’s heard Black girls are crazy. He calls me crazy. I look out the window and he keeps talking and I imagine myself as a kaiju stomping through the streets of Kobe, having finally learned to screech. I imagine my mother there on the ground, barely the size of a small doll. I tower over her with my teeth dripping spit onto her head. It’s as rain to her. She covers her head with an umbrella.

I pick her up, play with her in my claws, and then put her in my mouth. I let her roll around in my jaws. I show her how I’ve grown teeth.

I eat my mother.

For the first time, she’s inside me. I feel her next to my heart.

Then Hitoshi is hollering at me. *What are you doing! Don’t touch that!*

I stomp around his apartment, I knock his shit all over the place because I am a clumsy Kaiju. My legs are still new. I see an elaborate set up of action figures sitting in the corner. I hate when men play with toys! I really hate when they do that!

I stomp around the apartment and I screech and I scream. I open my mouth wide and I let all the air in and then I suck all of the air out of the room. Hitoshi stares at me from the couch. His face is so unreadable. I wonder if this is that first time he’s ever had an American girl over to his place. I’m not Meg-fucking-Ryan. No Reese Witherspoon here.

I throw his action figures on the ground. I crush them under my boot into the floor. I dislocate a little arm and I pick it up and I throw it across the room. I am still hungry even though I've eaten my mother already. And it feels so good to devour something because I've been eaten up by her for so long! I wish I could throw her back up just so I can eat her again! And I realize that I've lost control, but I don't know how to get it back. It's something like a bloodlust because I've tasted blood now and I want more. Now, I see why Carrie did what she did in that gym with all that pig's blood.

Get out! He's only talking in Japanese now. He screams at me to get out. I throw the window open and I throw my head out the window and I yell into the night. I say, *I've finally learned how to scream! Look at me! See me! Hear me! I Am. Coming. For. You.*

~ ~ ~

I catch a cab to my mother's house and all the while I'm thinking of which civilization I will destroy next. My mother's room? Her kitchen? Hideo's office?

I think back to Hitoshi's apartment. I left it in ruins. Him finally speaking Japanese to me even if only to tell me to get out. I heard him call me a monster on the other side of the door as I left. I laugh to myself when I think about him looking scared. Then I'm gnashing my teeth in the back seat of the cab. I should have been a monster for him. A Leviathan. A Colossus. I should have been an alien bursting from his chest. A genesis. A new species. For all I knew, I was a thing coming into a new life cycle. A larva pupating. A girl inside me waiting to become something else... entirely.

~ ~ ~

I leave my shoes outside the door and imagine I've just sloughed off another skin. This skin feels fresh. Exposed. I let myself into the house. Most of the lights are out except for a couple of dim hallway lights, so I feel for the wall. It's maybe half past three and I wonder why I let Hitoshi talk for so long. He was cute and funny, but by the time he went in for the kiss, I wasn't in the mood. My foot was already out the door.

I'm coming down the hall and I hear a sort of tapping coming from my father's room. A tapping with no pauses. My father's door is mostly closed, but with a little sliver open that lets some light escape. I look into the sliver and I see my mother on top of my father, her dress hiked up around the waist. The headboard knocks against the wall producing the sound. My father grabs her and pulls her closer to him.

I take a step back and my heel makes a small sound on the floor. My mother freezes and turns her head to me then. Where her face should have been, there is a veil of flesh, featureless and blank. My stomach lurches and she turns back to my father. I blink my eyes hard. I see that her hand is over his eyes. She says something to him that makes him shudder. She carries on. I hear him breathing hard. How much weed did I smoke? Am I imagining my mother with no face? Or is she just incomprehensible? Is this just a trick of the moon coming through the skylight? Or is this illusion work?

~ ~ ~

I try not to look at my mother when she moves around the house. We avoid each other like two magnets at their southern poles. We've always repelled each other naturally. She sticks to my father like they are North and South and I wait for her face to fall off in her lap at breakfast. But her face stays intact.

“You just have to have everything and everyone all the time, don’t you?” I say eating the last bite of eggs.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

I stand. “Do it in your own room next time.”

She looks bored. She’s tired of having me here. “Do what?”

~ ~ ~

That night, I fall asleep reading. I feel the book slide off some time in the night and then I feel the bed’s being pressed down on the other side, a weight there that makes me shift over to give it room. I do this in the dregs of sleep.

I feel a hand slip underneath my back. The touch I feel here crosses over into dreaming. In my dream, I am being felt up by a guy in my biology class. We’d bonded over both having Japanese parents, that was where we departed too. I thought of how happy it might make my grandparents if I could give them a half-Japanese grandchild. Something to dilute me. So, the touch feels like the guy from my biology class and I let it happen.

I feel the weight move from the other side of the bed on top of me and in my dream, me and Brian from biology are doing an exercise in making life right on the lab table. Then I feel the cold. It fills me up and I open my eyes to see if I’ve left the window open. And when I open my eyes, Hideo is on top of me pulling down my shorts. How is he here? He left for Tokyo three days ago. Is this like last night. I try to look at his face, but his head is buried in the crook of my neck. I try to push him off, but he’s heavy. Solid.

“What are you doing? Get off me!”

He’s a slab of solid rock on top of me. He pulls my shorts down and I beat his back with my hands. I scream for my father and I scream for my father and I scream for my mother and I scream for my mother and I scream—

My father wakes up in the next room. “Moriko! What is it?”

“Get off me!” I don’t think I’ve ever screamed as loud as I did then. I push at his weight. He unfastens his belt and unbuttons his pants. He feels in between my legs, his fingers cold like stones.

My father struggles to his feet in the other room. He says my name.

“Aiko!” He screams for my mother.

I beat Hideo in his ribs and he puts his hand over my mouth.

My mother is thundering down the hall. I never knew a woman so small could shake the earth like she is now. I see her shadow getting bigger behind the sheer canvas door, but before she can open it, my father goes in front of her. He opens the door and he says, “Get away.”

Hideo freezes and turns to my father and I’ve never seen the look on my father’s face like the kind I saw then. His eyes go wide and I wish I could see Hideo’s face in the reflection of his irises. What kind of look did a man have when he did something like this?

He doesn’t say anything. He just lunges at Hideo. Grabs him by the back of the shirt and throws him to the floor. He holds him down and I cover myself with the blankets. And my father

is wailing on him. He's on top of him and he's hitting him so hard and so many times I think he'll kill him. For a moment, I want him to kill him.

Each time he hits Hideo, he sounds like something feral bludgeoning something in the wild. When I look over the side of the bed I see Hideo's body there, a cowering mass. And I see he has no face⁹. Smooth and blank. No mouth. No nose. No lips or eyes. I flinch when I see it.

"Don't you ever touch my daughter," my father says looking down at the faceless thing.

My father steps over the thing and he comes closer to me. We press our foreheads together and my father's breathing hard. I expect to see blood on his knuckles, but there is a white, sticky-looking goo there in between his knuckles. White goo pools under the thing's body and I know in that moment it's not Hideo, but I have to tell myself it is because what else could be haunting us? What else wants us apart?

He drags the thing into the hallway, pushing my mother out of his way. She stands there holding the wall, holding herself. The front of her robe is open at her collarbone. One of her bare breasts almost hangs out. She looks white in the face.

By the time he's dragged the thing into the hallway, it looks like me. Its form has changed and there lies a body that looks like mine but without its face. The thing clutches some of my hair in its palm like it was an offering. Like it needed it from me.

My mother looks at my father and he looks back at her and then he grabs her around her shoulders. He shakes her, he shakes her so hard I almost tell him to stop, but I know he has to do

⁹ The witness that saw the last reported sighting of the Mujina said the Mujina had red hair.

this. She's silent. She's dumb tongued. She's never seen him like this. I've never seen him like this.

"What's wrong with his fucking face!"

~ ~ ~

I don't leave my room all day. I replay it over in my head. I kept looking for it to appear next as my father. Mom brings me breakfast later on and stands there until I finish eating it.

"I booked plane tickets," she says. "You're leaving tomorrow morning."

I eat the porridge she gave me. I'm sure it tastes good, but I can't really taste anything. She sits down beside me.

"Mom," I say.

"Don't worry about it," she says. "You'll be leaving soon. It won't bother you again."

I sip the porridge. "What do you mean 'it?'"

My mother puts her hands akimbo. She looks past me out the window. Tongues the inside of her cheek.

"Is it Hideo? Is he really a magician?" I ask.

"Don't be stupid," she says. "Of course, it's not Hideo. He's in Busan on business."

I say nothing.

"It's a thing," she says. "I don't know what it is. It just likes to scare people from time to time."

"It tried to," I start, but I'm not going to say it.

“At least it didn’t get to do it,” she says. “Not everyone has been that lucky.”

She looks out the window again. She says nothing to me. I reach for her hand, maybe out of instinct. Maybe out of instinct from one animal to another animal. She put her hands in her pockets. Then I feel something like rage going through me.

“You knew this thing was here and you let us stay here anyway?” I say.

“My mother told me stories about something like it when I was a kid,” she says. “Doesn’t matter. Hideo will be back tomorrow and it can be his problem again too.”

“You just live with it? Moving around the house?”

She plays with her wedding band. “I do. Usually it looks like you and your father.”

I imagine the thing doing horrible things to my mother. I don’t know how it makes me feel.

“How long has it been here?” I ask.

“That doesn’t matter,” she says. “You’re always wasting words, Moriko. Besides, at least I can’t see it’s face judging me. It either wants to hurt me or it wants to love me. Never anything in between that.” She pauses. “It’s what I deserve. To be haunted.”

“Was it you with Dad the other night?” I ask.

She smiles. “Probably not, but who’s to say?”

~ ~ ~

My mother drives us into central Kobe early in the morning and we watch the countryside blur by, a mix of green and rain. My parents hug for a long time and something tells me that my

mother is still the same as she's always been. Greedy and willing to push you away if she thought she wasn't good for you. Japan hasn't changed her. It's caged her.

She hugs me. She holds me there and I can't breathe, but I don't know if it's because she's squeezing me or because I haven't hugged her in twelve years. I squeeze her back. She carries Dad's luggage and pays for our bag fees.

"Call me when you touch down," she says. "Let's..."

She doesn't finish, but I know what she wants to say. She wants to say let's keep in contact. Then she realizes that I'm probably happier without her. That I chose my dad because he chose me.

We leave her at the terminal and take turns laying on each other's shoulders until our plane is here. When I get on the plane I search people's faces for their eyes and noses. I look for their mouths. Everything seems accounted for.

And I could have sworn that I saw my mother in one of the rows. After all, she is an illusionist.

The Absconding Swarm

People tell me I'm sweet-blooded. Poppa says that's why the bugs like me. They like to suck on my skin. To pull blood through their pipette mouths. Every time me and Tippiie lay out in the yard, the mosquitos are after me. We watch one circling around and I try and squash it with my hands, but it's already feasted on me. Pink spots come up on my skin and I'm scratching at them. They've already tasted me, so now I'm a part of them.

This morning me and Tippie lay out in the sun. We make grass stains in our dresses as we lay with the crowns of our heads pressed together. We do this most every day because this is how we share our thoughts. What with this pound of junk attached to our mouths, we had to figure out some way to tell secrets. Some way that the grownups couldn't understand.

I take a large sewing needle out of the top of my corset. I unwrap it from the piece of cloth and it shines in the sun, a glint catching on the length of it. It's the kind we use to sew seat cushions. Turns out it's good for small sacrifices of blood. This is our test. We lay with our heads touching. One of us pricks our finger to see if the other can feel it. If we can, our bond is still strong.

I never hesitate before I prick myself because I guess I think of it like one of bees stinging me. I imagine this needle tip coming out of the end of a worker bee. And I ain't never been scared of them, so why would I be scared of this? Been stung dozens of times since I was little.

I prick my finger and the pain flares a little. I wait for a moment, then I hear Tippie sniffing. We both sit up turning to each other. Her cheeks are wet. She can't handle even small pains like this. Complains about her period cramps every month. I haven't started mine yet. Tippie tells me I'll cry when I get mine too.

I look at her hands. She's holding the exact finger I pricked, so, I know the bond is strong. We smile at each other, then Momma rings the bell above the back door.

She's standing in the doorway waving us in. She signs to us. First to Tippie—*You're too old to be in the grass*—then to me—*Tend the bees*. Me and Tippie smile, but we can only see each other's eyes. I touch the metal across my mouth. The Quieten, it's called.

I look at Tippie's finger again, then at her Quieten. It's fastened to her mouth as if held there by suckling. She's beautiful underneath it though. She's got pretty lips and a small chin. She didn't get Poppa's cleft chin like me. She's soft looking like Momma, but she's built like Poppa. She has his shoulders, his muscly arms. Built strong like a stack of bricks, Poppa says.

I look back at Momma. She smiles at me. She was about my age when she got cut. Tippie's late to the marriage party. Something that Momma reminds us of all the time. Now I've got to get married younger than Tippie had to since she waited so long. I'll probably have to get cut younger than she'll have to too. She got three extra years which isn't that fair, but whatever. It's not really the pain I'm afraid of. It's choosing. Quieten or cutting. Quieten or culling. Quieten or cauterizing. I sometimes get stuck on sounds. On particular letters. I try to see how many other words I can come up with that go together. I haven't found one for Quieten yet.

I wonder what Tippie will choose? Will she visit Mr. Parsons and have him cut out her tongue? Poppa says this is a rite of passage. Momma says your face will feel better and it won't chafe anymore. I don't mind the chafing so much as I can't talk to my bees with the Quieten on. Every time I try to talk to them my words sound like a hum behind the metal. Almost like a buzzing. I sign to them too, but they have small eyes so who knows if they can see it. Poppa tended the bees before me. He said you have to talk to them. That you have to tell them when people die in the family or when someone gets married because if you don't they'll leave the hive.

He told the bees every time Momma was pregnant. Even told them when she lost the baby because I think he couldn't talk about it with anyone else. I used to see him crying out in the backyard a lot. Then one day he told me I had to take care of them for him. Never mind that I couldn't talk to them for the Quieten. He told me if I get cut they may be able to hear me better.

I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth. How will my mouth be without it? Will it be void? Will my tongue be like Pastor Kline's phantom leg, giving me pain during Sunday service?

Will I still be able to eat honey? Will I be able to swallow right? I sometimes look inside Momma's mouth when she's chewing or when she yawns and all I see for miles is blackness. Like a cave that goes on forever.

The sound of my bees brings me back to myself. Tippie helps me up. I wrap her finger in the piece of cloth. We part ways, her hair big and curly blowing around her face. Today is Tippie's Marriage Meeting. It's early, but she's already fully dressed in a muslin dress me and Momma sewed for her.

She's probably already helped Momma start with all the washing since we're having company today. The stuffy Parsons from next door are coming over for the Marriage Meeting. I think of Mr. Parsons and that bad toupee he's always wearing when he knows he should just shave his head. I wonder sometimes how Mrs. Parsons feels with him standing next to her and with her never being able to speak a word to tell him about that ugly toupee.

I dust myself off and walk over to the hive. The colony is alive, humming on some strange vibration that I almost feel like I can understand. Sometimes I lay out in the yard for hours listening to them buzzing. Their wings beating together to make the only sounds they can. I listen for something intelligible. I mine for Poppa's secrets. Even before the baby, we'd see him out here talking to them. He doesn't talk much to us. Momma says it's because he's told the bees everything he knows. Poppa gave me a leather journal with all his notes about bees in it. On the first page he lists a few things, among them: bees are messengers between this world and the next. I wonder if

they can give a message to Grandma Mazla. I try to talk to them, but the Quieten makes my words like a sieve with only fine grains of sound getting through.

Now, I'm supposed to tell them about Tippie getting married. I think of how to tell them. Should I sign to them? I watch them crawl over the honeycomb, their small bodies making revolutions around their queen. She'll be going for her mating flight soon, I suspect. She'll fly off into the air, a virgin queen, and mate with ten drones. She'll kill them all in the process, but she doesn't know it's murder. It's in her nature to kill.

When I read this in Poppa's journal, I'm a little ashamed to say, I start imagining myself as the Queen Bee of a hive. Sprouting gauzy wings and flying off into the sky. Ten men around me. Ready to die to be inside me. All that power and without ever speaking a word.

I don't tell the bees about Tippie's getting married because what do they care? They've got a mating to prepare for of their own.

I'll be your queen, I say behind my Quieten. It's muffled and I feel my lips vibrate against the metal.

I find Momma and Tippie stirring a big pot on the stove with bed sheets in it.

Momma signs to me—*I want you to go to the store with me.*

I nod and she has Tippie finish up the washing.

~ ~ ~

Me and Momma walk a mile into town. Argent is mostly made up of little shops. The Parsons' dentist office is on the outskirts of town, so we see it before we see anything else. Mr.

Parsons has the most dangerous job in town. I remember when I was little Poppa brought me to Mr. Parsons, Mr. Parsons said, "I've got the most dangerous job in the world, Nella." All this was because Mr. Parsons' job carried a particular occupational hazard with it: he had to deal with women without their Quietens on. Once when Mr. Parsons came over for dinner, he told me that every time he takes a woman's Quieten off he knows that he faces his mortality because us women had the ability to foretell a man's death by just saying his name. But that was in the time of the Silvertongues and there hadn't been one of those since Old Lady Silver. It's all something like an urban legend that folks around here took as fact. Leastways, the men did.

Old Lady Silver—as Poppa told it—was the youngest of four sisters and she'd learned to speak late and she didn't walk until she was three. Her first words had been her Poppa's name and the man died shortly after from some kind of sickness of the bones. When she got older she married and found her husband with other women all the time. That was before Argent believed in God. Before sin came to us through a preacherman from out of town. Old Lady Silver's husband was man who made physics for people who were ailing and he sometimes made house calls to deliver medicines. Sometimes those house calls ended in an exchange of services and Old Lady Silver was the last to find out. They say she caught him with one of her friends in the back of his shop and Old Lady Silver pointed her finger at him, her whole body shaking and she said, "I'll see your grave, Lionel. I'll see it come winter." They say he suffered something like what Old Lady Silver's Poppa did. She buried him in some unmarked grave outside of town. There's a big Willow tree that marks the spot.

Now, this was about the same time that the preacherman from out of town came drifting into town and he'd started preaching on the square. He gained some followers, I guess. Enough to start a lynch mob. It wasn't a witch hunt, but it might have been something like it, but Old Lady

Silver couldn't be found at the family house and no one saw anyone who ever looked like her for thirty years. She has no known descendants, just stories about girls who'd spoken men's names and then saw those same men dead. That made husbands start looking at their wives out the corner of their eye. But that was before women got cut and before the Quietens came. Some welder—one of the out-of-town preacherman's disciples—made the first Quieten for his wife because she wouldn't get cut.

My family isn't descended from Old Lady Silver directly, but some people believed that once she was chased out of town that she changed her appearance and took on a new name. Cate, I think they called her in the story. Her roots run deep in this town. There's just no telling which of us got her tongue.

~ ~ ~

Me and Momma bought a pound of yams, two chickens and a bundle of greens. When we get home, I wash the yams first. I scrub them with a piece of steel wool to get the skin off. Me and Tippie bump into each other a lot near the sink. Momma signs to Poppa in the living room. They're going over plans for the year. Crops, cows, seeds, bees. Momma has an idea for a machine they could build to help Poppa with stacking all the kindling for wintertime. They hash it out and me and Tippie cook.

I sign to her—*You excited about tonight?*

About meeting with Joseph's family?—she signs back to me. *Nah.*

She switches into our secret language—*I'm scared of what will happen if I leave here.*

If you marry?

Yeah.

I turn my back to Poppa and Momma so they can't see me sign. *You don't want to marry him? You don't like him?*

I like him—she signs. I just don't want to leave this house.

She pauses for a minute.

I want to marry—she signs. But he wants me to get cut.

I nod. I make the sign for *I see you* which also means *I understand what you're saying*.

You know—Tippie signs to me. Joseph's little brother is coming over here too. He's your age.

I don't sign back.

Don't you ever think about boys? She signs this to me, but she means sex.

I sign back—*No*. I think about the Queen Bee. The mating flight. I hear the hive in my head like the colony is trickling out of my ears. I am a virgin queen. Tippie's not. She thinks I don't know about her and Joseph sneaking around. I've seen them out back a couple of times messing around behind the hive because the buzz drowns out noise.

I'm not looking forward to the cutting—she signs. But I am looking forward to the marriage night.

She's shameless.

~ ~ ~

I've finished getting ready. I'm clean. I smell like fresh soap and powder. My hair is in a long braid down my back with little pieces of twine in it. My edges are pressed down tight. Momma combed the little hairs into swoops that frame my face like a beaded headdress. I pretend it's a diadem for virgin queens. I'm wearing one of Tippi's old calico dresses. Blue and white with a little apron sewn into the front of it. Momma and Tippi are dressed in their Sunday's best like it's a church day. Poppa is wearing his nice white button down. We are all ready for the Parsons.

They arrive in a group of four. Mr. Parsons steps through the door first with his wide brimmed hat over his chest. He puts his hat up on the coat rack next to Poppa's. He helps Mrs. Parsons out of her coat and places it on the rack too. Then Joseph and Obadiah come in with their hats off too.

I stare past Tippi and Momma at Mrs. Parsons' Quieten. She didn't get cut. One of the only mothers who hasn't. Every time I see her, I wonder why she didn't. People around town talk about it. Make up stories about why she didn't. Like that Mr. Parsons is some thrill-seeker and he gets off on the having sex with her while her Quieten is off from the danger of it all. But I'm sure those are just rumors.

Thinking of it now while I look at him in that horrible toupee makes me laugh a little and I turn my head so my eyes don't show it. I'm happy me and Tippi's heads aren't touching. I sometimes wonder what would happen if other people could hear me.

Mrs. Parsons' Quieten is smooth. More comfortable looking. It probably has extra padding. Me and Tippi's formal ones are dingy and not as smooth. Momma wears pretty red lipstick. She tells us when we get cut we can wear it to. She says this like she's already decided for us. Like this is a good thing.

Me and Tippie sign *hello* to Mrs. Parsons and she nods politely. She really is an uppity woman. She's overdressed too. Stuffy looking with all those colors on her dress. With that high collar buttoned all the way up. How long did she spend preening herself?

I look at Tippie and try to imagine her all primped up, peacocked and shiny like Mrs. Parsons. Tippie Parsons. Doesn't have a ring to it.

I have to admit that Tippie's fiancé is nothing to sneeze at. He's maybe even a little sexy. Is it incest if I think my brother-in-law is attractive? Let's just say handsome then. Joseph is handsome. He's quieter than his brother and Mr. Parsons. My mother takes Mrs. Parsons into the dining room and Tippie, Poppa, Joseph, and Mr. Parsons go into the living room. Tippie signs to me—*show Obadiah your garden* only when sings *garden* she makes the sign for *wet* too. She's being indecent and Obadiah almost catches us making our secret signs.

I look at Poppa and he nods. So, me and Obadiah are supposed to be the next marriage? I look him up and down. He's dressed smart and he's more beautiful than his brother. He's filled out since I saw him last. It's been a few years. Momma told me he went to school to learn a trade instead of learning dentistry from his Poppa. His hands look too soft for him to have learned anything.

Anyway, I don't know much else about him except for he likes to hear himself talk. When we're walking out the backdoor, he holds the door for me which is shocking because he doesn't seem like the gentlemanly type. He talks a looooooot.

“So, I suppose this is an attempt at marriage between us, eh?” he says with a big smile. I can see all of his perfect teeth. I study his face while he’s talking. He has a freckle just below his mouth the size of a big ink dot. It’s the only spot on his face. I think of sucking all of the ink out of that dot. There’s a heat in body that rising and I wonder if this is how the Queen Bee feels before her flight.

God, poor, stuffy Mrs. Parsons. She’s got a husband with a toupee that’s always running off the slope of his head and a son who’s always running off at the mouth. I think of how it might be for her to be inside a house full of men. A house made of men.

Our house is quiet most times with me, Momma, and Tippie moving around the kitchen together. Telling each other stories in the quiet. Outside of me and Tippie’s secret language, there’s one we share with Momma. Momma tells us sex jokes sometimes when Poppa isn’t looking. She tries to laugh. I imagine Momma has the best laugh. I think Tippie probably sounds like a duck. What would it be like with the sun coming in through the window at noon lighting everything up? And us laughing so loudly that not even the sound of million bees could drown us out.

I wonder how often Mrs. Parsons laughs. Is Mr. Parsons’ entertaining? Does Obadiah tell her jokes? He isn’t particularly funny. He’s one of the boys that has a lot of energy and talks with his hands even though he doesn’t have to.

“Me and Daddy are thinking of buying a couple more goats, for the milk you know,” he says and I realize I haven’t been listening to him.

I sign to him—*How many do you have now?*

He kind of puffs his chest out. “I don’t know. But we need a couple more.”

We’ve walked past the garden and now we’re almost to the big tree. Beyond that are the woods.

“Just trying to make conversation,” he says. “This is so boring.”

I nod. He nods. Maybe we could have been friends if we’d met each other when we were a bit younger.

“Wanna climb it?” he asks.

I can’t—I sign to him.

“Tall ass tree.” He cranes his neck up to the sky. “I think I see a bee’s nest up there.”

I know the one. There are wild bees up there. I’ve climbed that tree every summer since I was little. My shoes got stuck in that sap. Stuck to that bark. He doesn’t know this tree like I do. He doesn’t know these bees. We leave them alone because they pollinate our garden too.

And he takes off climbing. I sign to him, but he’s already going up the tree trunk and he can’t hear my hands. He gets half way up the tree and I realize he’s a damn fool. I wish I had a caning stick. I’d knock him down with it.

He calls down to me, “Hey, move out of the way. I’m gonna shake the nest.”

I sign—*Don’t! Leave them be.* I almost laugh at the *bee* and the *be*.

I hear him shaking the branches and I move back. Sometimes when the brood left this nest, me and Tippie would harvest the honey. Scrape a little out and eat it with our hands. Get stung by a couple wild bees.

“Almost got it!” Obadiah hollers.

And I hear this buzzing, like a voice humming on the wind. And Obadiah is falling from the tree howling like something wounded. I look up and I see the swarm coming out of the hive. I see the nest coming down and the bees are coming out in droves flying through the air in strange formations.

Obadiah hits the ground and his back makes a loud crack when it connects with the grass. And he lets out this scream that makes me think he’s broken his back. He groans and he’s gone quiet. The bees are swarming around us, so I step back from him. I try to scream for Poppa, but my tongue is dumb. I am dumb-tongued. And it reminds me of the time Tippie fell down the stairs and cracked her head open at the bottom. Poppa was outside chopping wood so the sound of Tippie’s head hitting the floor lined up with a swing of Poppa’s axe and Momma made this sound, she made this terrible sound from behind her Quieten and for the first time I wondered what Momma’s voice really sounded like. Because she made this terrible sound, this sound strained behind the metal and she held Tippie’s head and I got Poppa. Now, maybe I know how that felt.

So, I run and the bees are chasing me and when I pass the honey bee colony, I hear the buzzing raise louder and louder. The bees start emptying out of the hive and doing the same formations as the wild bees in the air. For a minute, I’m so taken by the way they move that I forget about Obadiah and instead I watch them fly around settling on me. I shoo some of them away, then one stings me, so I stay still. I’m not wearing my beekeeping clothes, I realize. More of

them come out of the hive and they start covering me like another layer of skin. I can see Obadiah laying still near the tree. He isn't moving. And my eyes sting, but I'm so shocked by the bees, that I don't move. The bees are on every part of my body, the last place they populate is my face.

I can't see the house. Just Obadiah laid out. And the wild bees, homeless now and looking for their queen. I want to say, *I could be your Queen*, but that seems too funny for the moment. I become aware that if every bee that's touching me decides to sting, I'll be dead.

I hear the door open a little while later and it's Joseph. I know this because first he calls to Obadiah and then he sees us both. Sees the state we're in. I hear him call for our Poppas, but our Mommas come first. Momma and Tippie are at my side and Momma's signing to me but it's too hard see through the bees crawling on my face. She's signing something to Tippie, but I can't make it out because I'm feeling like passing out. I'm feeling like going to sleep for a long time.

The Poppas are talking to each other. They are standing over Obadiah. They agree they shouldn't move him until Joseph goes and get the town doctor. His back's in bad shape.

Dr. Conner comes and collects Obadiah shortly after, but by that time, Poppa has already forgotten about him. He's standing at a distance and watching me. He's got his journal out.

"Nella," Poppa starts. He shoos Momma out of the way. "You told the bees about Tippie's Marriage Meeting, didn't you? Blink once if you did."

I don't blink.

"It's back luck, Nel," Poppa says. "They are absconding the hive."

Absconding the hive. My body feels it's buzzing from underneath my skin. They are walking across me and flying around my head.

"It's like you're their Queen," Poppa says.

The sun's starting to set. The sky is the most splendid mix of blue, purple, and red. I haven't seen Mrs. Parsons for a while until she comes over to me. She signs—*You'll be alright.*

The night is streaking across the sky and I'm standing perfectly still.

"Tippie, it ain't that simple," Poppa says. "If we aggravate them, they could sting her."

"If we rinse them off, what will happen," Mr. Parsons asks.

"Maybe they sting her, maybe they sting us," Poppa says.

"This feels like a bad omen," Mr. Parsons says. "Why haven't they stung her already?"

"Because she's pure," Poppa says. "Virgins can walk among bees without really getting stung."

"This don't feel right," Mr. Parsons says.

"She didn't tell them about Tippie getting married," Poppa says.

"Well, tell 'em, Nella," Mr. Parsons says loudly.

"Don't holler, Sam," Poppa says. "If they think you're threatening their new Queen, they'll attack you."

"Jeb," Mr. Parsons says and then I hear their voices get really low. I can't hear what they're saying.

Poppa said I'm their new Queen. Did they hear me? Did they claim me?

I see Momma with some look in her eyes. Something I've never seen. I can't describe it though.

"We gotta see how this plays out," Poppa says.

"I'm thinking it's a bad omen, Jeb," Mr. Parsons says. "You think she's a silvertongue?"

~ ~ ~

We've drawn a crowd by the time night falls. Some of the men from around the way. I can't tell how many, but there are so many loud voices. They're all talking over each other. I've seen the faces of most of them because they keep coming over to me and looking.

I haven't heard any of them say, "get them off her." I've heard talk of fire. Of silvertongues. Or burning. I wonder if they think I'm like Old Lady Silver. Do they think in my mouth there is a tongue that will cry like a banshee's keen? I let myself imagine for a moment that I am one of Old Lady Silver's descendants. I imagine opening my mouth and speaking the deaths of every man in my sight. I could free Tippiie from her marriage so she didn't have to get cut. Mr. Parsons wouldn't have to worry about his runaway toupee.

One of the men offers to set fire to me to cleanse me. Poppa reminds him if I were unclean the bees would have stung me already. He tells them I am their new Queen now. Where's my fucking crown? I wonder what it would be like to say a word like *fuck*.

Fear spikes in my stomach as I think of myself on fire. I imagine with all the firewood Poppa has it wouldn't be too hard to build a pyre for my body.

I don't want to burn. Are they really considering this? I want Momma. I want Tippie. I think I'd rather get stung by the brood than to burn like a witch. I feel the corner of my eye sting like when I'm about to cry, but I don't cry.

Momma and Tippie listen to the men talk of burning me and their faces, I can't look at them. I can't see them. I'm capsizing in a sea of bees.

I don't want to burn.

When the women come, the men are still talking about fire.

Poppa gets in front of a few of the men and then I hear the sound of bodies hitting each other. Our men have come to blows. I can't make out Poppa's voice in the mess of noise. In the mess of the bees. But I hear a sound. I hear feet coming toward me and there are women. So many women. Wearing their working clothes. Wearing their milking clothes. Their nice clothes. They are holding things from the kitchen. Knives, potato peelers. Some are holding big pronged forks, meat skewers, meat thermometers, kitchen shears. They've brought a pointy reckoning. Preparation for the stinging Mrs. Parsons is holding a letter opener. All of them, they're standing in a group watching the men. I imagine the men's heavy bodies thrashing around. I imagine blood staining their white shirts red. They split each other's lips. They blacken their neighbors' eyes.

But the women. Like my bees, they sense something is threatening the hive. They're standing there. Momma, she starts making this sound. It sounds sort of like the sound she made when Tippie fell down the stairs. Like an animal trying human words for the first time. She's making a sound that's like a disease. It's catching. The sound is contagious. It moves through the women like a tidal wave. They are all making the sound. It's louder when they all do it. They are all of them something wounded.

And they stamp their feet. They stamp their feet on the soft ground, but together it makes a beat. They are in agreement. The sound and the feet. They are in agreement. The mouths and the hands.

They raise their voices. It starts to sound like a buzz. It's like I can feel it in my chest.

The bees react and their buzz turns into a hum.

The sound of us spreads through the backyard. It reaches a terrible height and the men stop because they've never heard their wives makes this much noise. The sound goes through me and I'm making it too. I'm buzzing, thrumming, humming, vibrating. My body feel like if every bee took flight right then, like in the mating flight, they'd rip parts of my body off as they detached.

But we're making a sound that only us women would understand. It is the sound of mothers. It is the sound of blood.

I make the sound too. The buzz. In that moment, we're a colony of Queens. As it turns out, it, too, is in our nature to kill when someone threatens the hive.

4. IN WHICH WE ARE IN THE SKY

This section contains “Immortals.” and “Queen of Heaven.”

Immortals.

He told me he bought his eyes off a man in Kazakhstan. His lips from a Roma woman travelling with a gypsy caravan. The nose came from two brothers in Mumbai. Each gave him a sliver of their own to make the nose perfectly symmetrical. There is a thin, tan scar running down the bridge of his nose. The forehead, cheeks, and chin came from a band of carnies going from one side of the Mississippi to the other. They were in need of a boat, which my husband provided them. His tongue—he tells me after slipping it in my mouth and kissing me—came from a Sudanese woman.

He told me these little stories and I wondered what he looked like before he amassed his face. I asked him. I brought him a piece of paper and a pencil. *Sketch your likeness*, I told him. *I'll need more paper*, he said.

I've never seen my husband's real face. I suppose I met him back when I was still working as a waitress at that swanky restaurant on the corner. He came in and sat down always with his back to me. Always requesting another server if he was seated in my section. He became some kind of shadow that floated in out of the rain, sitting down for cup after cup of bitter, black coffee. The kind we served with our premium deserts. I'd eat my dinner at the bar near close, whatever scraps I could get the kitchen to warm up for me. He'd watch me while I chewed big bites. Gravy ran down the sides of my mouth. Each night I showed him my real face, with mashed potatoes on my mouth. He never showed me his. Big tipper though.

I supposed I called him *husband* once, but I sometimes asked myself what made someone a husband. That feeling of relief you got when you saw him coming in the door at night? The way his lips felt. The fact that you could tell it was him even in the dark? That you could track him by scent? How your skin could communicate at the molecular level?

Me and my husband had a rule. One rule that kept the whole thing working. He said to me once, with his hand on my face, “Do not look at my face. If you do, I’ll leave you blind. If you don’t you’ll be eternal.” I was nosy. I studied journalism in college. Learned how to follow a lead. So, I looked for things that might have told me what he actually looked like.

I wanted to see what he looked like without all of those other folks’ pieces of flesh on him. To me, maybe he was a kind of god. I had to figure out what kind of god I was praying to. His body might have been some kind of temple. Something that brought healing, nectar, sweetness. Something that made me feel cleaner after I left it. Like some strobe of light had gone through me.

He’d leave me all day and at night he’d come to me, a corporeal thing and always with the sound of wings rustling. The silhouette of a man standing in my doorway. The smoothness of his body. The hardness of his body. He was hungriest at this hour.

As we rolled around in bed, I felt his face with both hands. I imagined what he looked like underneath. How dark his skin was. Was he really white? What color his real eyes were. I couldn’t settle on any combination, so each time he visited me, it was as if by some strange magic I conjured up this man from memory. He was an amalgamation of every person. Stitched from their best parts. I sometimes felt like I couldn’t pull myself away from him. We were like splitting atoms, coming apart when we were never supposed to.

Afterwards, when we were sweating from our own heat, he opened the window and let the wind in. It dried our bodies and we held each other until one of us fell asleep. I was sore in between my thighs. Eros made me sorE.

Was he a demon in angel skin? Demons had been on my mind lately. And things that snarled in the voices of my sisters. A chorus, they were. *How can you share this bed without knowing who you share it with?* They'd ask.

He is kind, sisters. He feels like a kind of rapture, sisters. Something holy in my hands, sisters.

Sometimes they were satisfied with that answer and sometimes they hissed at me. They'd tell me that no man was worth staying in the dark for. *What's he doing in the dark?* They'd ask. They'd ask me and I'd say to them, *he's reaching for me.*

~ ~ ~

We'd been "married" ten months and I was still glowing. I wandered around our apartment holding on to his shirt. I smelled him. I lounged around. It was sort of like dreaming with my eyes open. He was in the walls and everything was spinning. I was all topsy-turvy, stars-in-my eyes, half-moons pressed into my palms. I laughed at myself. I wasn't a schoolgirl. I didn't merge our names and scribble it on my notebook with a Sharpie marker. This was some kind of complex situation I was in. He was a situation. And I was like all those girls from my hometown. The ones that got in their own way. The ones who stay cooped up in their houses with their man. The ones who'd leave class reunions early because they want to be on their knees before their husbands prostrate and praying.

I don't think I'd ever felt drunk like I did with him. I'd given up drinking years ago, but here I was drunk again. It felt every bit as topsy-turvy as wine. Like I was dancing with Dionysus. My husband told me he knew him. Dionysus. Donny—that's what my husband called him—was a bit of a drunk. Apparently, Donny had a nice wife and a yacht too. And a vineyard. A clichéd god, that Donny.

I spun down, down, down, into the covers on our bed. I ate bread and cheese with my hands. Just enough to hold me before we ate dinner. He only liked to eat fresh things. Things that came out of the ground. We ate raw most nights and he drank enough wine for us both. It was from Donny's vineyard. It had a smiling goat on the label with an erect penis.

The table was full of berries and apple slices, fresh bread, vegetables, and he brought cheese his mother made for us. I made him serve me for all of those times he was seated in my section at the restaurant and requested another server. He didn't roll our silverware. He wasn't a very good waitress. I made him sit down after a while and I'd serve him. He told me I was good at it. I told him all men wanted veneration.

We made cheese sandwiches. We ate with a small candle between us. This is just enough light to show me the outline of his jaw. His hair was a bit curly, I think.

He brought the carafe of wine to the bedroom, drank most of it and then joined me. We lay there with our clothes on for a while. The window came open and in blew that wonderful wind that only seemed to find us when he was there.

"I want to show you something," he said to me.

My stomach fluttered. I wanted to say *your face*, but I didn't. He was skittish. He'd spook like a horse if I showed even a slight interest.

"I've got a condition," he said. He told me that's why he couldn't be in the light. I didn't accept it. We wandered through the house a few months ago, me holding on to his arm, him heading for the balcony doors. I didn't accept that I wouldn't be able to see his face. This wasn't some fucking movie. We were in some kind of a religion and like all holy rights, you don't always want to accept them at first and then...then they're just what we do. That was a small ransom I paid.

He was turned over on his stomach. "I'm going to show you something, but you can't ask to see more, okay?"

I nodded. I remembered he couldn't hear me nodding. "Okay."

"When I say, you can turn on the light, but only for a minute. After the minute passes, you have to turn it back off."

I nodded again and said, "One minute."

He sat up. I knew his back was to me. The lamp was on my side of the bed and my hand was itching to turn it on. He breathed harder like the kind of breath you breathe when anxiety gets ahold of you.

"Okay," he said. "Turn it on."

I turned the lamp on. Right before the room flooded with light, a thousand faces blinking past my eyes. I was going to see his face now.

All I saw was wings. Wings took up the expanse of our room. Long, thick, black wings. I blinked a few times. Was he into some kind of weird roleplay shit? Was this a fetish? Did I seem like the kind of girl who's into fetishes? Was I the kind of girl who was into fetishes? Weird-human-hybrid-bird-man-fetishes?

“Say something,” he said.

“Can I touch them?”

“Yes,” he said almost entirely without breath.

I ran my hands over the feathers and I looked for straps or elastic, anything that bound them to him. I couldn't find anything under the feathers. They were warm, the same temperature as his body. These things were growing out of his back.

I flinched a little and so did he when I touched them. I scooted back.

“Is this strange?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. I scooted as far to my side of the bed as I could. I was deflated, but I tried not show it. I hid my disappointment. I imagined myself wearing one of those trashy tourist t-shirts that read: I went to see my husband's face but all I got was this shitty t-shirt.

The man had wings coming out of his back and all I wanted to see was his real face. My mind cycled through many reasons for this, but I settled on insanity.

I slid off the bed and walked slowly over to his side, ducking under one wing. He turned his head. There was his same boring face. Beautiful. Uninteresting.

“Are you maimed under there?” I asked.

“Would it matter?” he asked.

“Are you human?” I asked.

“Would it matter?” he asked.

I reached for his face. I laid my hand on cheek. My fingers slid down his cheekbone and it felt like the skin under a wound. Too soft and vulnerable. Too open.

“Your minute is up,” he said.

I turned off the lamp. Silence permeated the room. I heard wings. They went back into his skin. His back was smooth again after that. Unobstructed.

~ ~ ~

He brought the carafe of wine to our room. I poured him two glasses. He told me I was the best waitress in town. He told me he regretted not wanting to sit in my section. He never explained why he didn't want to sit in my section.

He crawled into bed. He pretended not to know I'm disappointed about his dumb wings. I wonder how Leda felt when she realized that Zeus wasn't a beautiful swan under his feathers, but just some lusty god. I wonder if gods can get STDs. I think gods should get STDs. I think Zeus should get something incurable.

I wondered if my husband had STDs. Were there other women? Did he have the ability to make copies of himself and distribute them out to desperate women? Did he transmit to me some incurable, populating god virus that multiplied by thousands inside me? Was that how he made

me something perennial? Something that withered and died and then came back as something else?

He didn't pull me to him like he usually did. He just said good night and went to sleep. I'd noticed that when he slept, he always turned away from me. He hid his face under the covers. I thought then that when he slept, his real face would emerge. I thought this for a couple of reasons, but the main one: He always slept, but he never stayed.

I usually woke up in the middle of the night by some strange stroke of my body clock. It's like my mind was telling me there's something I needed to see. Sometimes when I woke up, he was gone. The window was always open and the wind was coming in.

I pretended to fall asleep one night because real sleep had evaded me for some nights. And my sisters, their voices were perpetual. But that night, they didn't ask me any questions. Tonight, they said, "*Go on. Look.*"

"No," I said.

"*Hold a candle to him,*" they said. "*Don't drop any wax on his chest though unless he's into that.*"

"I just want to see him," I said.

Maybe I can seduce him? I laughed at myself. I'm wasn't some beautiful, Venus de Milo, *Afrodite* queen. I was barely blessed in the sculpting of my thighs, in how my collarbone had never been deep enough to hold a teaspoon of water, in how my chest was little more than two wasp stings swelling on my chest. I was and still am more Venus of Willendorf than de Milo. But my

thighs, oh my thighs wrapped around his body so perfectly that it was the only time I ever feel divine.

I reached for the lamp string and I clicked it on before my mind had a chance to catch up with what my hand had already done. He was lying there on his back. His face was pressed into his arm, so I couldn't see it.

I studied him for a moment, it must have been less than a second, but slowed down. I've played that moment over in my head twenty times. In that moment, I looked at his body smooth and muscular. He lay there with his legs open. His penis stretched along the length of the thigh. For a moment, I felt like I was seeing something I shouldn't be seeing. Like a voyeur watching my own husband.

I walked around to the other side of the bed. When I did, he jumped awake. He turned to me. And yes, yes, this was his real face. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. His face was encased in light that shined from his cheeks, his eye sockets, his mouth.

"Don't look!" he yelled, but I'd already seen it and the pain had started. I screamed and I crushed my hands into my eyes. I couldn't see, but his face was burned into my retinas. The pain was scorching. My eyes. Searing white pain.

There was no blood, the light having cauterized my eyes. There was no sight. It's all dark now, except for the after image of his face.

"We could have had this." I remember he said that to me. "All you had to do was wait a little longer. I was going to give you new eyes."

I reached for him, but he didn't reach back. I went into shock, I think. The pain subsided, but it still rumbled just underneath my eyelids. I felt amped up like I could fight. My senses were perked up. I could hear the swooping of a low flying bird from miles away.

"We could have had this," he said.

Then I heard the rustle of wings. I was still holding my eyes. That wind came in through the window. I screamed and cursed it.

This isn't how it was supposed to end, right? We were supposed to be eternal, right? Fucking across the sky for eternity? Shooting out ovum and sperm particles into the sky? Leaving constellations in our path? That's how the story was supposed to go, right? The man with the wings. And that bitch Psyche. I bet she never had to be a waitress.

Queen of Heaven

My father's visions of my sister started when she was ten years old. I suppose I could say *vision* on account of he only had one and I suppose I could say *dream* on account of he was asleep when he had it. But he doesn't like when we call it that. So, we call it a vision and I'm thinking that's on account of the fact that his vision for Grace came from his dream of wanting to be somebody. Wanting to have something nice since he'd worked all his days at a dying mill. Since he'd bloodied his hands with reddish work. Killed things and put them in little packages that we saw at the grocery store. "That's my meat," he'd tell me when we walked by the meat section. "Don't touch it."

My father's vision for Grace was made by those same hands. Sculpted and thrown on a wheel like you did when you made bowls. Made to take shape by his will. But my father doesn't own a fancy machine that makes the clay spin round and round. So, he makes Grace go round.

What I mean is that he only knows how to throw real things at the wall. He throws bowls. He does it a lot. I wait for the sound. He doesn't have the patience to make bowls, because clay, like most things, was just too soft in his hands.

“Clean up these pieces, Goose,” he says to me. This is the sixth bowl this week. I take a little slip of paper out of my pocket and make another tally. “When you're done, wash your sister's feet. The reverend is coming over.”

I think he was proud of me once. Proud of his only born son, because for some reason all he could make were daughters. Maybe in another life, he would have favored me. Poured all of his time into me. Taught me all that boy shit that I never learned how to do right, because Grace took up most of his time. So, I'd never gotten to be the son. Just the boy who made sure Grace's feet never touched the ground. Grace, who was soft when I carried her from room to room, whose little bones made me feel like I was carrying still wet papier mache. Very soft in my hands.

That was my only real job. To make sure Grace's feet never touched the floor. Though I suppose I should start calling her Kah, because my father has taken to calling her that since his vision of her. I asked him once what his vision was about and he said, “She was sitting on a throne made of metal with a holy light shining from her.” So, he went to the junkyard and found as many metals to melt down as he could. Spent hours out in the garage saying prayers to himself and becoming a blacksmith. He made the throne out of a bunch of different cheap metals. I guess it never occurred to him that if my sister was a goddess she may want a throne made out of something other than crushed and melted junkyard pieces. I guess it never occurred to him that she deserved better.

He toiled away in the garage, barely eating, taking his dinner out there and laying it on the ground next to his tools. The smell of burning metal filled the house for weeks, but my mother said nothing to him even though it nearly gagged us all. When he was done, he had me bring Grace—Kah, if you like it—out to the garage to show her what he'd made. She was only ten then, so she just sorta looked at it and held her nose. My father took that as her rejecting it and he took to throwing the bowls after that. Made her sit on the throne when people came over to be blessed by her. Made her sit on it when he had repenting to do.

I swept the shards of the glass bowl into the dustpan and put them in a brown paper bag I've been hiding under the sink. Inside the bag is a bunch of broken pieces of glass from all the different bowls he's killed since Grace became Kah. Little pieces of glass mixed together in that bag that looked like jagged pieces of hard candy. I sometimes thought of sticking my hand inside. I sometimes thought of sticking my father's hands inside. Maybe Grace's feet. Things that were precious.

I drag the wash pail into Grace's bedroom after I fill it up with warm water. Grace is sitting on the bed wearing a red veil over her face. My father liked to have her wear these veils to "protect her beauty." He said he didn't want other men looking at her. "Kah will be very beautiful one day and that's dangerous," he'd said to me. "She'll have a face like heaven."

I thought she already did. That she was beautiful now. She'd taken after our mama, but not like our sisters. Our father said they looked like they'd been hit with the ugly stick. That God only saw fit to give Grace all the beauty. And she was beautiful, but in a terrifying way. Her eyes looked like something supernatural when she looked at you. She had the eyes of a goddess if nothing else.

I sometimes wondered if the veil she wore was to keep other men from looking at her or if it was to keep Daddy from remembering that she was a human.

She sat on the bed, wearing a white dress and a red veil. She looked sorta like she was getting married, only to a demon or something that wanted red on the wedding night.

“Daddy told me to wash your feet,” I say. “Rev’s coming.”

She makes a little sound. I could have been a sigh, but the veil caught it.

I sit her feet in the water and she flinches a little at the heat and then relaxes. I’m not really supposed to talk to her except to tell her who’s coming, so I do my work in silence. The only sound is the water lapping around her ankles and my hand working through it. I dry her feet off and I turn her on the bed so that her feet are resting on a pillow.

“Ashe,” I say and then I leave her in peace. That’s what we say for manifestation, because my father says she’s a Yoruba goddess. He says that’s what we say to make good things happen to us.

~ ~ ~

The reverend comes half past ten and he brings his assistant reverend and a couple of deacons. I hear them in living room negotiating with my father. They do this every time because they want Grace to be a permanent fixture at Sunday services, but Daddy doesn’t want anything to do with church since Mama left.

“She’s fine right here, Reverend,” I hear him say. “Now, pay yall’s dues so y’all can see her.”

I don’t hear the money change hands, but I hear Daddy counting it. They usually pay him in twenties.

“All right,” Daddy says. “She’s ready for y’all.”

Daddy never lets me in the room when the preacher men come. He says, “Those are holy folks, Goose. They don’t need us sinners getting in the way.”

The men pass me on the way to Grace’s room. I suppose she’s Kah now. They pass me on the way to Kah’s room and they tip their hats to me. Daddy doesn’t follow them in. I stand in the hallway until they disappear on the other side of the door. One of the deacons smiles at me and then closes the door behind them.

I hear humming coming from the room. Movement. Tones. Chants even. Then silence. The door flies open and Kah is standing on the bed. The deacons are all on their knees before her, sweating and saying her name with their hands in the air. She’s still dressed.

I look around the corner a little more and she looks back at me and I hear a rattlesnake rattle its tail. It’s in my head I think.

~ ~ ~

The reverend and his men leave around noontime. Daddy tells them when their time is up. I look around the corner and I see Kah sitting on the edge of the bed this time, the veil still over

her face. Her feet dangle off the side of the bed. Daddy outfitted her bed with two mattresses so her feet wouldn't brush up against the carpet.

She fiddles with her hands and I look into the room and the reverend is sitting in a chair in the corner sweating. He's loosened his tie. The windows in the room are open and he's sitting by one of them.

"Rev, you need some water?" Daddy asks him.

The Rev shakes his head. "You were right, Al. She ate our sins right up. Just put them in her mouth and swallowed them whole. What do you call that?"

"Sin-eating," Daddy said.

"Your daughter's really something, Al," the Rev says.

And Daddy says, "She's not my daughter, Rev. She's a goddess."

~ ~ ~

I make sure that Grace is comfortable before I head to bed. I pass by Daddy in the kitchen and I hear him on the phone talking to Mama.

"Yes, Geraldine," he says.

He waits for Mama to finish.

"No, just The Rev today."

Mama talks.

“I’m not having this conversation again, woman,” Daddy says.

Mama talks louder.

“Geraldine,” he says. “Geraldine.”

Mama is talking now.

“I’m glad you got out when you did too, because we are on the up and up.”

Mama talks even louder.

“Well, you shouldn’t have given birth to a goddess then!”

I haven’t seen my mother or my sisters for four years now. Not since Daddy’s vision. Mama left and took Kel and Daisy with her. I haven’t seen my sisters four Christmases, four birthdays, four Easter Sundays. I sometimes want to take the phone from Daddy and say to Mama, “Why did you let him keep us?”

~ ~ ~

That night, I have a dream, but I can’t remember it on account of I’m not sure whether it’s a dream or a vision. What I do remember is Grace kissing me on the lips, sweetly, innocently like Mama used to kiss us. She presses her forehead against mine and she says, “I’m getting out.”

And then an endless stream of words, names, go across my mind like a ticker tape. *Auset, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna. Auset, Astarte, Hecate, Diana, Demeter, Kali, Inanna. Auset, Demeter, Astarte, Hecate, Diana, Kali, Inanna.*

And so, it went like that even when I woke up. These strange words going through my mind.

~ ~ ~

The reverend comes to visit us again and this time he brings more men which means more money. I listen to my father count it.

“She’s through here,” Daddy says.

They come trudging down the hall, tipping their hats to me. “Hey Goose.”

They all say something like that when they pass me. They’re all wearing suits and it feels like they’re taking all the air out of the place.

Daddy opens the door and they all file in taking off their spiffy hats when they go inside.

“Where is she?”

I come closer to the door and I see Grace sitting on the bed wearing all white. Her veil too.

The men stand there and they all look dumb and stupid. They might have been scratching their heads if this was a movie, but it’s not a movie, because it really happened.

“Al?” The Rev doesn’t sound impressed. “Is this some kind of joke?”

Daddy walks around the room, and he, too seems not to be able to see Grace sitting right there.

She's wearing all white and I can see her smiling through the veil. It's almost as if it's a smile only for me. She laughs and they can't hear her.

"Kah?" Daddy says.

He hunts through the rooms. The Rev and his men help. I stand there, my mouth hanging open, staring at Grace sitting on the bed. I don't go to her. She's killing herself laughing at this point. She's laughing and laughing and the men are looking and looking.

"Boy don't just stand there," The Rev says to me as he passes me in the hallway. "Help us find your sister."

I can't move. My feet have planted roots in the carpet and I watch Grace roll around on the bed in her good dress laughing.

My father goes back into the room. He's standing two feet from Grace and he can't see her. She sticks her tongue out at him. She makes a face. Why can't he see her?

"Daddy?" I say.

He comes back out into the hall and pulls me up to him by my collar. "Where is she, Goose? Did she slip out the window?"

I look at her and she shakes her head at me.

"I don't know," I say. "I just washed her feet like I always do."

“Yeah,” he says perhaps more to himself. He’s satisfied with my answer, but wishes I was the culprit behind it so he’d have someone to blame. “And I saw her after that too.”

Grace waves me into the room.

“I’m going to check the attic,” Daddy says to me.

I come in the room and she’s still sitting on the bed. She looks at me. Her eyes are so brown and penetrating. She really does look like a goddess.

She doesn’t say anything to me. She just hops down off the bed. And I almost lose it because her feet haven’t touched the floor in years and that’s not supposed to happen. None of this is supposed to happen.

She stands in front of me and I haven’t realized how she is the same height as me because we haven’t stood face to face since we were younger. I don’t ask her how she’s made herself invisible. She takes off the veil and there are two perfect little horns growing out the top of her head.

“Can I touch them?” I ask.

She shakes her head no, so I don’t touch them. Never touch a Black woman’s hair, right? Not even her horns.

She leans forward and kisses me on the lips, like in my vision and she does it sweetly, innocently. We press our foreheads together and for a second we are breathing the same air and I fill my lungs with particles from her breath and I don’t care if she’s really a goddess or not because this moment is the closest I’ve felt to anyone in so long. The closest I’ve ever felt to anything

divine. We stay like that for a minute and I remember she was always my favorite sister before all of this happened. Before Daddy made us break apart in his hands.

She pulls herself away from me. She gives me a piece of paper with a PO Box number on it. It says:

Queen of Heaven

PO BOX 0911

Middlesboro, Tennessee 37130

She slides the window up which had been painted over and nailed for years now. I see little flecks of paint where she's picked through it. She goes out feet first and since we're on the second story I expect to hear the sound of her head cracking open when she hits the ground. But there's nothing. Just a strange, familiar silence. And she's gone.

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BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Alex Terrell was born in Hamburg, Germany on August 30, 1992. She was raised in Murfreesboro, Tennessee and graduated from Siegel High School. She attended the Middle Tennessee State University and graduated in 2014 with a Bachelor's degree in English. She came to Maine and entered the English graduate program at The University of Maine in the fall of 2016. After receiving her degree, Alex will be heading to University of Massachusetts Amherst to pursue her Masters of Fine Arts degree. Alex is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2018.