

The Caramel Venus and Other Stories

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ABSTRACT

My collection of stories illustrates the absurdity, the beauty and the pain of being human by depicting experience through fabulation. The intensity of existence comes to light in strange worlds that operate by rules of our inner mechanics, distorted so that only the colours and the shape of our hearts swim underneath. My fiction embodies these realities using the flatness of the fairy tale form while incorporating the humorous, the bizarre and the surreal. Some of the stories build dystopian worlds using the manifestation of the unfamiliar as a mirror of our psyche in an overpopulated and consumer-driven society. Others create contained worlds where the fantastical is fostered only by the narrator being drawn into an inner life. All the stories take us through inner landscapes with the humans, animals and objects around us that can pulse with so much meaning and then none at all.

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The Bears

When you were a brown bear you reared at me on the shore. So much food from the salmon run—your snout glittered with scales. I brought my wading suit and filled it with fish in your wake. You didn't eat anything during your hibernation—your belly swayed from side to side as you dug your den in the ground. I guarded against poachers outside. They brought bear traps. I said there were no bears here. They said they'd leave the bear traps just in case. I carried them around my neck until spring. You were grumpy when you awoke. You dragged your paws and stepped on a rusted nail in the forest.

When you were a panda bear your eyes had black circles around them. You had me believe that you were sad and fatigued, but it was only the nature of your pelt. I brought my rain coat for the monsoon. My hands were raw from foraging for the bamboo that I brought you. You roared at me in Mandarin and bit my hands when I fed you. When a tiger attacked me you said that you were a herbivore and a pacifist and that you didn't have any teeth. You were pink and patchy from where I clutched at your fur as I got dragged away.

When you were a black bear you had a white crescent moon on your chest. I brought my suction cup suit to climb up to you. You were eating the moths that were as confused as I was about the idea of two moons. You stepped on my head when you climbed down and said that you had a stomach ache. I said that it was your own fault for eating wood and termites at the same time. I rubbed your belly until you fell asleep with your long claws tucked under your head for a while.

When you were a sun bear your skin was hard and coarse. We'd been living in the forest for too long and it was quiet because there were spider webs in my ears. Your long pink tongue pulled out the spiders from inside, leaving the droplets of your saliva to drip incessantly onto my eardrums. I brought my bee suit and watched you break apart a hive with a ribcage crack. Your jaws chomped down onto vibrating bees. I joined in your feast, as I had also learned to search for a small bit of sweetness beneath the stings.

When you were a polar bear your fur was tinged copper with blood. I dove to watch the seals make jet lines around you in the black waters, like bobbing grey balloons. When you swam away from me and the next ice cap was too far for you to reach, the shore a

distant plateau with waves lapping from the ripples you sent long ago, I steamed up my goggles with my warm breath so that your flailing bear paws in the current made it seem as if you were waving.

I hiked back to my tent that had been whipped by arctic winds. I climbed into it and tore my wet suit at the seams.

When you were nothing but a bear suit, the two of us slept—on the saline damp of your bareness spread over the bed.

The Caramel Venus

My mother named me Venus, which was a lot—to be a fly trap and a morning star and a goddess of all things beautiful. Every year at my birth ceremony she would dress me in a body stocking of the kind figure skaters wear to have you believe they're showing skin. My mother did it so none of the townspeople she invited to watch me emerge from a papier-mâché shell would see my parts. But still I looked flesh-coloured all over, pressing a lock of yellow hair to my pelvis in modesty.

Mars was one of the boys my mother dressed up as an angel and paid in caramel biscuits to dangle from a tree during the re-enactment of my birth as Venus. He was obsessed with caramel, especially the kind found in Mars bars, which was how he got his name. My mother made the biscuits herself, sprinkling the dough with flour and kneading it with hands that were calloused from dishwashing. She slipped Mars an extra tin of the good stuff when he looked theatrically in awe of the way I cocked my hip in the splash pool that served as the ocean from which I, the Venus, materialised. My mother said that your birthday was *your* day. The day you deserved to be celebrated. And that was why it was OK for Mars to come over to our house after the ceremony when I asked and to let him into my room where he could watch me take off my body stocking.

Mars was less theatrical when he watched the ripples of my yellow hair falling over my mounds like autumn leaves with the moon of skin shifting behind them to make them golden. In those moments Mars floated up to the ceiling, still wearing his angel costume as though the faux feathers were granting him power. But Mars kept floating even when I took off his wings and put them on my bed. On my birthday my mother said nothing of Mars banging hard against my ceiling and of how, when he was done, we spent the rest of the day in my room watching *Adventure Time* and lapping up the caramel that had come off on the pillows.

The next day my mother always gardened. She grew vegetables in the backyard and picked them after my birthday to make us a wholesome meal that would cleanse us from the cake and sweets of the day before. As we ate I watched her fingers and the soil caught between them, admiring how it didn't make her seem dirty but earthly. She scrubbed them after dinner though, so that she could touch the pictures on her wall. Even so, the postcards of Botticelli's Venus were covered in fingerprints, especially around their heads where my mother had stroked their hair.

My mother didn't bother me in my room while she was busy with her pictures, which gave me time to sit and think about Mars. I thought of his wings and the stubs of

their feathers pressing into my thighs as I watched him floating about my room. I thought of the caramel that had dripped from him and into my mouth. I thought of how it must have been candy bars that had been melting and oozing from his pockets. But when I touched the inside of my panties, they were sticky too.

My mother told me that Mars was sweet enough to visit me in the living room or in the garden once a week. Mars invited my mother to watch a movie with us in the city. But she just smiled at him in the way she smiled at the owner of the dress shop when she was offered something to try on but politely declined. It was clever of him to get my mother to trust him like that because he took me to an R-18 movie and bought a big box of popcorn drizzled with caramel.

I put my hand in his lap and when the movie was over it was sticky. He weaved his fingers through mine and we stuck to each other. We sat like that until everyone had left the theatre, the credits still rolling. When Mars started floating again I felt his hand pull away from me like a plaster. He hovered in line with the projector, his body illuminated and his silhouette dark against the screen—a bomber soldier whose parachute hadn't opened yet. With sweetness still tangy in my mouth I tasted my breath as Mars whispered something to me on the way home. And as caramel trickled from my ear I watched him float around a corner in the direction of an all-night grocer that sold Mars bars.

A day later my mother had me checked for an ear infection when she found sticky brown stains on my pillow case. She asked the doctor if it might be my hair that was in the way—creating a mouldy climate for my ears—because it was out of the question to cut it. The doctor asked to see me alone. At home I asked to be left to sleep. In bed I put my hair up and ran a finger over my earlobe. I sucked at the caramel still oozing from it in a trail that petered out. When there was nothing left I checked inside my panties, which were all dried up as well.

I called Mars and snuck out of my bedroom when my mother was asleep, meeting him outside in the street. He walked over slowly, chewing at a Mars bar. He faced me and squeezed the bar in his hand before lathering my palm with its toffee-like caramel, tracing my furrows in the syrupy goo which collated until the lines disappeared again. We walked around to my mother's garden, which was ringed with uneven bricks jutting vertically from the ground. I lowered myself onto one of them and pressed down hard between my legs.

Mars tried to make conversation, but my foot tapped at the ground. He smiled at that and leaned in again, to whisper in my ear. Mars held on to the tops of my mother's carrots to keep himself from floating away. But by the time the caramel dribbling from

my ears had created glistening tawny highlights in the strands of hair that had come loose on my shoulders, he could hold on no longer and drifted off into the night. I sat dipping my finger in my ear until dawn and chewed at my hair until all the caramel was depleted. When I lifted myself from the jutting brick I had to rush to the house and climb into the bath to catch all the viscous sugary toffee that was dripping down my legs.

My mother bought a lot of extra sheets and spent more time with her vegetables. When she saw me in the hallway or in the garden, she turned and pretended to have forgotten something in another room. When I snuck Mars into my bedroom at night and lay back on my pillow while he floated around trying to catch the stars projected by my night light, I suckled mechanically at my hair. It had clotted in stick-like tresses down my back. With the caramel buzzing in my ears I pressed my cheek to the wall. It was then that I heard the soft tapping of glossy paper against the plaster where my mother was stroking her Venuses.

It took a long time for my mother to confront me. It happened when I was lying spread-eagled on my bed on a school day, pleading with Mars to whisper to me over the phone just one last time before I would get dressed. My mother came in unannounced and laid a towel down on my bed. She sat on it and faced me, smiling and tucking a shard of hair behind my ear. When it sprung back she looked down and rubbed her hands in her lap. I put the phone down next to me and concentrated on Mars's breathing on the other end. My mother cleared her throat and said that she wanted me to know that she was OK with my decision to wear dreadlocks. We were both startled when we heard the sound of Mars banging the phone into something hard.

When Mars came by that night he was floating already and saying that the strangest thing had happened. Something in my mother's voice had sent him reeling—bashing into the ceiling of his bathroom and floating out the window and into the sky. He said that he had floated all the way into space and had come across a planet of caramel. It looked like a toffee lollipop, complete with chocolate bubbling out like earmuffs at the sides where asteroids had chipped away at it. He said he would take me with him, and that there was no need to pack.

I left Mars zooming around in my room and closed the door behind me. I washed my hair for the last time, teasing out the caramel that had caked in crystallised sugar filaments. I combed it out and let it fall down and over me in a yellow and silky blanket. After waking my mother with a light shake on her shoulder I waited for her to rub her eyes before going to stand in her doorway. With the light from the hallway framing my head in a halo, I cocked my hip gracefully. I told my mother that I was

going to live on Venus and that she should go back to sleep. But of course she came out to wave at us—not asking us to send a postcard, just standing with her toes in the soil of her garden, eyes dreamy and smiling up at the morning star.

The Old Tiger

Old tigers are wondrous, she thinks, lifting her skirts to show her ankles to the old tiger lying panting on the floor. She caresses them with a flamboyant ostrich feather boa which she drapes over the rifle resting against the bed. “No one wears *old* tiger,” is what her friends say—lovingly of course, because of how quaint her doing so is.

She takes off her dress and bends over the old tiger, letting her breasts almost spill over her corset. The sharkskin leather is spanned tightly over the whalebone frame digging into her flesh. She feels faint and knocks over the harpoon gun by the fireplace.

The old tiger must have managed to lift his head to have a drink of water from the saucer she put by his nose. His white goatee is dribbling and ruffled—the scraggly fur of which she adores as its sparseness could make her cheeks seem so much fuller when they are licked by him.

She tugs at the thin threads of the necklace that is choking her and wets a sultry sheet of silk woven by worms. She dabs at the old tiger’s protruding spine. His pelt has lost its water resistance with age; she knows he can enjoy the coolness in his fever.

She rummages in a drawer, pricking her finger on a meat hook she hid there once. From there she takes her lucky little rabbit’s foot and drags it across the floor in front of the old tiger. She knows he never falls for games like an inbred house cat, but his deep sigh reassures her that he still appreciates her effort.

The old tiger’s coat would no longer provide camouflage in the wild. The once-dark stripes are hardly distinguishable from the coppers and the creams now. The old tiger would never be mistaken for anything but an old tiger. So she covers him with a soft blanket of sheepskin of the same colour as the ivory hilt of the knife she removes from her bosom.

She drops her corset and her petticoat and curls up next to the old tiger. Facing him, she places his colossal paw—the paw that can no longer sprout deadly claws—on her naked hip to rest and to numb her there under the weight.

The old tiger has no teeth left, only hot breath to moisten her skin. He blocks out all light from the fireplace so that the quiet darkness makes a mouse trap going off sound like iron jaws clamping.

There are moons of amber in the old tiger's eyes which are not, as in the glass eyes of the antelope mounted on the walls, just a reflection of outside flames. The amber in the old tiger's eyes can surely be carbon-dated back to the Baltic Sea where trees bled into the ocean.

She falls asleep and wakes when the old tiger's breath stops blowing the strands of hair from her face. She knows, then, that when she is lying alone in her bed with her old tiger's pelt on top of her or when she wears him to the opera, that she will run her fingers over his skin and feel his old scars.

The old tiger's battered whiskers finally stop trembling and it is then that she remembers. The most wondrous thing about old tigers is that they die on their own.

The Kid

The Kid crushes out his cigarette under a Ben10 heel. He stands close to the wall, near the gate where another first grader is saying a soggy goodbye. He watches her pass, heavy rucksack making her walk like a crab. Kid reaches out to help her, but then gets mesmerised by her braids. They remind him of his girl. You better be home at noon, she said. She's feisty like that, his girl. Five years old, going on seven. What a woman. So he kissed her and promised to make it. He knew how important the day was. The day they would set the lamb free.

The lamb. He chuckles under his breath and remembers how they found it. Bleating and kicking, becoming more entwined in the thorny vines with every desperate heartbeat. Red spluttered over soft tufts of wool. His girl refused to let him touch it. She wanted to do it herself. And she did, she nursed it back to health. She only let him touch the eye, which was pierced and oozing out of the socket.

Kid flips a curl out of his eyes to look up at the school wall. He laughs softly. That it should be thorns too. Not even the tiny ones with the hooks, but unpretentious thorns—white and long and sticking out for everyone to see. So the children wouldn't even try climbing it. But the Kid—the Kid has to get out by noon.

The Kid looks at his hands. The calf-skin gloves fit nicely. His mother's hands are so tiny. A shame her gift is already soaked like a warm spill on a leather couch. And sticking to his palms. The pain underneath is like lightning, flashing. The Kid can't bear the thought of thorns penetrating him there. So he lights another cigarette to think.

The Kid's eyes follow a set of triplets heading in the direction of where the school building should be. But then he does what you're supposed to do with a notice board. He notices it. A newspaper article. About how the school burned down a few months ago. A photo of an old building blazing and speculations of arson. The Kid's mind whirrs. Flaws in the architecture. An exit somewhere—a weak spot. A piece of soot flutters towards him, slowly. Kid is getting out by noon.

*

Dozens of feet patter across the playground. Children scream and hurry in delight or despair that the bell for the first class will ring soon. The Kid watches from a distance. There's not much to the place, really. The grass is still blackened. It's only at the small faucet where a viscous pool of mud has formed. The feet trample it into a paste. Kid goes closer and opens it to get a drink of water. He looks around for an exit, but there's only a vast expanse of concrete with faded hopscotch patterns. As the water gurgles into his mouth, he hears a soft moan. Two eyes stark white against the sludge of the mud

open on the ground at his feet. The Kid makes out the figure of the crab girl. She's stuck, but he unclasps her backpack and pulls her out. His hands sting. As he tenderly rinses her braids, the two of them watch a lazy bubble mark the disappearance of her backpack into the pool. Crab Girl doesn't leave his side until the bell rings.

You couldn't call it much of a classroom. A skeleton is the word. But the carpet survived the fire. Years of crayons and melted sweets and vomit and muddy footprints have created an impenetrable, indestructible film of grime into which the class of new first graders now sink comfortably with their legs crossed. The Kid looks around the room for a clue, a tool, an aid in his escape. It's only when Crab Girl next to him starts hyperventilating like an injured dove that he notices the teacher entering. Long brown trousers lead up to a beige shirt that barely covers a patch of scar tissue burned long ago. The tissue is fused into the teacher's neck like an almost-done omelette. His thin lips are set into a smirk that doesn't reach his eyes. Eyes with no eyebrows. Fizzled away by flames. The Kid decides that the teacher is the Arsonist.

He makes them introduce themselves. And when it's time to draw pictures of their choosing the Kid gets an idea. In black and red crayons he draws a map of the school. He volunteers to be first to show the class and the Arsonist claps his hands. The Arsonist points to the map in exaggerated gestures and his voice goes up a pitch. He kneels next to the Kid and starts showing him where he got the entrance wrong. Just as he takes the crayon from the Kid to draw all the exits, the Arsonist's breath catches and he looks at the Kid, really looks at the Kid for the first time. His smirk becomes lopsided. And he moves on to the next drawing, leaving the map unfinished.

The Arsonist pretends to be interested in the pictures of mommies and daddies and fishing trips, but his eyes flit back to the Kid. They blink too fast is what the Kid decides. While one of the triplets is busy explaining the intricacies of her unicorn's tail, the Arsonist seems to get an idea too and he reaches over to whack one of her brothers on the wrist with a ruler. Hard, like the crack of a whip. Tears well up in the boy's eyes as a welt springs up in the place of impact. The Arsonist triumphantly announces that that's not the way to hold a crayon, and lifts his upper lip and gaze in the Kid's direction.

*

By the first break the Kid is getting nervous. It's already ten. Crab Girl doesn't miss a step in mirroring his feverish up and down pacing, which doesn't help him think. And neither does the boy leaning against a burnt tree stump, sobbing and cradling his wrist. The Kid chucks his cigarette and slides down next to him. Left, right, there's no one around. So the Kid slips a glove off, making sure the boy can't see his palms. He

touches the red welt, sucking it into himself. The boy's tears dry up and he calls his two siblings over. They follow the Kid across the playground like the body of a Chinese dragon at a parade.

Crab Girl and the Sister hop and skip as they walk, tittering about this and that and about paper angels. Teacher said they were going to make paper angels after break. With scissors? is what the Kid wants to know. His girl had a pair of scissors. Pink and like bunny ears. It took them ages, but they managed to cut the vines loose from the lamb in the end. Yes, with scissors dummy, is what the girls chant in unison. The Kid looks out over the grass. He can still see the wall and from far away it doesn't look that big. When I grab your hand, grab someone else's hand and follow me, is what the Kid says to them. And bring your scissors. The Arsonist is standing at the classroom door, herding everyone in. He is smoking a cigarette and running a calloused thumb over the wheel of his lighter... sweating.

*

Scissors, explains the Arsonist, are dangerous. He laughs at this as he hands each child a green or yellow or red pair. Then he sits down, rolling, rolling the wheel of the lighter. Flicking it open. Closing it with a tired click. But the Kid just draws. He draws the silhouette of his mother and wonders why she left him here. Wonders why he has to save everyone again. The oval loops of the scissors dig into his aching palm.

The Kid sits at the feet of the Arsonist. He drapes his paper over his charred brown shoes, looking very busy. Looking very much like the child he could have been. The Arsonist sits and waits and sweats, but doesn't move. The Kid ties the Arsonist's shoelaces together under his paper angels spread out over the carpet and over the shoes. He takes his time. He waits until everyone has finished with the cutting. And then he starts wrapping his string of paper angels around the Arsonist's legs. Slowly, almost lovingly, he ties the Arsonist to the chair. The Sister giggles loudly and starts joining in. The Arsonist just sits, eyes growing wide, but unable to move from shock and wonder and the curious strength of dozens of strings of paper angels gradually forming a cocoon around him. When the Kid finally grabs Crab Girl's hand and leads the thread of children to the wall, the Arsonist is wailing and rolling around on the floor.

*

Little scissors cut through thorns. They cut a path through the wall. The Kid can start seeing some light on the other side, and the sound of cars passing leaks through the holes. When a gap big enough for the Kid to stick his hand through is formed, the wailing of the Arsonist grows nearer.

The Kid turns around and there he stands. Charred paper angels fly from him as he runs and they drop to the ground in little embers that die out quickly. The Kid knows he's done for. And then the Arsonist reaches him, teary-eyed and manic, tearing at his hair and stomping his feet as he wails. He finally regains himself, breathes shallowly. And then he takes two cigars from his pocket. He hands one to the Kid.

The Kid hesitates, then takes it. They smoke in silence. From behind a cloud of deep grey, the Arsonist starts talking about the school building. Such a beautiful building it was. Not fair that a building should be trampled and treated with indifference by the children that it shelters and teaches. It was better to burn it.

The Kid thinks on this for a while. Then he nods. He hands his smouldering cigar to the Arsonist carefully and takes off his gloves. He lays his palms open, and droplets of blood from the stigmata trickle to the ground. The Arsonist falls to his knees and cries, holding the two burning cigars in his hands as if they were the buttons of a suicide bomber's pack strapped to his chest. He drives them into the wounds on the Kid's palms. He couldn't help it after all.

Searing nerves make the Kid clench his fists. The burns bloom over his small hands, stopping the blood, closing the holes. For a moment it's fire, unbearable white scorching fire. And then it's all gone. Kid can't feel a thing in his hands now. He touches the Arsonist's face. But the eyebrows don't grow back. Kid's hands are swollen and useless. Finally.

So the Kid leaves them all and starts climbing the wall. He doesn't feel the thorns penetrating his dead flesh, the blisters. His thoughts trail back to the lamb. The sun is high already and it's time to set it free. When he reaches the top, the Kid looks down at the children that have grown small on the ground. As the satisfied Arsonist makes his way back to the class, the Kid wonders. He wonders if the stupid lamb will even realise that it's free.

The Golden Girl

There was iron ore under the earth's crust. Cloudy chunks of metal reclining in stone—content in never rusting from the underground steam, but still adamant to see the surface and become tractors and swords and perhaps even staplers. With their weight and hardness, the iron clumps took over the minds of the rocks and commanded them to vibrate so that from the friction the iron nuggets could rub against one another and become magnetic. A magnetism so powerful was sparked into being that the iron broke away from their settings and bashed into each other and, with the help of the smelting heat of the earth's distant core, sculpted themselves into polarised bodies.

The iron lovers could not separate, their northern and southern hands joined in eternity. But one pair of lovers clawed and rolled their way through the underground network of iron dreamers suspended in hardened embraces. They were strong, this pair, and in tandem managed to drag themselves far enough away from the tunnels to a place that was warm.

Exhausted from their journey, but still far from their melting points, the iron lovers lay down in an underground cave that glowed amber. They held each other there until the northern lover opened his eyes and saw, over the shoulder of the south, a glittering pool of gold.

Tired of being cold and hard, the lovers dipped themselves in the pool and slowly became softer—warm and mutable—groping and bending each other and delighting in the round dimples made by their fingers. The southern lover shaped the north's cheeks into a smile and said “Let us make a daughter”, at which the north cupped his hands and herded some of the golden syrup into the crevices between their bodies. They clung tightly to each other then—for the molten metal not to leak from any cracks—and rolled out of the pool.

They lay as one—their hard cooling bodies a shimmering mould, solidifying the gold within the negative space cradled between them. When they could feel it lying heavy and precious inside them, they broke apart. Their faces aglow from the light of their golden baby, they shaped the odd soft egg into a girl with legs that could walk and hands that could touch.

The north took the child's one hand and the south the other and as they did so they both felt it—the break of the magnetism. The catalyst child looked up at them with her Peridot eyes and thought that she understood what she was. Her non-ferrous softness a comforting wedge between them, the lovers climbed towards the surface—no longer bound by the forces of the earth.

The first thing they saw above the tunnels of their past was a young tree. A pair of love bird parrots sat dozing in its foliage. They snoozed with tittering sounds as their blood-orange heads rested against one another's. Their feathers seemed to heave in the gentle light of sunspots sifting through the leaves.

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The golden daughter climbed into the freezer every day after work. The iron lovers, her parents, had bought it for her with the last flakes of gold they could scrape from their gilded bodies after they'd made her.

There was only one golden girl above the surface. The golden girl didn't think she was meant to be there. Her soft body scratched too easily and got bent out of shape in the summer heat. Every day she would have to massage her pliable limbs and smooth out the scrapes with her limp fingers. Her mother wanted to help her with this ritual, but would only be saddened when her iron grip deformed the girl even further. The golden daughter couldn't bear the sound of her mother's iron tears, grinding their way over her face like chairs being dragged across a school hall.

The girl determined that she alone should fix herself and the freezer was enough, for the time being, to harden her and ready her for every day that awaited her as she awoke, contained again on a bed of meat packs in their crystallised coolness. Listening to the sound of her parents expanding in the heat of dawn—a creaking, sometimes howling sound—the girl readied herself.

Most people stared of course, but she had managed to find a job where she could sit in a dimly lit place all day, in a corner. On the train home she looked down, never lifting her glittering green eyes, afraid that they would be plucked from her skull by hooded youths.

The best part of the golden girl's day was when she came home through a small iron gate, welcomed by her iron parents sitting in the garden, rusting in the sun and the rain—content to no longer be attached, but stuck with each other nonetheless.

Sometimes the golden girl melted into her father's arms, pouring herself over his chest and oozing out from his embrace in glimmering treacle. His corroded joints groaned as he patiently stroked her head to calm her. "All will be well, my daughter with the small soft heart. We will all return to the earth one day."

If only all men were like her iron father—a beacon of the earth's functional treasures—but the girl would soon realise that they were far from it. Her boss called her in one day, saying she was worth so much more to the company and that they hadn't been recognising her enough. The golden girl felt special and agreed to attend the party they were organising for her late one night after work.

When she arrived with a pretty dress, her boss was there with a woman she had seen only a few times, but heard frequently when she tapped her nails against her desk. It didn't take long for them to stop pretending and to close the doors and to cut the golden girl's dress from her body.

They splayed her out on the boardroom table and decorated her navel with fruits and chocolate that they licked off with their beastly moist tongues. They took out a file from the woman's handbag and set to work filing the girl. All her tips filed blunt. First her nose and then her breasts and her knees and the balls of her feet and some of her toes, leaving only enough so she could stumble out of there while they rubbed the gold dust over each other, snorting it and storing it in a velvet box for later.

The girl collapsed in a park, rubbing herself—rubbing the dust from her rough skin, trying to ply herself into the right shape again. Trying to get rid of the marks where the file had chewed into her. But the golden girl's body was stiff and rigid from the night that seemed much icier than the sanctuary of her freezer. Her fingers couldn't unclench themselves from the metal file she must have grabbed and that was now etching criss-crosses into her palm.

*

The golden girl came home through the iron gate as usual. She stood holding it agape, listening for the comfort of the wind howling over the bolts of her mother and father. She longed for their strength to enclose her, for their warmth as they expanded in the emerging sunlight. But the only sound in the garden was the rustling of grass.

The golden girl walked to the porch and banged her stubbed toes on something hard. The torso of her father lay bloated in the long blades of grass, his eyes closed. His fingers looked brittle and corroded to the colours of desert sands in bottles, but they seemed soft, entwined with those of her mother. She, too, looked at peace with her coarse body and the flowers growing from her ears and the vines swathed around her neck.

The golden girl knew then that she had to go to the tree where they had surfaced and so she made for the road, the metal file still clamped in her hand.

The tree had grown beautifully and made a thick parasol over the heads of countless lovebirds whose school-uniform greens looked luminous against the dark shades of the leaves. The girl stood listening to their song. She lowered herself to the ground and crossed her scarred legs, leaning against the trunk of the tree. She could feel the sun warm her and soften her once again until her body was viscous enough to take the shape of the bark. She felt herself wrinkling, growing older right there as she

pressed herself against the grain, leaving behind flecks of gold between the splinters. She was startled when the metal file slipped from her fingers.

The golden girl looked up at the sun and with its light burnt cobalt blue into her closed eyes, she started filing herself. First she rounded off the jagged edges, then she started smoothing the scratches—filing herself thinner and thinner. When there was barely an arm left to file with, the golden girl watched her golden dust swirl in the air. Much like the morning sun gave halos to the lovebirds and set the veins of the leaves ablaze, the golden girl gilded the wind, for a moment, before the last specks of her floated towards the ground and sank back into the earth.

The Bundles

My friends bring me over in summer mostly, so that I can divert the mosquitoes. They breed in the back garden, where there is a brackish pond that the dog no longer drinks from. My friends can't stand the itching that bubbles up from their skin in yellowish welts and they reward me to endure it on their behalf by doing my washing all summer, which I bring to them in bundles.

My friends have a top of the line washing machine. They brought it home last summer, swaddled in polystyrene, from a sterile room with lots of reflective surfaces. It's been whirring ever since—always full but never finished. I sweat a lot around my friends. I don't get to visit the aquariums in summer, but I am content to sit on the cool floor and watch my sheets swirl by, floating past like foaming jellyfish when one or other cycle of the washing machine is complete and brings the world to a ghostly halt.

Mosquitoes really like my blood because it's a sort of cocktail. I had a blood transfusion once because of tick fever that I noticed too late. My friends' sheep dog is always digging in the garden, among the long grass that grows wildly near the pond and she shares a bed with me—a small bed in a separate room that my friends never finished painting.

My friends say what a relief that I'm here now—that they have their hands full and can't waste any more time on scratching. The husband has a bundle wrapped in a blanket that he's rocking in his arms. His wife has a bundle strapped to her chest. I lift its folds to find a silver cutlery set still in its packaging. I stroke her belly, where she has stuffed a feather pillow in under her dress.

The television wails and the husband says it's his turn. He shuffles off, pushing his bundle into my arms. I unwrap it to find a computer game inside. The husband watches over the television until it quiets down.

*

The wife and I sit on old chairs in the back garden. They're covered in canvas, for the sun and rain, she says. They creak from our weight. The wife props her feet up on my lap and I rub them because she says they're swollen. A mosquito hovers over her ankle, before deciding to settle on my wrist.

Mosquitoes really like my blood because it's a sort of shooter. My mother and father's blood never quite took inside me. It floats around my veins in oily layers that don't have the same density. The mosquitoes pull up their bar chairs and pass

out drunk around my ankles and my feet, where the veins fork closest to the surface.

The sheep dog cuts through the grass, rustling it with her black tail sticking out like a shark fin. I lift the wife's legs, her ankles in my palm, and scratch at my neck with my free hand. I want to know what's in the garden where the dog digs. She says there are only more mosquitoes and tells me that it's time to wash my shirt.

It sticks to my stomach when I take it off. The wife gathers a fresh bundle of clothes and sings to it while I undress in the wash room. She hands the bundle to me and flops the sweat-drenched heap into the washing machine. The buttons of my trousers bang against the dark inner lining of the machine—thrusting with hollow metal echoes.

*

My friends are exhausted by the late afternoon. They spend all morning gathering the right things into the right bundles and carrying them around the house until they are old enough to find their rightful place. I fix us an early dinner of cool summer fruits and leaves, with meats cut into thin films. My friends sit listlessly at the table, each of them fingering a bundle or hopping one up and down on their knees.

By the time we are finished eating, my friends barely have any strength left and I carry the wife to their bed. I come back for the husband and wrap his massive arms around my neck for him to lean on me on his way to her.

The husband jerks the pillow out from under his wife's dress and hugs it tightly to his chest. They prop a bundle of duvet up between them and fall into a deep sleep.

I sit on my small bed and scratch. I want to sleep through the twilight as well, through the mosquitoes' most active time. I wait for the sheep dog to join me, but she doesn't come and I go looking for her in the house. I find her herding the bundles into corners. My friends leave them lying all over the house. The sheep dog runs them up drawers and tables and they scurry into cabinets. She plays tug of war with their wrappings and spins them out of their blankets. When all of them are in their rightful places, she lies panting on the floor. The bundles, too, seem to breathe a bit before they start gathering dust.

*

At the peak of summer I become anaemic. My skin breaks out in hives from the bumps of baby mosquito bites at which I scratch my nails into a pulp. There are

big mosquitoes too that drift over to me lazily and like pesticide aircrafts they swiftly deposit their saliva into me before I can even feel them on my skin. My blood is their fuel. They park themselves on my ceiling and wait poised until I turn the lights out every night. I listen to the sound of their wings in the dark—the voodoo violins that they play for me in secret, for my ears only.

Mosquitoes really like my blood because it's sort of easy to reach. My skin is soft and thin, my pores are generous. I don't have a lot of hair on my body and I breathe deeply and sweetly. The sheep dog lies at my feet, occasionally snapping at one of the insects that hover there. We never sleep under the covers in summer.

My friends sleep undisturbed. They take a nap at dusk and dress themselves in cool white pyjamas before going to bed at midnight, when they fall into a comatose sleep that is interrupted only by their bedside radio at dawn. It screeches at them to change its frequency before they go about their daily bundling.

I can't seem to get any sleep anymore. Every evening after I have carried my friends to bed and the sheep dog has finished herding the bundles through the house, she looks up at me with her uncanny brown eyes and tries to herd me through the back door, into the garden. At the peak of summer I no longer have the strength to outsmart her or to fight her and one day I let her lead me into the grass. Like a koi fish lazily passing a lotus in a pond she sweeps me along, cutting a path through grass as tall as my shoulders.

We end up in a clearing where the blue light of dusk seems to be thicker and where several piles of small stones lie heaped on the ground. I look back to the house, which seems further now than I could have imagined.

A thin trail of smoke drifts up from one of the piles and I see the wife perched on top of the heap, a long cigarette holder between her fingers. She glares at me from behind giant round sunglasses that cover all of her temples and her eyebrows. She taps at the holder to let a clump of ash fall down and in between the stones. Her legs are spindly in striped stockings—splayed atop the pile at impossible angles.

The dog settles down at my feet, making herself small and flat behind me. The whites of her eyes glisten in the increasing darkness. She is silent except for the occasional whimper—the inverted whistling sound of sheep dogs. When the coal from the cigarette lights up the wife's face with every drag, I can see its embers reflected in each of her dozens of eyes as they try to decipher me behind the glasses. It isn't the wife after all.

Her cigarette is finished and she removes it from its holder, taking care to stomp it out completely with her heel before crouching in front of the pile of stones. She plants her cigarette holder in the middle of the stones and closes her lips around it more tightly than before. The woman who is not the wife does not let go of my gaze while she sucks at something that is buried underneath the bundle of stones, her makeshift straw pulsating.

*

The sheep dog follows me everywhere, supporting me when I stumble and licking my face when I pass out on the floor in front of the washing machine. I am happy that my friends' skins are smooth once again and that their strength has returned.

They manoeuvre through the house in increasingly animated ways every day, bundling their treasures and taking care of them. The husband brings me a bowl of fruit at noon, saying that I look too pale and that the sugar will make me feel better. He drinks the juices from his own bowl, which he balances on one palm while he cradles a wrapped electric razor in his free arm. To his back he has fastened a rolled-up bedspread and when I ask if we are going camping he laughs and squeezes my shoulder really hard.

The wife passes me in the hallway and lets her fingers run across the small of my back to feel how much I am sweating. Her nails are long and tingling. They slide across the bumps and scabs on my spine. The itching returns when she lets go, even worse than before. I grope at her belly where this time she has stuffed a teddy bear in under her blouse. Its price tag dangles over her belly button. Its eyes are black pearls under the white of the fabric, of her skin.

She stays with me until past midnight, on the cool floor of the wash room, lying flat on her back and resting her feet against my chest. I nestle my head between her knees and wait for her breathing to become soft and even before I pry a small bundle of earrings from her fingers and carry her to the husband who is curled up in their bed.

I watch over the sheep dog as she herds the bundles. She barks and plays, her paws scuttling across the tiles, her ears flopping happily. She rushes from one room to the next, tongue trailing behind her. Her human brown eyes smile at me for approval. She brings me a package covered in bubble-wrap from which I tear the tape for her. She chews at it until the vase inside is exposed. It rolls towards an open cupboard and comes to rest. It is only when the back door opens that the dog gives a suspended inwards whistle and slowly backs into a corner.

The woman who is not the wife walks into the wash room, her striped legs blurry in the fluorescent light. She sweeps through the kitchen and towards us. The lights are reflected a hundred times in the eyes behind her glasses, but she does not seem to be looking at us. Strapped to her back is a cart that is formed like an abdomen—bean-shaped, bulging and shiny, trailing behind her on the tiniest of wheels. She takes care to manoeuvre it through the doorways and into the living room where scattered bundles of treasures still lie waiting to be herded into their rightful places.

The dog and I watch in silence as the woman gathers the bundles and deposits them into her cart. Slowly she picks each bundle up from the floor, poking at the folds with her cigarette holder to see what's inside and then closing it up again by twirling the fabric over the opening. She moves silently, the only sound a faint creaking from the wheels of the cart under the weight of the packages.

By the time she gets to the hallway leading to the bedrooms her cart is full. She stands there for a moment, palms resting against the opposite walls of the narrow corridor, elbows jutting out at the side. She seems to be listening, to be smelling. But she soon reverses, walking backwards with her cart until she is out in the open once more where she can turn around and proceed to the kitchen and through the wash room out the back door.

The sheep dog and I watch through the dining room windows as she stops at the pond, where she crouches down. The woman who is not the wife blows bubbles in the brackish water with her cigarette holder, before lighting a cigarette and making her way back through the grass. The ribbon of smoke and the wheel prints on the ground stay behind in her wake before they, too, dissipate as though they had never been there.

*

My friends do not miss their bundles that disappear from the house every night. They seem to have a source of unlimited new bundles, or perhaps they recycle older ones, but as far as I know my friends never revisit the treasures that they once nursed with the greatest care. They seem to be fixated on the new, the unopened.

I decide not to tell my friends about the disappearance of their bundles, keeping it buried inside me as much as the urge to scratch at my body, which is a field of sores that re-open every time I lose control for a moment and dig up the itch that I managed to keep stifled for a while.

My friends start looking at me worriedly, lifting up my shirt to check the severity of my mosquito bites. The wife washes my clothes more frequently and I try my best to keep my secrets from her especially. She wraps bandages around my middle, where the mosquitoes have bitten through my thinning shirt, and she dabs at me with salves that stop the itching for a while and seep into my pores with minty coolness.

When the woman hauls her cart into the house at night, I try to ignore her by busying myself with dusting off the treasures that lie buried in drawers and displayed on stands around the house. On one such a night I discover something in the television rack—a large parcel wrapped in cloth and tied with string. It rests among wires from various electronic controllers and charging cables.

Inside the bundle I find a candle as large as a water bucket. It is yellow and smells of the forest—citronella, the kind that repels insects. I light it with my swollen fingers, slightly searing the bandages around my hands. I fall asleep next to the lit candle, waking up when it is light outside, with blurry vision underneath swollen eyelids that were, up to now, free of any mosquito bites.

*

I spend my days on my small bed in the separate room where the sheep dog lies in the doorway. I wrap my arms around my candle and breathe through my mouth. I am woken only by the fingers of the wife changing my bandages and trying to lift me so she can get a fresh shirt on me. This happens so frequently that I imagine she leaves me lying naked and sweating on the bed after a while, closing the door behind her.

When night falls I hear the faint screeching of wheels on the tiles and reach out my hand to the dog to calm her whistling. The cart comes ever closer through the hallway, its wheels jerking over the cracks in the tiles, stabilising again to press forward. I crawl out of bed and drape myself across the hallway, in front of the door to the small room with its peeling paint.

I light my candle and look up to the woman. Its tall flame licks at her glasses, reflected in the eyes beneath. She puts her cigarette holder between her lips and pinches her nose. She retraces her steps, backwards through the hallway, pushing the cart with her back until she is out of sight and in the living room once again. The woman who is not the wife continues to forage for treasures, her shadow long and spindly in the light of the candle—the only light now in the house.

I feel the hands of the wife wrap me in a blanket, swaddling me like a larva and trying several times to pick me up. She carries me to their bedroom, where she

places me on the bed. With me wedged between them, a soft solid bundle, I fall into a feverish sleep as my friends watch the shadows of what was once important to them, dance against the walls.

The Greyhound

The doctors said that my wife would do well with a greyhound instead of a neck. That no one would notice its waist above her shoulders—the stringy slender white with fur as smooth as skin. We had to choose a female so that no genitals would stick out between my wife’s collar bones, as that would give it away. We had to choose a damaged one because no one donated racing champions in their prime. The doctors said that my wife would do well with an amputee—that it would give her something to nurture. I thought that they were only making excuses because there was no space for two front legs in my wife’s head. The chest barely fit in there, curving in the same way as my wife’s throat, pulsing with a heartbeat so fierce that it made her nod every second.

How they managed to fit the head inside was a mystery to me—the muzzled snout pressing into my wife’s sinus cavities and the ears swaddling her brain. The eyes were in line with hers, peering through them and giving them a dark lustre under the green, like a mossy pond you can’t quite guess the depth of. But I was more fascinated with the way they rerouted her arteries—the greyhound’s hind legs connected in a way that pumped blood to her head when it galloped. The doctors said it would be good for her to feel something moving inside of her—her ribcage flaring with every stride, her belly convulsing to provide the deceitfully small paws with a buoyant mat to run on.

My wife’s neck had always been the best part of her, its arc like a polished bow leaning into me to rest her head. And that’s why I took it home in a jar in case she could use it again. Other than that I took care of her only, making sure the greyhound never stopped running. From then on there were rabbits in the house—poignant rabbits whose cages I hardly cleaned to make sure that the greyhound could smell them. Her pillows I stuffed with down and every night I covered her in a throw decorated with rabbit tails at the edges, hoping the greyhound would dream of chasing them.

But still I was afraid that the greyhound would stop moving—the galloping machine coming to a halt and hovering inside my wife, a few seconds of rest enough to shut down her brain. So immediately I took up cycling because the greyhound is triggered by movement. On winter days I sat my wife down outside and rode around in front of her so that the greyhound could watch me whirr by. That seemed to work because when we made our way back home my wife was warmer than ever, her cheeks aglow and her hands close to boiling, twitching inside mine when I held them.

Even with the bruises that were blooming outward on her ribs and the never-ending shudders, I wanted my wife more than ever because of the way her skin was on fire. The energy being generated inside of her made her seem so alive to me—a warmth so close to fever. I filled the bathtub with ice so that we could have sex without her overheating and I lowered her onto me very slowly, the jolts of her seeming natural to me for the first time since her operation as we moved together in the water. I tried to keep up with the strides of the greyhound until I thought my heart would burst. And when we came, both of us together, there was a terrible moment when she was still—only the greyhound’s heart beating in her throat.

When I took her back to the doctors, they said that there was no need for rabbits or cycling—that the electricity firing in her brain was enough to shock the greyhound into perpetual movement. It was best not to be too physical with her, to let her live inside her head. And when I drove us back in the car I could see it in the rear view mirror—my wife on the back seat so as not to knock my hands off the steering wheel with her jerks, her green eyes taking the greyhound for a sprint in the fields of her mind.

That night my wife lay staring at the ceiling and our bed swayed like a ship from the tides of the greyhound in a gentle dream. I could feel her heat spreading, its tendrils reaching out to me, warming me where the cold jar rested on my shoulder, on the pillow where I had placed it. My wife always had the most beautiful neck. Pale and taut with muscles like flutes under her skin. Flesh strings mooring that which fights to rip itself loose from a body. A head too heavy.

The Bird Girl

There was a Bird Girl nesting in the copy machine. Hiding herself, can you imagine! She was slender, but not abnormally so, as it was really the machine that was monstrously big. It could print industrial blueprints that seemed to me to serve the sole purpose of making others feel insecure for not understanding them. The Bird Girl's anonymity rested entirely on people pretending that it wasn't them who broke the printer when rustling sounds could be heard from the inside.

How she revealed herself to me was somewhat of an accident and all because the geese inspired me into working late one night. Every day before leaving the office I stopped by the goose pond to have a cigarette in the light of dusk.

On that one particular evening my mind seemed to be wandering as I soon realised, from the light reflected in the pond and the strange taste in my mouth, that I was puffing at a *second* cigarette. I stared at the geese until darkness had fallen and the last car had abandoned the parking lot, save for mine and the dark mercury sports model of our CEO.

There was an especially fat goose I quite liked. By the time the others had settled in for the night his beady little eyes were still scowling at me. He wiggled his tail and waddled over as if on an official scuba mission, lifting his wings to let out a loud squawk. A truck's horn somewhere on the highway echoed his cry. He seemed satisfied with that and turned to lumber back to where the others were sleeping, flopping his bright orange feet against piles of his own faeces along the way.

The goose pen wasn't cleaned often. My co-workers and I didn't have time to appreciate the company's effort to create a more serene work environment, and most of them felt that peacocks would have been more suitable. I sighed and looked up at the office building to see if I could recognise my window. As the stars became visible I realised that I liked the geese. And looking at them lying there, still and feathery like cotton balls scattered around the pond, I felt an inexplicable desire to look at numbers for the rest of the evening while they slept and until they woke the next morning.

Reaching the third floor, I imagined goose feet paddling through clear water on a summer's evening and took off my shoes and socks, which I then carried to my desk. I believe it was this, along with the eerily soft workings of modern computers, that failed to warn the Bird Girl of my presence.

It wasn't long before the plasticky hinges of the printer made a creaking sound as the gigantic lid lifted up. I looked up to see her emerging with the uncannily casual grace of the Bird People, as if she were rising from a sun bed.

Her large brown wings were wrapped around her neck like a high-fashion scarf, resting just above her breasts. The auburn hair beneath her navel, parting perfectly down the middle like the sunlit veins of an autumn leaf, was the last thing I saw before bowing at her feet.

“Can I get you anything?” I mumbled from the dark.

She hissed with fright. “Stand up,” she said. Her voice was deep, like the hooting of an owl.

She sat down on a desk with her back to me. Satisfied that I had taken in her beauty, she twisted her neck one hundred and eighty degrees with a sickening crack, facing me again. She slowly blinked her yellow eyes, her eyelashes quivering like moth feelers.

“Pardon me for asking,” I said, “but why do you nest inside the printer?”

She reeled her head back around and dug her long fingernails into the desk to lift herself from it.

“Does this bother you?” she cooed, silently putting one foot in front of the other to approach me.

I cleared my throat. “No, no, not at all. It’s just that, well, you’re a Bird Person.”

She stroked the young feathers caressing her collar bones. “Yes?”

“Well, our CEO is a Bird Person. Forgive me, but—isn’t that what Bird People do? There aren’t many of you, after all.”

Her pupils dilated and she stretched her neck towards the moonlight sifting through the blinds. “He’ll be ascending soon,” she said dreamily.

“I’ve seen him floating through the hallways lately, yes.”

She smiled at me and turned to leave the room.

“Where are you going?” I asked, immediately regretting my rudeness.

She made a crucifix of her body over the open doorway, gripping the sides with her arms wide open and letting her head fall back far enough for me to see her upside down lips muttering, “Who do you think feeds the geese?”

*

The geese were excited. CEO’s ascend often, but not that often. The entire company was out in the parking lot the next day to watch. I wasn’t focussing on the speech. My eyes fixed on the CEO’s powerful naked torso, I thought about the Bird Girl. I only truly registered the last part where he handed his car keys over to an accountant, his lips playing into a dazzling smile as he mused that he wouldn’t be needing them where he was going. I always wondered about those lips and how they were receding into his skull from old age. How they were perfectly straight and thin like the cubical glass he

drank his expensive whiskey from, which he didn't bother to lock in his drawer and which he never offered me when I was in his office once.

I suppose he couldn't hold it in any longer. It started when he was gesturing to someone in the front rows. At first the gigantic white feathers of his wings opened slowly, like an unfurling fern, but then—with a jerk and a gust of wind that sent two employees staggering—he shot up into the sky. The sun made a halo behind his balding head and he bent one muscled leg like an angelic soldier, keeping his stern face on the clouds towards which he was hurtling.

The faces around me were astounded and I was watching their mouths droop when I saw the Bird Girl somewhere in the back of the crowd. She was wearing a hoodie, only one brown feather sticking out at her throat. She placed her finger on her lips and went back into the building while the others let out a cheer as the CEO made a white trail like a fingernail scratching so rapidly across the sky that it broke the sound barrier.

*

People were talking. The constant whispers in the canteen and by the water cooler had a single topic of discussion—where would we find our next leader? Had I been interested in gossip and politics, I might even have suggested the Bird Girl for this very role. But as the whispers became more frantic and papers were scattered throughout the hallways in panic or rebellion or apathy, I became more detached—thinking of nothing but the Bird Girl and refusing to share her with anyone.

The Bird Girl visited me as much as I visited her. For a time I convinced myself that she didn't know of my nightly visits to the office and the goose pen, where I waited for her in the shadows. But seeing her on the side of the road, perched atop signs that said

Caution

OWLS!

on my drives home, I began to admit that the gleam of her eyes on the unlit freeway was not a hallucination after all and that the Bird Girl was watching me as much as I was watching her.

On the night the Bird Girl chose to speak to me again I was sitting cross-legged in the plants behind the CEO's empty parking space, waiting for the Bird Girl with the binoculars I had bought for my interest in swift migration patterns. Devoted to her routine of feeding the geese every night, the Bird Girl leaned over the goose pen and

cooed lovingly at the geese while she did what I imagined was to feed them. On this night, as on any other, I watched the smooth curve of the Bird Girl's back as she leaned over the railing of the goose pen in a way much akin to a dancer draping herself over a ballet beam.

I was startled when I saw the floppy white form of a hideously fat goose running towards me, becoming ever more blurry in the lenses of my binoculars when it suddenly stopped to curl up in the middle of the CEO's parking space. The Bird Girl took her time to approach us there and when she was only halfway across the parking lot to meet us, she looked right into my eyes.

"I can hear a mouse's heart beating from the sky," she said. "Or are you more of a rat?" She picked up the goose with her hand curling around its neck, and stroked its fat crop with her nails. By that time even I could hear my own heart beating. "Don't worry, I don't eat rats," she said and kissed the goose on its head.

I got up from the ground and dusted off my pants. "I, um, haven't seen this goose before," was all that I could muster. I did believe I knew all the geese rather well.

"He just wants a big executive parking spot like the big fat executive goose he is, don't you, little goose?" she said, tickling the goose's ear hole. She let it drop to the ground, where it scrambled to its feet and rushed back to the middle of the parking spot.

"Everyone misses the CEO," I said, making conversation.

She raised a feathered eyebrow. "And now you're going to ask me if I want to take his place, aren't you?"

I shrugged, not wanting to admit that I would prefer it if no one else knew about the Bird Girl. She stood breathing in the night air, slowly tilting her head at me. The Bird Girl seemed so controlled in those moments. If our eyes hadn't been locked in an ethereal gaze I might never have noticed that I was no longer looking straight at the Bird Girl, but up at her as her feet left the ground and her body started floating ever so slightly until the moon was behind her.

The Bird Girl jerked herself back down to earth and ran into the building and up the stairs. When I opened the lid of her printer, out of breath and wheezing, the Bird Girl looked at me with the dark pools of her engorged pupils. She whimpered into her ink-stained hand, clutching a gigantic cartridge and saying, "A cage is better if you can rest your head against its bars."

*

I never knew that Bird People could ascend at such a young age. But the Bird Girl was irregular and mysterious in all aspects of her person. In the days that followed, the Bird

Girl seemed distracted and frightened, which is why I took it upon myself to assist her in feeding the geese so that she could cling to me whenever she started floating.

“Still not fat enough,” was what the Bird Girl said one night while flinging corn kernels at the geese.

I held her tightly to my side to prevent her from floating too far off into the night, but I didn’t dare caress the Bird Girl softly. Her body seemed warm and my suspicions of her running a high fever were confirmed when she started telling me the story of the geese.

“They seem fat enough to me. Don’t you think? Too fat, in fact.”

The Bird Girl shook her head. Her pupils grew into dark pools once again. She stared off into the goose pen and started talking with the flute sounds of her echoing owl’s voice.

“Can never be fat enough. Nothing will taste as good as the clouds that make them white and fluffy.” The feathers around the Bird Girl’s neck rose slightly and the wind blew through them. “They gorge themselves on the clouds. They think it makes them lighter. Until they’re too fat to stay up there.” The Bird Girl’s body felt sickly warm and beads of sweat rolled down between her breasts. “Falling back down.”

The Bird Girl lunged at the geese, groping for the fattest one—the one who escaped every night to lie in the executive parking spots. She squeezed its throat until its squawking beak gasped for air with the sound of a slowly deflating balloon. The Bird Girl forced the whole sack of corn down the struggling goose’s throat.

When the sack was empty the Bird Girl’s body seemed to relax and she seemed to wake from her reverie with a frown and a frantically heaving chest. The Bird Girl climbed back over to me, not meeting my eyes. But her feet never managed to touch the ground. Her wings unfolded above us—each delicate feather lined silver with the moonlight—until they cast a symmetrical shadow over us.

I didn’t think much before hugging the Bird Girl’s waist with all my strength and cradling her writhing body in my arms. I don’t know how fast I ran, but I managed to look back once to see the fat goose running after us and slipping past the slowly revolving door that led into the building. How I managed to break the glass door of the CEO’s office with only an elbow and to subsequently rip the drawer from the desk was also somewhat of a mystery to me, but looking back I can ascribe it to adrenaline and the monstrous focus on the whiskey that lay inside—glowing amber with the anti-septic properties of its alcohol.

I also didn't know why the CEO would keep scissors in his drawer, but was glad that they were polished enough to snip at the Bird Girl's whiskey-drenched wings that thrashed against the walls of the office as if they had had a brief life of their own.

*

I remember wondering if the beating of my heart hurt the Bird Girl's hypersensitive ears as she lay resting on my chest. The Bird Girl, the goose and I lay dreamily on a bed of sticky feathers. As I poured each of us another glass of what remained of the whiskey, the Bird Girl reached over to stroke the fat goose.

She nestled in my armpit and whispered that she thought I was a sophisticated gentleman and whether I was familiar, perhaps, with the art of making Foie Gras.

The Astronaut

At home there were always kittens. Lithe kittens, long as aardvark. Solid as fish, too, when they pounced on the stack of old vinyl records, surfing them across the room and scattering them like discarded compositions. The kittens always had engorged pupils, to see us in the dark. There was a yellow one and a stark black one and they were never not on top of me—wanting to nurse on my soft pyjamas, wanting to eat from my plate. Sometimes they would surf a vinyl right up to me and jump on my back like I was supposed to take them somewhere next. But the kittens stayed indoors and went to the bathroom only when I did. The yellow one had a respiratory condition and wheezed like a bird when it kneaded my eyes, urging me to open them. The black one was silky and ran its cheeks along my fingertips to save me the trouble of stroking it.

My father was ambidextrous. My mother and sister too. There wasn't much we could do together because there wasn't much I could do efficiently with both hands except stroke the kittens—pick up the kittens and feed them. But my sister was literally a brain surgeon and came up with an idea.

“This is my friend Amy,” she said the first day she brought Amy Lee to the house. They were both wearing red eye shadow, their eyes equally icy blue. My sister had blood on her scrubs. Who knew a brain could bleed so much. “Singing isn't something you need your hands for.”

“But can't you just poke my brain until I can do things like you can?”

“That's not how it works, little Sasquatch. Besides, I don't operate on family,” she said and pushed Amy Lee towards me. She went into the kitchen, texting with one hand and operating the washing machine with the other.

Amy Lee and I sat on the sofa with her skirt a purple pool around us like she was some kind of Oracle. The kittens jumped up to knead it, wrecking the delicate fabric with their insistent little nails. I think that must have made her angry, but she showed me how to sing anyway. When she sang a lot of things vibrated and the kittens fled into my hair. Her beautiful pale hands rested on her diaphragm. Feeling the rumble there, she closed her eyes.

What she showed me was so exhilarating that when I tried it that night, the voice coming out of me like a pearl hovering in my throat—a pearl expelled and growing like a snowball down a mountain—the kittens both had brain aneurisms. But my sister stuck to her guns —*I don't operate on family*.

In the end the kittens survived, but not completely unharmed. The yellow one was paralysed on its right side and the black one on its left. They had to lean into me

wherever we went in the house, permanently attached to me like mushrooms. Sometimes they sat on my feet for a completely free ride and used my momentum to bound through the air like water spurts in fountain shows—landing back on the ground where they waited for me to pick them up.

My mother and father applauded my singing, shaking tambourines in one hand and playing the piano with the other to accompany me. But eventually they decided that I still needed something to keep me busy while my sister was out cutting brains.

“How about an astronaut? The first little daughter in space,” said my father, who had been an astronaut himself before he was just a scientist.

“The first little daughter on the moon, with skin white and glowing as the moon itself,” said my mother, who had skin like cream and limbs like a polished sailboat.

When my parents bought me a moon-shaped foam ball, the kittens took to playing with it—lying on their dead sides to prod it with their fluttering kitten limbs and chew at it with their half-limp mouths. My parents took that as a sign of agreement and started building me a suit.

Every day I brought my father a Coke while he was welding. He opened the can with his free finger and lifted his mask to drink from it without missing a single seam. The suit was large and looming, propped up over a coat rack for a spine. My father asked me to hand him tools and materials, so that we were both occupied using our hands.

The kittens were on my feet, nibbling at my shoelaces until they were worn through. I didn't notice at first and only realised when it was too late—when my sneakers were loose and gaping so that my feet slipped right out and I stumbled into the suit.

But my father didn't build anything that was flimsy. He only had to make minor repairs and stroked my head saying, “It's OK, Sass. No harm done, little Sasquatch. Look, I put a sticker on the inside of the helmet. It's Amy Lee.”

At night I lay in bed with the kittens on top of me, dreaming about being too big for the suit. When I woke up on my side I was curled up into a ball with the kittens snoozing on my hip. I realised how ridiculous it was. The suit was gigantic. But when my mother started decorating it, sewing with one hand and painting frescoes on the crown of the helmet with the other, the dreams spilled over into waking. I was certain that as soon as the suit was complete and it came time for me to climb in, I would bulge out and tear it or lumber around inside—a super-massive Sasquatch that would pierce something.

I limited myself to a yoghurt in the morning, two little chutney-powdered rice cakes in the afternoon and a vegetable in the evening. The kittens grew very thin, pulling their useless limbs listlessly along when I opened the cupboards, barely interested in the orange chutney powder at the bottom of the empty rice cake packet. I was glad that I didn't have to share it with them because it was so intense that it gave me blisters on my tongue that made me think less about eating.

I was smaller than I'd ever been, but instead the dreams intensified. The kittens preferred curling up in the crook of my elbow instead of atop my shuddering body. I woke up with my hands tucked in under me—just as the kittens seemed to suck their paws inside themselves like they were about to lay an egg—every night, pressing tighter and tighter against my chest until there were furrowed wrinkles on my wrists that no longer went away when I stretched my hands out.

When at last the suit was finished my sister was the one making the final adjustments. I found her bent over and stripping wires with one of her scalpels, making some sort of circuit board. On the inside of the suit, right there at chest level, my sister was building a control panel.

“Hey, Amy, would you hand me one of those knobs over there?”

But Amy Lee bobbed her foot to some tune. The kittens followed the movement with their eyes and wiggled one half of their bodies to pounce.

My sister rolled her eyes and reached for a knob herself before slotting it into the panel.

“How do you even do that?” I asked as she put several more bulky levers in place.

“It's just like a brain really. All those connections. You know, things are a lot easier if you can do things well with both your hands. Look, I made this for you. You just push like this and this and the hands will operate themselves,” said my sister, showing me how the levers made the fingers grip Amy Lee's wrists.

“So, you all packed and ready for tomorrow, little Sass?”

“What was I supposed to pack?”

My sister just smiled lopsided at me, as though she had had a brain aneurism herself, but it made me feel better nonetheless. She polished the panel until it shone and then put her scalpel behind her ear.

I shuffled a little bit, not knowing if I should bring her a Coke or what Amy Lee liked to drink.

“What if I break it?”

My sister picked at the peeling skin on her palms—always rubbed raw from antiseptic soap. She laughed a little bit. “You’re like a little feather now, Sass. Nothing will go wrong.”

But my sister must have seen my panic because she pulled something out from underneath her scrubs. A cream-coloured corset with ribbons and wire lining.

“This used to be Amy’s, right Amy?”

Amy Lee looked like she could have been nodding her head.

“I wear it sometimes when I feel like I’m gonna spill out all over the fucking place,” said my sister.

Inside the corset I felt better and like the dreams had never been there to begin with. By that time the kittens were almost rabid, scratching at Amy Lee’s bobbing foot with one pathetic paw each until they drew blood and she, instead of screaming, sang out loud what must have been playing in her head.

*I lie inside myself for hours
And watch my purple sky fly over me*

When I woke up that night I was contained inside my corset. I think if the moon hadn’t been casting light on my bedroom floor in the shape of a twisted doorway, I might have been excited to go out there and be the first little daughter astronaut. But when I fell asleep I just couldn’t help it, tucking my wrists into myself. Bending my hands and pressing them into me until they curled up like millipedes. I didn’t even wake up from cradling the kittens and squeezing the kittens and ramming them into my chest and shifting my ribcage to put them behind little bone bars. I didn’t wake up from being unable to move my arms where they were stuck inside my chest, my elbows jutting out.

When my family wove goodbye with all their hands the next morning and I floated up into the purple just before dawn, I couldn’t really wave back either. Unless you count jiggling your elbows. But I quickly got the hang of operating the levers. Elbows are kinda stupid, really. Big dumb cone-headed ogres that can push things around. Bumping into the big red buttons my sister had marked for me. Pushing the levers up and down. I did rather well with that.

But my hands—I don’t know—hands seem rather delicate. It seemed to me like mine were really at peace just resting there inside my chest. And when I sang, knowing that no one could hear me through the soundproofing of the suit, I felt the vibrations in my fingertips, the ripples of a voice through all those receptors like sleeping kittens purring.

The Palm Readers

We were a Japanese horror movie in our bed in the mornings, my young lover and I. Me all long black hair, draped over the pillow in wisps like creepy calligraphy and him all unearthly grunts and moans when he yawned. He stood in front of the closet, rocking slowly to the rustling of a dozen white shirts. Was he asleep as he leaned against the coat rail?

A better diet might have made him less pale. More tea instead of coffee, perhaps. But in the mornings it wouldn't work. Since the aromatic horse-eye-coloured liquid was the only thing that could wake him and warm him, his sleepy limbs would stiffen when he realised I was busy tricking him into having his tea leaves read instead. And he hated the Readers coming inside the house. Touching the crockery. But I felt guilty for parking them under the avocado tree every night. The little white flowers clinging to their fur coats looked quite out of place.

On the first morning of our stolen fifth year together, my lover and I sat at the breakfast nook. I was trying to suck up the vitamins and minerals from a bowl of cereal. He dangled a cigarette between two of his fingers, the only intact parts of his hands, and stared into the garden.

"Show me your hands," I said.

Steak knives worked best for making readable patterns. The corrugated edges had made dotted scabs on his otherwise blank pink palms already. But I was tired the night before and it showed in the mess I'd made.

"I'm sorry", I said. "I'll try again tonight. I have a plan you know, I saw a picture in my mind, in a dream. Almost like a map. It will work this time, for good. I promise."

He gave me a wry smile.

We were late for work, and waiting for the Readers to warm up. They were frosted all over with tiny icicles decorating their charcoal-coloured coats. Mine's hooked nose was red as it stood breathing cartoony clouds in the cold. Its eyes followed us behind perfectly round sunglasses.

When I was ready it weaved its hands into a cradle and hoisted me onto its shoulders where I nestled into the fur of its coat. I rested the back of my hands against its collar bone and it picked them up to start deciphering the fine patterns and wrinkles of my palms like ancient Aztec codes. It knew exactly where I needed to go.

As we headed into the street, I looked back over my shoulder. I wasn't surprised to see my lover crashing into a bed of cherry blossoms, flying headfirst over his bucking

Reader that was desperately trying to make sense of the purple mess of a few days' future I had carved into its rider's palms. *Where will he end up today?*

*

I suppose I was lucky. I could just relax while my Reader put me on the right path. My palms told it everything. My days passed in a haze most of the time. My path was set, clear. I could even entertain myself on our journey. I liked playing with the crystal ball.

I rubbed my nose against the Reader's bald head. It turned transparent, showing me pictures of my lover hurtling through the streets, kept on his Reader's back only through its fierce grip on his hands. It squeezed them and tapped frantically with its fingers. It dashed left, then stopped abruptly. It concentrated for a moment, feeling the skin, then looked at the sky and took a back alley instead. I wanted to look away, but I needed to make sure the path I had drawn would get him to where he should be, instead of taking him to the border like last time.

As they finally shot through the window of his ground floor office, I sighed relief. I rubbed my nose on the crystal ball head once more to make the pictures of laughing people in suits disappear. I whispered a small prayer that the path home was clear enough for my young lover's Reader.

*

But my lover didn't come home that day. By midnight I brought my Reader inside and let it sit at my feet by the sofa. I rubbed its head. My poor lover appeared in the ball, crying. It was dark all around him, the only light coming from neon signs in a seedy part of town. He tried to pry his own hands from the Reader, but it refused to let go. It pressed on with an indifferent expression on its ineffably wrinkled face.

I flew up and reached for my keys. As my hands closed around the gate, my Reader appeared next to me.

"I have to go," I said. Its fingers were digging into my wrists. "Let me go. You know what will happen when those lines disappear."

I couldn't quite see what went on behind its sunglasses, but the world suddenly spun as the Reader flung me around its neck as if I were a helpless fox fur scarf. It held my palms and ankles tightly against its chest. I thought I had warmed it up inside the house—how could its touch still be freezing?

*

I only saw my lover one last time. On the way to work, close to the border, a week after he had gone. A big black coach was sagging under the weight of dozens of people staring out the windows as it creaked to a stop at a traffic light. A band of Readers were

holding hands and dragging the coach along the road. Their backs were facing the oncoming traffic. They didn't need to see.

With his green-grey eyes my lover gave me his best smile from one of the front seats. He held up his hands for me to see. The countless scars I had made on his palms were gone. And with only a few dark blue veins and one short wrinkle, I couldn't deny that my lover's soft blank palms looked right. Like they should have looked. Like they'd looked since he was born. And pressed hard against the window of the bus they looked like a small discarded piece of meat that had carelessly been thrown over the shoulder of a butcher to cling to that horrid plastic curtain beyond which children shouldn't venture.

The Gold Star

Sieve and I wait for the Boy Scouts in an old Cuban bar. It's not really old or Cuban, but decorated expensively so to give us a taste of the old world. Sieve could do a few tricks in his head right there to apportion the cost of genuine leather booths, a decorative Turquoise Vespa and the rent in this area to the hundreds of salads and beers they must sell in one evening. Adding a premium for craft and health, he could tell you the exact price of a burger without looking at the menu.

But instead he says, "I think you'll like Dark Wolf. They say you wouldn't believe the flavours he's got."

I try to smile at him and order a beer. We sit in silence and watch the plants hanging from little cages in the alleyway where we're seated. They sway in the wind and it's cold enough for Sieve to wrap his coat around me. People file into the bar, filling tables reserved for weeks. A girl dressed in a black suit and tap-dance shoes bumps into our table. Sieve applauds and hands her one of the *Charlie Chaplin* badges I made. He even helps her pin it to her lapel.

I snort.

"Don't start," he says, squinting at me through his cigar smoke.

I roll my eyes and pick at the label on my beer. "Shouldn't you be saving your badges for the *Boy Scouts*? Dark Bear and whathisface?"

"Stop it. It's just one deal, OK?"

I adjust my Girl Scout scarf and become pouty. A guy in a tattered band shirt stares at me as he walks past our table. I stop him to ask for a lighter and let him watch me take the first drag of my cigarette. He doesn't notice Sieve flicking his own gold lighter, his gaze fixed on the door where the Boy Scouts should come through any minute.

"So is that your band?" I ask him, tracing a finger over the shirt. I brush my ass against Sieve's back.

The band guy blows cigarette smoke past my ear. It smells like sleeping 'til eleven and holidays in his parents' beach house.

"Yeeaaaah. You should watch us play next door tomorrow night."

I stick a "*Struggling*" *Artist* badge on his chest.

"Wow, thanks. I..." He moves closer but I flash him my upper boob where I have sewed the one badge Sieve ever gave me to my skin. The boy raises his palms, saying, "Woooah," before backing off into the bar.

You are my sun, my moon and my stars. That's what Sieve had said when he gave me the badge. *Clichéd fucker*, I think, and smile while I stroke the small circle. I trace the concentrated orange thread that forms the sun, and press my nail over the rifts of the little silver moon. I could never find the stars. Wouldn't they be beautiful in tiny knots of golden thread to dot the purple felt night sky? I shrug. There couldn't possibly be enough space on such a small button for a cluster of gold stars. I watch Sieve run his onyx-ringed fingers through his hair. I haven't seen him this nervous since he first tasted my cookies.

I nuzzle into his armpit and play with his cufflinks. Sieve isn't one for flashing a lot of badges. The only two he wears on his sleeve are *Middle-Aged Guy I'd Really Like to Fuck* and *Eccentric Venture Capitalist*, mostly so people would leave him alone. And if they would run their eyes over me to search for a *Lolita* badge I would just show them my chest, tapping it with my middle finger to bring the point home. Sun and moon and fucking stars, bitches.

But what's underneath Sieve's clothes tells the full story. I pull one of his shirt tails from his pants and slip my hand in, drawing my fingers across his stomach. The hundreds of badges etched into his skin form a diorama. A maze of lines like a city's plumbing, connecting each carved out emblem that is part of him. A network like an abacus, a honeycomb, a sieve. A map of an underground metro system—each circle a stop for my fingers to linger before following a line in a new direction. Above one rib I hover over *Astrophysicist* and *War Veteran* before moving around to his hips where I poke at a bulging heart for *Detrimentially Kind*. My favourites are on his shoulder blades—on the left there are a few deep scratches for the pages of *Rare Book Custodian* and a set of concentric circles for the pupil and iris of *All-Seeing*. I settle my palm on the right, warming it with the glow of *Slow and Gentle Lover*. There are furrows at the corners of Sieve's eyes. I forget myself for a minute and bury my fingers in his hair, accidentally brushing the dent in his nape. I shudder as my fingers trail over *Immortal*.

"Here," I say, taking a handful of cookies from my bag. "Calm down a little, baby. Come on, have some *Sonnets*."

Sieve doesn't seem to hear me and bounces his knee under the table. *Asshole*. What ever happened to *Insatiable*? It's right there on his diaphragm—a carving of a well supposed to be bottomless, never filled. I remember watching the mark glow red and open up like a wound every time we would stay up all night, me feeding him cookies. Sieve was always wanting more. The knowledge and the vastness of the world. *Pop Art, Violin String Materials, Nuclear Meltdowns*. I can bake it all.

I don't know what it is about them. They seem so real. Like they're taking me places. I never asked for any badges in exchange. The sun and the moon and the stars were enough for me. I run my finger over my heart, searching for the smallest dots of stars that aren't there. I jerk away and shove a *Sonnet* under his nose.

"Not now, Honey Bear. The Boy Scouts are on their way."

"Fuck the Boy Scouts," I spit. "And fuck their chocolate and their candy bars. I hear it's poison. I hope you die."

I fly up from the table and make myself at home at another one full of young people. I blend in and slip my hand up the skirt of a girl with tousled hair and a delicate wreath of flowers around her head. She talks in a dragged out way and smells like strawberry drinking milk. "I just feel so *here*, you know, like really in the moment right now. Oh my god, is that for me? Where did you even come from?" I put my fingers to her lips as I pin "*Unwittingly*" *Unkempt* to her poncho.

"Gahd, it's like the universe has sent you here, I can just feel it. I mean, now I only need one more of these and I can trade it in for a gold star. A gold star!"

"That's nice. You'd have to take your wreath off to make space on your forehead though, right?"

She cackles and turns back to her wine cooler. Gold Star. She must be tripping out of her mind.

Sieve is watching me through his cigar smoke again and beckons to me with his fingers. Goddamnit. I don't let go of his gaze until I'm next to him, like a cat. I nestle at his side and let out a sigh.

"So, looks like your Boy Scouts have ditched you. Aren't they supposed to be really punctual?"

"They'll be here." He smiles in that *Resigned* way of his and pulls me closer. "I want to show you something." He takes a leather sheath from his belt. Inside there is a knife of cloudy metal, marks like fingerprints and tortoise shell on its blade. It's corrugated where it curves towards the hilt. "It's a Karambit," he says. "It's used to slash. It can even take a whole chunk of flesh out if you angle it right."

I close my fingers over it. Sieve's eyes are shining at me. He hunches over to watch my reaction from the side. I can catch on. I take an *Indonesian Weapons History* cookie from my bag and break a piece of it off. He rolls it around in his mouth and groans.

I rest my chin on my palm and watch him savour it. He seems to have a hard time swallowing.

“You are my sun and my moon,” he rasps, concentrating hard to get the cookie down his throat.

“And your stars?”

“Of course.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” I say. “Look, I made all these badges for your Boy Scouts. We can trade them for the chocolates.”

He sifts through the badges and smiles. *Resigned* again. “That’s great. You’re a—“

“A star?”

“You’re my angel.”

The wind rushes through the alley, knocking over my empty beer bottle. With it it carries the Boy Scouts to our table, wearing little Boy Scout shorts and socks pulled up to their knees. Their shirts are immaculately pressed. Draped over one shoulder they each carry a sash covered in badges, neat and unfaltering in arrangement like bottles crammed in a case.

“Thanks for meeting me,” says Sieve, rising and bending over to not seem too towering as he shakes their Boy Scout hands. They don’t introduce themselves, but I gather that Dark Wolf is the one with the really lame wolf emblem on his cap. I stick my tongue out at the other one—Gross Bear or what-the-fuck-ever Sieve called him. He stares at me blankly, clutching his giant box of chocolate bars.

The Boy Scouts sit down. They shake their heads in unison when Sieve offers them a drink. Sieve tries to make small talk, but the Boy Scouts don’t make a sound. They wait for him to give up, then slide a chocolate bar across the table. Its wrapper glints purple in the light of a vintage sign that says *Video Games*.

Sieve eyes the chocolate. He looks down at it and sits breathing softly. He searches their faces for the go-ahead before reaching out. He unwraps it like he undresses me, bites into it like he kisses me. Between his teeth as he chews on it there is a sound like my bones unlocking when he fucks me.

“Take it,” I say, throwing them a few badges like coins at a homeless person. No one makes a sound. The Boy Scouts don’t reach out for the badges, their eyes fixed on Sieve, his eyes closed in ecstasy.

He chews on that piece of chocolate forever. He slips his hand up his shirt and he busies himself there, a small sound like tying ropes in complicated Boy Scout knots scratching under his shirt. When he takes one hand out I can see the knife, which he puts on the table, its blade glinting droplets of maroon—red mixing with the purple of the light. When he brings the other hand out he dangles a small coin of skin between his

fingers, a badge from his chest, one I could never decipher. He places it on the table, where it sticks like a flap—a raw rolled-down piece of cookie dough.

Gross Bear pinches it, lifting it up to inspect it, and pins it to his sash.

“Sieve,” I mumble. “Baby,” my mouth feels really dry. “What are you doing?”

Dark Wolf digs into the box of chocolate bars and presents a green bar that glints on the table like a can of soda in the sun.

Sieve isn’t looking at me. He greedily unwraps the next chocolate and takes another single bite. This time he clasps it and presses it to his mouth while he slips the knife in under his shirt again, reaching up and around to his shoulder, swaying his elbow as he slices away. It’s much quicker this time, flopping the little badge on the table. He’s giving them one of my favourites.

“Stop it! Take this. Just stop!” I empty my whole bag of badges on the table and fling handfuls at the Boy Scouts. “Take it, *Bitch!*”

But the Boy Scouts are occupied with pinning wrinkled scar tissue badges to their sashes, and the patches of blood blooming on Sieve’s shirt are multiplying as quickly as he devours the chocolates, taking bites out of a few before groping for the next, frenzied and *Insatiable*.

I feel sick as I face the Boy Scouts over a mound of foil wrappers. When their sashes are full they place the bars Sieve didn’t have time for back into the box. I watch them ready their backpacks to leave.

Sieve is breathing next to me, his lips smeared with chocolate, sweating into his stained white shirt—dotted with dark rosettes of blood like a giant piece of Swiss cheese. “Christ, what the fuck, Sieve?” I say, but his eyes grow wide and he grows so very pale and then he just vomits on the table.

The chocolate sludge coagulates on the wood, pooling in chunky mounds. He wasn’t even chewing properly.

“If you fuckers poisoned him I swear I’ll fucking *kill* you,” but the Boy Scouts aren’t looking at us anymore. Instead they’re facing the door, where the girl with the wreath around her head is waving at everyone.

On her forehead there are no longer any flowers, but a bulging star, pulsing with a golden glow. All the patrons reach out to touch her, and the Boy Scouts get up to move closer. I look at Sieve and touch his shoulder. “I’ll be right back, baby.”

I leave him coughing and vomiting at the table and move towards the girl with her Gold Star, because Sieve can’t really die.

He will live forever. He will grow more badges on his skin and maybe even on his heart and engrained in his very being—beautiful and complete and endless. But for

now the Boys Scouts and I, we just want to be like this girl with her shining Gold Star—brilliant and unique and loved by all, even long after it has burned out.

The Empty Lot

You sit and gum the soft food we eat now. My boyfriend says that I'm still stuck in the oral phase of development. He is going to take over the world by controlling homeless people's brains. He runs his fingers through his long sandy hair. It smells like chemicals, but nice, when I bite him in his neck like he asks. He wears massive boots and he likes me because of the way I smile—mysteriously, without showing my teeth. People say guys shouldn't wear high heels. He says they're metal (but like the music) and that he can kick someone's face in with the steel tips. Steel is hard. Hard-core, he says. Just hard, I think, and bite my nails when he looks away. There are germs on my fingers. There are germs in our cage from all the soft food take-out boxes. We don't clean.

An empty lot looks so affordable next to all those six zero figures. We let ourselves out to buy it. The real estate agent sells from her booth inside the municipality garbage can with the picture of her face. I'm pretty sure she lives inside it. She's a gypsy fortune teller. "You'll be so happy here." And you and I look at a pile of old cement on yellowing grass. There is a mound of steel pipes and nails from when someone wanted to build. I'm pretty sure the estate agent nomadically moves from one garbage can to the next. Her picture follows me, popping up at every mini-mall's conveniently located waste dispenser. It shows her in a red pantsuit. The picture only shows her top half, but I know it's a pantsuit. Someone has stuck a piece of gum to the bin, in her mouth, right between her front teeth that look bleached in the over-exposure of sunny days. I dream of cooking you crunchy carrots in our house.

My mother feeds me little white pills for my teeth. To strengthen them. Fluoride pills she calls them. I don't tell anyone. The teeth fall out anyway and she tells me that I will get rich when little mice leave me money under my pillow. The mice build their houses from little teeth. I lie awake on my mattress next to hers. I dislocate my jaw and clamp it down onto my small pink nail, grinding the keratin between the remaining teeth on nearly opposite sides of my mouth. I decide that a house of candy would make me happier. You let yourself out to bring me candy from a vending machine. A soft toffee chocolate that I can suck on and make my fingers sticky with. I smear it on the couch. The one I let myself out to go and sit on sometimes, in the store. The one I want to put in our house.

My boyfriend and I drink beer from the bottle. He pops it open with his teeth. He has good teeth. Good genes, he says. I enjoy the beer while I can and dance to music with my hands on his crotch. I need a cage. I have to smile with my teeth soon. From between the mesh I have to convince someone to adopt me. I judge anyone who never had access to fluoride pills. Your mother knows about the pills too. They give them to us even after all our milk teeth have been stacked in a jar. For our grownup teeth. We buy beer for our cage, but we forget to drink it. The hours pass while we forget. We only feel the pile of nails at our feet when you curse and tear us from our reverie. You have bitten into the quick. The white of your nails will always be longer than normal. If you leave them long enough to grow.

I find out that my mother is actually a cage fighter. She doesn't care that her ears get fucked up and that she starts looking like a mutant. She fights. I suggest surgery. Or make-up. She shakes her head and puts her protective mask on. It fuses with her face as she carefully counts out the week's fluoride pills for me. I think she's dumb and go for acrylic nails myself. They smell good but get dirty. I eat the shit out of them. There is red nail polish between my teeth. I wonder if you can see it in the dark, when you wake up in sweat at night, when you realise that we have mortgage to pay on an empty lot. You sit in a corner of our cage and take out your computer that breaks and that we take apart to find nails between the keys.

The couch store people give me a lift home. They put me back in my cage and I wait for you to come. I can't wait to tell you that they give me the couch. That they leave it in the alley for me, next to broken cages on wheels that people used to shop with. I'm so glad I met you. I don't even miss my boyfriend who is living off car stock and who has a pool. He steals from me. Cutting the wires from my cage and plugging them into my brain. I'm so glad we adopted each other. I let myself out to drag the couch to our empty lot and wait for you.

The blood drips from our mouths. We don't remember having a dark pool in our front yard. We call it a yard because there is a foundation for a house made of bent steel pipes and nails in the ground. We sit on our couch and screw the cap off a beer with our slippery squishy fingers. I tell you a story about my mother. My mother says that cage fighters have short careers. That they need to get as many swings in as they can before their teeth fall out from old age anyway. In the dark I show you a trick that my mother taught me. Cage fighters can fold pennies with their fingers. They don't even feel their

nails dig into their flesh. But you just gurgle sarcastically. You already know that cage fighters can bend steel pipes with their teeth.

The Birds

The shit-cycle wakes her. Countless little batteries drop to the carpet with clunks and lightly bash against each other like marbles. She rubs the keyboard imprint on her cheek and stares at one glimmering green battery that is rolling towards her like a scarab beetle. She checks the time on her PC monitor, but she doesn't believe it. So she checks her cell phone too, and the digital alarm clock docking station radio on the bedside table.

The hummingbirds' wings never cease to flutter. It's easy to fall asleep to that sound—so much like little strips of paper in the wind. For a moment she's disorientated with the faint memory of a spreadsheet nightmare, but then the flickering red light catches her eye and she realises that the birds must be running low on juice. The dimming overhead light cuts out for a second in agreement. And she notices that her music has stopped.

She picks up the batteries from the floor where they lie scattered in the crevices of the room, wishing that her husband would help her for a change and stop pretending that he can live without any electricity at all. Cradling the batteries in her hoodie with one hand, she uses the other to open the droning black case that is skulking on the desk. Dozens of shimmering green batteries flicker their own red lights in protest. Some are still good, but not for long. She picks out the worst ones like the Jelly Babies she doesn't like and replaces them with fresh cells, still warm from the birds' digestive tracts. Their lights go green, turning the case into a glinting treasure chest. Her speakers blare out the song that had been holding its breath.

As always, she looks around the room to see if the birds are feeling the power yet. The blurry pink fans of their vibrating wings turn into floating holograms. They hover in clusters around the wires of countless electronic devices that snake towards the giant battery case. She can't remember how long the birds have been in those same places, and their occasionally blinking eyes are the only sign that they're still alive. But sometimes, right after she replaces the batteries, she can see their breasts heaving as the sweet new electricity surges through their bodies. Their little black beaks sprout from wherever they can find an open spot on the wires. She gasps as a greedy one opens its beak slightly, letting a golden droplet of electricity fall to the floor where it fizzles out on the carpet.

The gleam of the room is soon reduced to its normal hue as the birds sip up the electricity. The shimmering jades and fuchsias and cobalt blues gleam iridescent and the

air becomes a cool veil of white noise. That's the best thing about their fanning wings. Nothing ever overheats.

Satisfied with the loyal hum of the PC and the laptop and the air-conditioning and the lamps and the speakers and the clocks, she starts investigating where the flaw is. That's the thing with the birds. They can never give more than they take out. She checks the battery box for the weakest cells, the ones she couldn't replace, and a few birds move out of her way mechanically as she follows the wires to the speakers.

They need her report by Monday and she can't work without music. She chews on the nail of her index finger. On with the old plan then. Cheap trick, but she doesn't care, and she needs tea anyway. Her husband probably needs some coffee by now.

She walks through the hallway of the small apartment, passing the living room where her husband is sitting in the dark. His tall body is leaning forward in his chair; his elbows perched on his knees as he drags one hand through his hair and waves the other at the wall in fervent gestures. He is whispering softly. Talking to himself again. Their pet rat, a fat albino, is nibbling at his hair. Its little pink claws dig into his shoulder as his body shakes in the cool blue light.

"Hey, darlings," she says.

She can see his dark lips slice into a resigned smile.

"I'm making coffee."

She waits for a moment before moving on to the kitchen.

Making sure to open a window first, she checks that the electric kettle's wire is still good. Not hooked up to the battery system, they can only use it in emergencies. Coal power from the municipality is so expensive. She fills it up with water and takes a deep breath. She flips the switch against the wall. A thick silence looms before the device starts up. At first it purrs lightly, but just as it starts building up to the drone of an airplane, she hears the hummingbirds in the distance.

Like the eleventh plague they swarm through the window. Some are lost even before they can come close to the shivering power, bashing against the glass, breaking their beaks. Tumbling the seven storeys to the ground with broken wings.

The lucky ones slide their beaks into the wire. Those thin syringes pulse as they suck every droplet they can find. She doesn't look at them pecking each other's eyes out for a spot closer to the wall, the distant source. Instead, she quietly takes out the cups.

A hummingbird can only flap its wings for twenty one seconds without sustenance. There can never be enough space for all of them. And as the unlucky ones wretch on the kitchen counter, flapping their wings slowly like tired eyelids, she thinks of the coal miners somewhere, coughing as they pick mindlessly at hunks and hunks of

the earth's last bit of coal. Ancient, fossilised plant matter momentarily powering up a plastic thing.

When the kettle switch clicks off, she pours the steaming water into the cups and stirs slowly. The drunken birds twitch and hover for a moment, before shitting out hundreds of batteries and shooting off into the night. She vaguely wonders if they will find another source within twenty one seconds, but gets distracted by the sweet smell of fresh fruit tea. Stealing from rogue hummingbirds is what everyone's doing after all.

She lets the cups cool on the counter while she picks up the batteries and the remaining birds from the floor. The batteries she stuffs into her pockets, the birds she lets drop into the waste bin.

"Smell that," she says, holding a cup out to her husband.

He takes it without looking at her and offers some to the rat, who smells it with a twitchy pink nose. "I could have drunk it cold," he mumbles.

The wife ignores his remark. She reaches over to switch on the lamp in the corner.

"Leave it," he says. "Let's just sit in the dark for a while."

She searches his face. "Come on, don't be like that. I just need to get this report done. They can't not promote me this time. Then we can pay the electricity bills and any other bill you want."

He squints to savour the coffee, then smiles without any participation from his eyes.

"That reminds me, I have to go put these batteries in. They're running low."

He glazes over and strokes the rat's papyrus ears.

"Can I take her for a while?"

He puts his coffee down and hands her the rat. Its fat belly ripples out between his fingers and its tail wriggles like an earthworm. The little nails clamp onto her shoulder.

"Thanks, love. I'll see you later OK?"

On her way back to the bedroom she bumps her toe on his great grandfather's gramophone in the hallway. Its massive wooden box shows no sign of remorse for the throbbing pain in her foot. It wobbles on its dainty legs for a minute before coming to a silent rest.

She closes the bedroom door behind her. Back in the warm light, she leans against the wall and closes her eyes to listen to the hummingbirds. The music has died again, the speaker birds have made their way to the other wires in the room that still have power gushing through them.

Removing the dead speaker batteries from the box, she replaces them with the ones from the kitchen. There are more than enough to spare for next time.

Alright. Report. Business. Spreadsheets. Money. She turns her music up to three quarters of the maximum volume and sits down to the document she fell asleep on. A string of *asdf*'s has flooded the screen from where her face rested on the keyboard.

“Look at that, girl,” she says to the rat whose eyes, so much like swirling red wine, are fixed on the birds that have once again settled around the speaker wires. “I hope I saved before this.”

Unable to focus on the contents of her report, she listlessly changes the fonts and colours. She thinks of her husband and tries not to imagine his whispering behind the cloud of noise that now shields her from the outside once more.

The cursor of her computer flickers. It lingers on a word that seems to be swimming. Her gaze keeps straying, coming to rest on the birds whose blurry wings cast a mesmerising spell on her—seeing and not seeing. How strange, she thinks, that they should be content to live with eating and shitting in unwavering cycles, until one day there is no escaping that they have taken more than they can give. Unable to create, only to consume and to waste, and forever indebted to plant matter that died so long ago.

Only when the music stops does she notice that the rat is no longer in sight. This time it isn't only the music. The computer screens have gone dark, the air-conditioning has breathed out a last wave of air. The only light now comes from a pale moon behind the curtains. Amidst the whirring of the hummingbirds, now gulping at air in the sagging dead wires, the rat keeps chewing on the main power feed cable.

In the terrifying twenty and a half seconds of silence that it takes for the emergency diversion to kick in, the wife and the rat listen to the husband winding up the gramophone in the hallway. An old song slithers through the crack in the door. They could run away, thinks the wife. A gramophone doesn't need electricity after all. Some kind of magic that makes music from a wooden box. *We should leave now*, she thinks, tiptoeing to where he is standing in the dark. *Before the ancient wood fossilises*. Fossilises, yes, then to be burnt up for nothing but a few fleeting seconds of warmth. A warmth so absent from his eyes as they implore her—cold and dark with an oily lustre like wet hunks of coal.

The Skirt

“Please send washing instructions,” is what we paint on the bellies of the white baby seals. There are almost thirty of them, each with one capital letter on its fur. My sister coaches them in water ballet because she only ever talks to animals and I am the one who has to navigate and prevent the skirt-waves from swallowing us. The seals don’t spell the words quite as planned. Some of them bobble with their backs to the sky. There are awkward blank spaces when they get submerged. My sister isn’t too hard on them. My sister understands that it’s difficult to swim inside a sea of fabric and that there’s little chance of our mother looking back over her shoulder to see our message.

The lilt of the hem of the skirt of our mother makes for fjords that are always changing shape. The skirt of our mother is as long as a dinosaur tail and we’re afraid of the red that the baby seals are smearing all over it. We’re afraid of prehistoric skirt-sharks that are attracted to colour instead of scent. We know that there are animals and things that we don’t understand because nature is always changing if our mother can make new shores around her from the outlines of her skirt on the ground.

We plant our oars in the fabric and tell ourselves that as long as we can stay in her slipstream our mother might chase her tail and circle back around to the end of her skirt where she will meet us to share her secrets for keeping it clean all these years. My sister leans over the boat to dip her fingers in the thread and we both try to remember what it felt like when there were no creases. My sister’s skirt comes undone and spills out into the vessel and I am the one who gathers it and ties it back up in a bundle at the base of her spine. My sister and I look like bee girls with our fat skirt-bundle abdomens and the bristles on our bodies from being exposed to sailing weather. When we look back over the earth covered by skirt we see no flowers to pollinate, only the little white seal-larvae that will be our children.

When the skirt of our mother turns a heavy cloud blue we know that a storm is coming. My sister calls all the seals to her and we load them into the boat. They look pure and white against the filth of our legs and the grimy dark patches on our bundled skirts. When our mother shakes her skirt out like laundry to sit down, the first skirt-tsunami comes our way. My sister and I deal with the waves of our mother by catching them and pulling them over us like blankets. In our genes there’s a trait of being able to breathe through skirt-fabric until the worst of things are over. My sister gives CPR to the seals

that turn purple around the mouth while we wait for the waves to subside. Before I throw the skirt-blanket off of us I study its ceiling above me. It's as clear as the sky after rain—a sharp solid blue with no hint of a universe beyond it.

At night when we sleep there are black cats that visit. They come in from all sides and knead their way towards us. They have no interest in climbing into the boat. They stay in one place to stare at us until they go into a frenzy and rip the skirt-spot open with their nails. They climb in under the skirt and head towards our mother—their tails erect and burrowing away from us. In the morning they're back and from the way they mewl we know that our mother fell asleep on them. Their faces are crushed and crumpled and their legs are a lot shorter. Before my sister can name them I row us to the shores of our mother's skirt and it is there where we sell them as a rare breed of Persian cat. We trade them for water and washing powder to the people who like things that cannot breathe.

My sister and I let our skirts loose to wash them and they trail over the boat after us. By nightfall they're still damp and we reel them in to create a soft cool bed for the seals all around us. My sister sleeps soundly with her ear to a seal and I am the one who lies awake thinking that we've left our skirts undone for too long. When the moon sits just right—a spotlight in the dark—our skirts open themselves just like stage curtains. And then they're released—our little bald daughters who dance and twirl their skirts around the boat until it rocks them to sleep. When they're scattered and still we lift them and pack them—back into ourselves like dolls into a cupboard. And we sigh at the dark blotches on our skirts between our legs. And we bundle them back up on our backs and hope that the fabric doesn't rot from all the moist little breaths that it traps.

In the morning there are people that yell at us from the shore. That we're witches whose black cats have brought them bad luck. That their children have disappeared. My sister and I put two seals to our ears to muffle the sound of their mourning. When they give up and leave us my sister and I cast a line to fish. We find the children one by one, clutching the skirt-sea beneath us. They have no skirts that we can hook and they slip away from us when they wake up and crawl instinctively towards our mother. My sister and I try to use the last of our washing powder to remove the paint from the seals, but they refuse to get up off of their bellies. We do the same, flopping onto our stomachs, trying not to roll over in the night and squash the skirt-bundles that writhe on our backs.

My sister and I should be burned at the stake, which is why we say goodbye to the seals. My sister and I let our skirts fall down around us and set each other's feet on fire. It's hot air that rises and makes our skirts balloon around us. It's skirt-bulbs that lift us from our vessel and make us float up. My sister and I are Chinese lanterns with the blotchy yellow glow of stain-silhouettes. We don't need our feet anymore. The pain in our legs doesn't exist because tiny bald skirt-daughters are endless fuel for fire. When we soar over the skirt-ocean the seals spell something new, and we know that our mother will understand it.

The Princess

I fetch the little Russian princess Tatiana from the airport. In a thick grey poncho-looking coat and gloves, she hobbles over and shoves her single tattered bag into my arms. Her tiny sharp chin used to be cute. Her lips are red and look like those butt-crack little birds on the horizon in one of her drawings. I bend down to hug her, afraid that the lipstick might stain my jacket. My head is foggy.

“It’s so good to see you, Princess.” I breathe in the smell of paper and crayons wafting from her pockets and her bag.

She just stands there.

“What’s this you’re wearing?” I ask, poking her furry Russian princess hat. “It looks like a yeti condom.”

She coughs and her eyes tear up. Then she squints while thinking of a comeback. “That’s just how we *roll-l-l-l* in Russia, mothafuckas.” She *roll-l-l-l-s* her eyes and takes my hand mechanically.

We walk and the people stare.

“So, uh, they changed the name of the airport since you were here last.”

“I can *read*.” Sounds are muffled as something still hovers between us. My high heels on the tiles are a ticking timer. “Why don’t you try reading *this*.” She hands me a crumpled piece of paper with a few words of Russian on it.

I open my mouth to tell her that I don’t un—

“It says I hate your *face*,” she spits.

It hits me hard, those words, but then the smell of the paper... I give a quick glance over my shoulder, not really seeing anything, and then stuff it in my mouth. Oh my god—hate.

The world is static for a minute, but in a way you can’t put your finger on like the snow falling on a disconnected TV screen—moving and not moving—and yes it’s not much but there will be more and I can make it to the car.

I tighten my grip on her hand and walk faster up to one of those conveyor things. I wait for her to fall (I certainly did the first time), but her pointy white boots land perfectly on the belt as if she’s the world’s smallest astronaut on her third trip to the moon.

Tatiana snatches the key from me and climbs up my big SUV. She locks the doors before I can open the one on my side. I bang on the window with a COK COK COK from my rings. With a violent little jerk she gives me the finger.

“OK, if that’s how you want to spend the little time we have—fine.”

I look around the parking lot. The trees are small and dead and frozen inside the trampled soil as hard as the concrete of the equally-spaced toilet bowl-looking rings they're planted in. Tatiana goes into a coughing bout.

"So. Did you get a weekend pass?" I ask, fogging up the glass of the car window.

"Kind of," she croaks.

"Hmm?"

"Stole some whiskey on the plane. It would have fallen off the tray anyway. I saved it. Ungrateful bastards halved my pass time."

I rub my forehead. "You know, there's a reason they don't let kids drink."

"Pur-lease. We can get vodka from vending machines in Russia when they're not looking."

"I remember."

She pouts and unlocks the doors.

The drive from the airport is a long one with nothing but corn fields and shiny new warehouses along the way. The street lights hang over the freeway, alight during the day to fight through the grey of airplane, train and truck vapour.

It's quiet between us for a long time. Tatiana's note is starting to wear off and I can't help myself stealing looks at the bag lying at her feet. I made sure it was well within her reach, but she isn't budging.

"Got any chocolate?" she asks after a while and digs loudly around the various compartments of the car. Her little fingers let the cubby-hole drop down before I can stop her.

"What the actual *fark*?! Postcards?"

I can feel her eyes burning into me and it takes all I have to keep my quivering fingers on the steering wheel. "It's just to keep me going." Her mouth is hanging open like the cubby-hole. "Look, the post office takes forever to get your drawings to me. You know sometimes more than a week goes by before I get anything from you."

"Disgusting junkie. Next thing you'll be eating magazine ads."

Tatiana is right. It isn't like the real thing. But what am I supposed to do? "I got a bonus last week." I say.

"Oh yeah? How long until you can buy me?"

"I, uh, can't say. I'd have to look at the figures."

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever." She finally takes her sketchbook and colours from the bag and starts drawing quietly. She doesn't take her gloves off.

“Here,” she says, handing me an A3 colour drawing of the corn fields surrounding us. “If it will make you drive less like a retard.”

The oily pastels and fibres of the expensive paper I bought her makes it tough to tear the drawing with my teeth. But it’s a good thing, because these kinds of drawings you have to eat real slowly not to OD.

The sky isn’t grey anymore, but a bright blue. The corn fields rustle with thousands of corn stems spreading their leaves like they’re doing yoga with the distant hum of a tractor as their mantra. Birds peck at pesky little bugs to detox the kernels and I can hear everything.

“My toes hurt,” mewls the princess somewhere on the brink of my consciousness and switches on the air-con. She presses her feet against the vents and her toes spread out like a gecko’s. They are purple from the first signs of frost bite.

Snow causes the frost bite that blacken our feet. The snow itself is white and every flake looks different so it’s a lot like the polystyrene peanuts in an empty box in that sense (and also since you don’t care about it anymore after you’ve opened your Christmas present). Just like nobody in Russia cares about snow anymore. Tatiana’s coat was also white once and then she just blended into the snow like a deer that the tiger catches anyway. Princesses deserve presents all the time, not only over Christmas.

I stop at a garage and give Tatiana a fifty to buy some chocolate. Her eyes twinkle for a moment and she fumbles with her boots before getting out of the car. I watch her reach up to the counter and carefully select some gum sticks to buy with the change. She carries the plastic bag back to the car with the poise of a real princess. Her cheeks puff up around chunks of chocolate and I drive.

Tatiana is like the pine tree that stays green forever. Seemingly ever-fresh and youthful, but growing endlessly old with bark that has flaking layers you can never get to the bottom of. This country didn’t want children that grow old but never grow up so they sent them away to concentration camps in Siberia.

“I have to pee-eee,” moans the princess. I skid into another garage. I can hardly wait for her to close the door so I can dig into her bag. Yes. More pictures. I consider that she’s probably saving them for later, but I can’t help it. I flip through a gold fish in a bubble tank and the night sky but finally decide on one of a big black bear.

The silver-backed black bears lurk in the forests and eat escaping children that cling to teddy bears at night. The toys are given to them by concentration camp officials to shut them up and they have hard patches on their fur from the snot of little noses, like the black bears’ blood-clotted pelts. Unlike the toys, these are cleaned quickly to make the loveliest furs for the tsars and their concubines.

“Where’s my black bear?”

“Look, we’re almost there. Do you see the city lights?”

“You *ate* my black bear? You just had a whole fucking corn field. Are you *insane?*”

“We don’t have much time, OK?”

“What? You’re not even making sense. Just drive.” She crosses her arms and stares out the window.

Concentration camp officials are like gold fish—cold-blooded and with big round binoculars over their eyes they look out over the camps in glass tanks that tower. They also have a three-second memory span, ‘cause when you give them money to free a princess they just forget that they ever got anything from you and all your efforts melt like fish food flakes on the surface of the water.

We approach the city. It is the complicated side of a circuit board with lights slowly moving across its surface like children carrying candles to tiptoe through large houses at night. And if I squint they look like the stars in Tatiana’s drawings. We’re cruising up the incline, climbing higher in our SUV.

“Drive faster,” whispers Tatiana.

My blackened feet push the petrol pedal to the floor and I can’t feel that the car is rushing to the edge, but I stop just in time.

“Roll the windows down. This cool night air is... curious.”

I do as she tells me and Tatiana takes her gloves off to wave her hands through the icy breeze. They are small and pink and thank god she can still feel the cold. “Hey, do you want to drive for a while?” I say, not knowing what else I can do for her.

The Heart of Hearts

It had been a long day for Pine. His eyes were hidden under his hood and I could only see the shadow of them in the blue light of the television. His body was how I could tell what the day had taken out of him. I could see it in the dimness of his glow. I could hear it in the clobbering of a few small building blocks that echoed in his perforated stomach when he drew his knees to him. We were still made of young wood then, of supple wood. We were still made of smooth wood that gave way under the force of cookie cutters that made our negative spacing more intricate—wood too green to keep a proper fire going.

Pine had insisted on taking the short sofa even though he was taller than me. He'd insisted that I stretch out on the three-seater so that he could gather himself. I slipped two fingers into the hollow on my thigh and fished out a heart-block that was lodged there. I offered it to him, but he repeated that he needed to gather himself. The wooden heart was not painted yet, still splintery and soft from where I had stamped it out the night before, when I had been watching him look at the moon. It still smelled of sap and left my skin with little strings of gum—the amber that hardened the lining of the wound to create a smooth, clean hole.

I snuck up on him and fit the block into a heart-opening on his back. I was always coming up with new ways to love him.

His glow strengthened only slightly, so that I reached out to close the windows. “Your heart of hearts is burning low,” I said, because he was too full of holes. The wind would go right through him, swirling in through the hollows shaped like stars and octagons and clovers on his ribs—sweeping up and tugging at the flickering orange flames in his chest.

He sighed pointedly and shaped his hand like a bird's beak before lowering it into a large oval opening at his navel. From there he removed a handful of blocks that he slotted haphazardly into his holes. I watched as he absent-mindedly shoved one heart I had given him into a triangle-shaped opening.

“Better?” he said.

I nodded. I opened a window at a crack and stuck my finger out to feel the wind. It was cool but docile and I opened wider, lying down on the long sofa and digging my feet like roots into the crevices at its far side. My head sank into the depression that had been made by Pine's form—a frequent presence weighing down on the upholstery when he rested there at night.

That evening the long sofa was mine for a while and I raised my arm to shield my eyes from the flashing lights of the television. Focusing on its sounds to keep the rustling of the wind at bay, I ran my fingers over my front and my sides to assess the damages for the day.

A missing star—drawn out of me by the voices in that tall building. Another sucked out of my crown by the magnetism of those screens. A gaping square from the block that must have been stolen off my back in that queue. A small fat heart gone from my wrist—slipped under the door of the bathroom stall where someone was crying. Insignificant compared to the other heart-shaped holes that littered my body in strategic places, far enough apart to divert the wind and make it forget its pursuit of the heart of hearts at my centre.

A flitting sound passed outside the window—a small whooping sound softer than the television, but deeper. It made me hoist myself up. In the twilight there was a glint of a beady bird eye. The barbet peeped out from the hollow he'd been carving out of the tallest tree in our garden. His spotted wings quivered and his head twitched from side to side, brushing his soot-black crown against the bark. He seemed to be suspended, half of his body leaning out of the nest. Seemingly deciding that it wasn't deep enough for a bride yet, the bird shot out and into the dusk again.

I watched the sky for him to return, but there were already too many stars, it was too dark and I could feel the moon stirring a song inside me so that I had to sing out the window. The sounds hurtled up from my heart of hearts, sending little embers through my throat and out at the moon. They swirled in the dark, carried by the wind—up and over the vine-covered walls, into the night and glowing.

The song kept coming louder over the sound of the television, crackling pleasantly out of me. I closed my eyes and read the letters Pine had carved out on the soft wood on the inside of my eyelids. They, too, glowed from the heat of my heart of hearts. When I opened my eyes again my song came sweeping back through the garden, carrying the blocks I had lost with it. I caught them in my palm and fitted them in their rightful holes.

Leaning back into the sofa, I felt my heart of hearts glowing—sheltered again from the wind. I noticed that the television was louder and was startled when it cracked as it got hit by a small wooden block. And when I walked over to pick up the heart that was still sticky with the same gum that dripped down my thigh, I couldn't really tell what kind of show it was that had drawn so much love towards it.

The wind always found its way under doors and through small cracks for ventilation, which is why we slept like consecutive question marks with me shielding Pine from behind. The flames inside his heart flickered, casting shadows on the walls. I tried my best to cover him. I wrapped myself around him, letting the blocks that jutted from my front slot into the holes on his back. I slipped my one hand under him and spread it over his chest to cover as many of the hollows as I could and closed the other one around his throat so that his breathing would not whistle like kettles on the fire.

That night I couldn't sleep, clinging to Pine as he shifted and rolled. Droplets of sweat formed on his forehead as he jerked his head around. The wind howled furiously outside and seeped through the covers, creeping up my legs and against my grain. Pine's heart of hearts grew dimmer, even as the night was at its darkest. I rummaged through his stomach as softly as I could so that I wouldn't wake him, but he kept his blocks buried deep down there. It felt like blindly invading the den of an animal and I was afraid that something would pull me in. When there was nothing else to do I took the cookie cutter from the bed stand and watched its silvery outline shimmer in my light. What was one more heart for the one I loved?

I pressed it into the soft part under my arm—a place that was still untouched—and twisted it until a small heart popped out. It was fragrant and green underneath like the secret belly of a lizard. It was the right size for the spot in his neck too—the place beneath his ear where his hair didn't reach—and when I slotted it in, his heart of hearts flared up for a moment before settling on an amicable hue.

I lay worrying about my arm sticking to my side from the goo that was oozing out of me there, but when the light outside started turning grey and I could hear the soft song of the barbet readying itself for a hard day of pecking, I felt myself relax and fell into a deep sleep that could have lasted only minutes.

I woke up alone and from the pinch of a five-point star-block digging into my ribs. Pine was staring at his closet and started clambering about. I hoisted myself up and felt a cube press into my palm, realising that I'd been asleep long enough for Pine to have a nightmare. Scattered across the bed lay dozens of his blocks that had slowly bled out of him like nails being unhinged. Or had they been forced out by a single shock?

“You need to put these back in,” I said, grouping them by shape.

He paused for a moment and watched me, before gathering the blocks and hastily sliding them into his holes. He turned back to his closet.

“What about that heart I gave you last week?” I asked.

He stiffened and breathed out. Then he rammed his hand into his stomach and fished out the heart, lifting his arms to search for an empty hole to cram it into.

Please don't lose any more of my hearts today, was what I wanted to say, but I knew I would have more to give and I could already hear him fumbling with the keys of the front door.

When I had my breakfast in the garden, beneath the barbet's tree, the bird eyed me suspiciously. But it wasn't long before he continued crafting the home for his unborn babies. He faced the hollow, turning his head to the side as if to show me how his insistent pecking was making the red and yellow of his feathers blend and vibrate like ever-lasting fire.

*

When I came home I couldn't wait to show Pine the hollow that had started forming in my womb—bean-shaped and growing, an invisible termite burrowing as deep as a belly button.

"They say it just needs soil," I said, sprinkling a pinch of dirt over it. I searched his face for a clue. "And maybe a few seeds to grow inside it and fill it out."

But Pine was ever silent. He walked up to me and ran his fingers over my eyelids to close them over my sockets.

"You *know* my love for you is more representative," he said. "Letters carved into the bark."

I read the words again and opened my eyes to face him. When he saw that I wasn't satisfied, he wrapped my arms around his waist.

"Look—my love for you is symbol. Concentric circles engrained." He tugged at my hands but they couldn't reach all the way around him and whatever I said after that was an echo through the cavity of his chest. I peered inside him but failed to discern, in the sparse light of his heart, where the tunnels of his insides led.

Even after he had left to settle into the sofa I stood trying to think of things that could be more symbolic than a bulbous fruit in my womb, but eventually I gave up. I glanced at the barbet's tree in time to see two tails disappearing inside the hollow and I imagined the warmth of the birds ruffling their fire feathers and leaning into one another. This only made me more aware of the cold that was creeping up my spine and into my heart of hearts—through the hole in my back from which Pine must have taken out one of the biggest hearts I had left. An uneven sort of heart-block that had always been there and that was darker than the rest of me. A heart much like a birth mark.

*

"Take this one too," I said to Pine, after having given him a heart from the ball of my right foot. I hadn't been able to remove it with the cookie cutter as the wood on my soles was hard and I had chiselled it with a pocket knife instead. Deciding that it was

difficult to walk with only one hollow foot, I handed him the left foot-heart too and wondered why I hadn't thought of taking one from there before. For someone who stood still as much as I did, surely there was no other place the wind could possibly reach any less and I felt proud of the way I had duped it.

With the hollow in my belly having grown to the size of an onion, the soil I had taken to filling it with no longer compacted properly inside it, sifting right through me and dusting my toes with dark powder. The wind howled through it, washing out any dirt that did manage to cling to the small cavern and clawed at my heart of hearts so that its flames diminished by the day.

Pine took the hearts and rolled them between his fingers before throwing them into himself like dice. I wondered why I couldn't hear them reach the bottom of him, as he must have been filled to the brim with me by then, yet his body was still perforated with the same empty spaces all over.

I started busying myself with making a rope from the vines against the wall, severing them and weaving them until they were strong. I reached down into Pine and took from him the two hearts he had swallowed, before splitting the rope at one end and tying each strand around a heart-block like a life buoy. The other end I tied to his wrist and slotted the hearts into two of his holes. "So that you don't lose any more of them," I said and stood back to admire my craft.

Pine looked down at the rope and then at me. "Where are your other blocks? Those other little hearts and stars and shapes?"

"I can't get them back. I'm too cold to sing," I said. "Besides, we could get this vegetable to take root and then I'll be filled up completely, and then it won't matter anymore right?"

But Pine looked over the wall. "It's better to stay indoors then," he said, and headed into the house.

The barbets started making a sound like a saw mill, the male shooting out of the nest like a cast fish hook and it was then that I knew their baby had hatched. I shook the tree until the two halves of egg shell fell out and placed them into my onion-hole. Then I burrowed my toes into the soil to get in touch with my roots.

*

"You're looking burned out," said my mother. The first spring rains hadn't fallen yet and the soil was dry, which made her form flicker every time I wriggled my toes—the connection was bad. I could see straight through her every time the television inside flashed white or yellow through the darkness that was everywhere else—it even reached

the garden where we stood, since my mother had no light of her own and mine was feeble.

When my mother spoke it sounded like the wind. In her throat there were two giant heart-hollows instead of a voice and in her chest there were more—the only thing she could control was her lips, which she rounded and split in time with the wind so that it whistled through her to form words.

“I’ll be fine, Mother,” I said. And then the wind gave one fervent swirl that pulled the moon from behind the clouds before it went quiet. My mother couldn’t speak for a long time because of that and so we watched each other illuminated by the moonlight. Her body was like an iron gate embellished with the outlines of hearts. Inside her there were a few twigs like straw dolls, but mostly she was hollow and see-through like an unfinished finch nest. On the stronger outlines within her perched a few birds that slept quietly in her caverns. In her chest there was the crow, wide awake and staring at me, polishing the glittering pendant that was my mother’s heart of hearts under its talons.

“A little melon in your womb won’t fill you up,” it rasped. “Fill you up.” I hated when it spoke for my mother, but the wind was quiet and she could form no words. “Look at you. One more heart-block and you’re done for. If you aren’t already. One more heart.”

The crow squawked and pecked at the pendant. It couldn’t seem to polish away the last smudges of soot.

“Mother?” I said, but the wind was still in hiding. “I just need one more heart to give. I know if I love him enough he’ll fill me up and shield me from the wind.”

My mother’s eyes were wide and glistening and she kissed the air to try and summon the wind, gulping at what wasn’t there. My poor mother had no hearts left to give me and when the wind finally flared up it was with such force that I was knocked down, my feet leaving the ground and the shape of my mother retreating to where it came from. I walked over to the barbets’ tree and shook it, but their baby didn’t fall out for me to catch.

*

The seasons were late that year, with the winds that were supposed to strip the last dead leaves from the trees still blowing furiously deep into spring. I had given Pine one last heart-block that I had cut out from beneath my breast, hoping that the wind wouldn’t reach there. I don’t know if that had been the one that ended up being the difference. I suppose I should have stayed indoors. But I almost felt like I could sing again, standing under the tree to watch the barbets teach their baby how to fly. And it must have been

the same gust of wind that plucked the little barbet from the sky and smashed it into the ground that finally blew out the flame in my heart of hearts.

*

“I’m sorry about your heart of hearts burning out,” Pine said some time afterwards—I couldn’t tell how long it had been, but he came out to me a few times and repeated those words so much that the crows perched on the wall started learning them.

“I found something to fill you up,” he said. He went down on his knees in front of me, right there in the soil under the tree, and put the fallen baby barbet in the hollow inside my womb. And when the wind blew through me, creating a tide like a voice inside of me, it pounded the baby bird against my bark. Its limp neck bobbed, tapping its beak softly against the amber that had hardened around my cavities, just like it was really pecking.

The Floater

The girl wasn't always a float, but became one when she pumped air into her breasts and her lips to rise above the water and to lure him in, that magnificent predatory fish that sees her bobbing about on the surface of his murky habitat.

The sun beats down on her, turning her top half red, like she's blushing, but leaving her submerged bottom half honest—a shimmering white like the inside of a chattering oyster that is tugged at by the undercurrent to open itself wider.

She floats all month until the moon is finally full and bits of her unused insides expelled. The pieces swirl around like little Siamese fighters, but are mistaken for bloodworms—the food of the lazy and domesticated carnivorous fish.

The majestic predatory fish comes, and slurps them all up, and lets his whiskers feel her flesh. He sucks onto her with his flexible fish lips and drags her down into the depths of green.

The floater now immersed, she bathes in the cool liquid, thankful that her eyes are not meant to see below the surface, where fish turn into blind dragons that thrash and roar in the dark.

Bored of towing and reminded, by the metallic bloom of bloodworms around his mouth, of the iron taste of a hook, the magnificent prehistoric fish unclasps himself and sends her hurtling back towards the light.

She bobbles uncontrollably, and stops, oblivious to the dents made by his whipping tail, but glad to be free of some algae in the places where the sun doesn't shine anymore.

The Colour Worms

I was studying insects and decided to go on an adventure with my assistant Kumiko who glowed somewhat in the dark and exhaled the oxygen that I required to live. We were specialists on the order Lepidoptera, but spent most of our time chasing moths under the stars because of Kumiko's delicate white skin that did not take well to sunlight.

After we had discovered several new species in various shades of brown and silvery beige, Kumiko started regretting her aversion and covered her face with her net to hide the tears that rolled from her eyes in glistening bubbles. Kumiko wanted to discover a new butterfly. Her coloured pencils were kept sharp.

Apart from Kumiko's sketching abilities she was also an excellent navigator, especially in the dark where she relied on her night vision and her sonar. The idea for our journey came to me once when she was screeching and tapping on the ground. When she presented a small fox that we proceeded to cook on an open fire, I realised how truly resourceful she was and that there was no reason why we could not be the first ones to study the metamorphosis of the Colour Worms.

Kumiko and I didn't believe that the Colour Worms were, in fact, worms. Our peers at the time were set on the conclusion that, because they burrowed deep underground and could not possibly transform into flying specimens down there, the Colour Worms could not be caterpillars. Now, I am no longer an expert, so forgive me for not using the proper terminology, but Kumiko and I knew that the Colour Worms were caterpillars that would transform into the largest, most breath-taking butterflies ever seen, simply because

1. They had sticky tentacle-like legs and feelers
2. Each one ever spotted had its own magnificent spectrum of colours
3. One of the butterflies came to Kumiko in a dream, almost smothering her with its gigantic wings

Kumiko had always been fixated on that butterfly, with its colours that still lit up the darkness behind her eyelids in sleep. It was time to go and search for it. Kumiko and I made our preparations and set out on a journey to record the metamorphosis of the Colour Worms. The journey that started in the place where a new mountain is formed every year, at the foot of which the Colour Worm eggs hatch in droves.

Stage 1—The Psychedelic Eggscrement

Some mountains bear forests at their feet, others bear treacherous boulders or a chasm of ocean. The Colour Worms, however, hatched in an open field—on nests of soft grass that surrounded a mountain range of oddly-shaped peaks. These peaks, powdery and pearly, seemed to consist more of crystallised laundry bundles that had been wrung out and left to cake in the sun than anything the earth could conjure up. Their wax-like towers had folds like fabric and seemed to change form with the movement of the light.

We timed our arrival to coincide with the day on which the Colour Worms would hatch—the exact predictability of which was another phenomenon that led us to believe that the Colour Worms were but one stage in the mechanical cycle of metamorphosis.

We waited until sunrise for the Colour Worms to hatch, having set up camp near the outskirts of their scattering so as not to alarm them or put ourselves in danger. Even though docile, the Colour Worms were large upon hatching and would grow even more so during their several months of feeding on the grass until they became big enough to enter the soil. No one had come close enough to determine if they were poisonous, and Kumiko and I planned to observe them before opening ourselves up for any trouble.

Kumiko sketched the sunrise with her colour pencils while I pitched our tent made of special silk to protect her skin until we could go underground. It was when the egg closest to us started breaking apart with a squelch that Kumiko touched my arm and the both of us watched two black feelers emerge, looking very much like worms themselves.

Just as eager as the Colour Worms to see a new world, we let go of our trepidations and dipped our fingers in the inky fluid that oozed from the egg and, concluding that it wasn't poisonous, lay staring at the silken canopy our tent made over our heads. We were dreaming Kumiko's dream with our eyes wide open and inhaling the gust of a thousand massive butterflies flapping past.

Stage 2—The Looking for a Foothold

Kumiko and I spent enough time in the field to see the Colour Worms grow. They fed on the grass in a tireless manner, the field teeming with their numbers and the air filled with their amicable crunching noises. Wild flowers of all sizes could not escape their mandibles and it was this that led me to believe that perhaps there was some form of parasite at work—a parasite that festered inside those flowers so

carelessly consumed by the Colour Worms. A parasite that would then take hold of the Colour Worms and implore them to journey underground to their death, for the sole purpose of transporting the parasite to the next stage of its lifecycle.

Much like those snails possessed by parasites imploring them to climb further and further up trees, the Colour Worms possessed the brightest of colours—the patterns on their bodies ever-changing and almost fluid. Could it be that not unlike the snails, the Colour Worms were merely vehicles—their colours only bait to convince a predator that they were something else? But if so, there was no explanation for the survival of the Colour Worms as a species. All of them went underground at the same time, leaving nothing behind but the question of how they came into being in a field at the foot of a mountain in the first place.

I busied myself with studying as many of the Worms as possible—taking care not to tread on their wobbling forms as I made my way through the field. I could not discern anything strange about either the flowers or the grass.

Kumiko, on the other hand, had taken to observe the Worm that had hatched from the very first egg we'd been intimate with. The Worm, by then the size of an overnight bag, never strayed far from our tent. Its body was a deep midnight blue blending into purples at the darker patches and dotted with bright coral flecks in the shape of beans. Kumiko grew fond of the Worm, saying that it had good taste in colours and that we should call it Violet until we could properly classify the species.

At the time I interpreted Kumiko's naming of the creature as an indication of her strong intuition that it was female, which would support our theory that it was a caterpillar and not a worm. I did not realise that it was instead a term of endearment—a fact which I could no longer deny after Kumiko had started mounting the then farm-animal-sized creature and riding it around the field as it grazed.

Kumiko kept producing oxygen. And as if out of nowhere, she also produced a saddle and stirrups that she'd crafted from the waste we did not want to leave behind when we started our journey underground. She believed it would fit on top of a fully grown Violet, along with our sparse belongings.

Stage 3—The Lighting of the Way

The Colour Worms migrated at night. In the days leading up to their journey, we observed that they were starting to spread out. Eventually they started forming a large circle from the foot of the nearest mountain, curving all the way back around, in a surprisingly symmetrical fashion, to where our tent was located.

The Colour Worms ate less and less in their new positions, rearing on the suction cup stabilisers located on their abdomens, as if smelling the air. Kumiko kept fussing, saying that it would happen any day, that the Colour Worms could up and leave at any minute and that we needed to be prepared. We practised breathing through the pipe she had fashioned. It lead from her mouth into mine to transfer the oxygen. We synchronised our breathing and wore helmets, to protect our heads from the dive—from debris and bones and roots and from the soil that would enter all of our uncovered orifices.

It was on a night of a new moon that I reached for Kumiko's glowing form for some coolness, only to realise that Kumiko was no longer the only one that glowed in the dark. I felt my hands prodding the bulbous body of Violet, who reared in a flurry of luminous inkblots.

I watched the colours of her skin trickle from her, forming a shimmering net of light that floated away as if she were shedding her skin—as if the colours were being drawn from her in the same way that a handkerchief is drawn through a ring.

Violet and the other Worms remained suspended, watching their colours waft towards the ground and to the centre of the gigantic circle—in pointy ropes of mesh that started drilling holes at our feet.

Kumiko and I dressed ourselves in our helmets and clamped our mouths around the pipe. There was no moon to look back up at when we descended into the ground, saddled on Violet's back. I clung to Kumiko. The earth shuddered somewhat as thousands of naked Worms bore underground after their colours, as if they were maggots wriggling towards the most succulent piece of meat in the centre.

Stage 4—The Pushing Through the Dirt

It was not quiet and serene beneath the surface of the earth. The force with which Violet's net of colour was pulled towards the centre of the circle made it break through the soil with the rolling sound of construction—a sound which was reciprocated by hundreds of other nets around us. It caught the soil in its thin mesh, pushing it further underground and creating a tunnel in its wake. Inside our tunnel echoed the thunderous noises of the adjacent drills of colour, making it impossible to hear the soft shifting of Violet's body over the soil. She took us deeper and deeper down into the earth. The soil discarded by the drilling net whipped at our helmets, the force consistent in almost knocking us off Violet's back.

Kumiko and I clung tightly to the saddle and became nauseous from riding the wave of Violet's caterpillar body—a monstrous frequency of peaks and troughs spreading and squiggling towards the tug of its destination. We couldn't speak on account of breathing, but pointed to several beetles and ants that we had never seen before. Kumiko became so skilled at riding Violet that she managed to take notes with her one free hand along the way. I held her steady with mine, and let her cool glow spread through me.

Kumiko needed two hands to prepare our food. Reaching for roots and a small mole, she made us a delicious soup that left us nourished and more alert to the sounds of the adjacent Worms. They were drawing nearer, the angles of the circle pulling us all to the same centre, the same core. Their movement rippled through our tunnel, sending flecks of soil crumbling from its roof.

Stage 5—The Heated Blood that Enters the Heart

Kumiko wrote me a note. It indicated the distance we had travelled underground and informed me that there were no longer pockets of water in the soil—only steam. She said that I was not to worry, though, that we were getting very close. She said not to touch Violet anymore, that she was boiling hot and that I would burn my fingers.

It was true that Violet had acquired the radiance of searing white fire, and that the colourful net leading our way was glowing more intensely with the purples and corals of her once-smooth skin. Kumiko enveloped me in her coolness, letting me ride at the back so she could block the heat emanating from the direction in which we were heading. I was safe there, watching the steam turn to droplets on our skins and listening to the other Worms shift claustrophobically close to the walls of our tunnel.

It was with little announcement that some light was let through in front of us and it was little time afterwards that we emerged from our tunnel on the back of Violet's body, dusting soil off of our visors and squinting at the waves of heat that made a blur of an underground cavern.

We remained still on Violet's back. We watched the rest of the Colour Worms pop out of their tunnels, forming a circle inside the cavern as perfect as the original in the quiet field at the foot of the mountain. They stood poised, rearing to smell the air, an army of glowing white soldiers ready for something. They hovered there, only slightly rocking like the blades of grass among which they were born. We all watched their nets of colour unwind and form a tapestry around the circle, spreading out to their full size and shimmering in the blurs of heat of the earth's core. Kumiko and I assessed the

embers on the floor of the underground cavern and pitched our tent on Violet's back, waiting for what was to come.

Stage 6—The Chrysalis

Kumiko and I watched the first step of the metamorphosis of the Colour Worms from the small zippered window of our tent. We could see Violet's net of colour approaching, disintegrating once again into flecks of glittery powder that floated towards her in the exact reversal of how it had left her body in the first place. This time, however, the net of colour possessed a heat that made it fuse, moulding itself over Violet's body, enveloping us in a pulsating cocoon of shifting colour and embers. The net pulled itself taut over the unexpected addition of our tent on Violet's back, but managed to cover all of us.

Kumiko and the tent kept us cool all through Violet's transformation, which was swift and silent. The only evidence of her changing into a pupa inside of her cocoon right beneath our feet, was the hardening of her body which, up to then, had been nothing but a wobbling bed of caterpillar juices. When we peeped out of the tent we could no longer see her feelers. Along with the rest of her head, they were enclosed in a brownish helmet like the top of an envelope that had sealed her inside.

Her transformation took long enough for us to fall asleep, despite our best efforts. It was the pressure of being squeezed through a small hole in the cocoon, along with Violet's newly-grown spindly legs, that woke us with a jerk. I looked at Kumiko, who was holding up a note to tell me it was happening.

Stage 7—The Eruption

Our tent held fast through it all, secured between Violet's new wings. We watched them flap slowly in surges of inky shadow, like dark manta ray in the depths of the ocean, as she lifted herself from the ground and her cocoon. Her characteristic coral spots burnt like red eyes as she glided on the waves of heat in the cavern, brushing the tips of her wings against those of other gigantic butterflies. A fluttering one much smaller than her shot past in a flash of blue so soft that it seemed much cooler, save for the outlines of orange on its wings, like dawn clouds melting away in the sun.

Even through Kumiko's coolness we could feel the scorching heat of Violet's body increasing as she fluttered on the currents, so massive yet so delicate in the waves of heat and the powerful gusts of wind from the others'. A particularly large lime-green

butterfly fluttered next to Violet, tried to block her way and then darted upwards. It sped back down and circled her in spirals. A smaller cherry-coloured one with yellow blotches on its feelers opened its wings underneath her like a canvas and whipped at the air in spurts before floating down and disappearing into the flurry.

The cavern was teeming with wings and long dark bodies, some of them coming to rest on the walls of hardened soil and rock to bask in the heat before sputtering off again. They seemed to revel in their new-found flight, circling one another and frenzied by the kaleidoscope around them.

Their flapping soon became frantic, their positions more fixed. They were forming a rope of butterflies inside the cavern, spiralling upward and back down again in helix-shaped strings, attaching themselves to their neighbours and dancing with each other without ever losing buoyancy. We heard the thuds of their wings against our tent as Violet became entwined with dozens of other butterflies, their legs and wings dark shadows against our thin layer of silk.

We seemed to be stuck in a whirlpool of butterflies, twisting upwards and upwards inside the cavern, pushing through the soil again in a single wave, Violet and our tent somewhere at the top, dirt raining on us, becoming warmer and warmer with the heat of their vibrations and their winding mound forcing itself out of the earth, up up and out until it reached the surface, the cool blue surface. The pyramid of blazing butterflies started hardening from the top down, a twisted winding mountain of petrified wings oozing out of the ground—Violet's wings like folded, grey bark, her body a sturdy trunk.

The shimmering powder-mountain lost its glow in the night air, becoming stationary and eternal. It released the last pockets of air that were trapped between the petrified butterflies inside—a few small bubbles that left craters from which a thousand eggs were expelled. We zipped open our tent, which had been hurled to the top, and watched the eggs roll down into the field of grass at the foot of the new mountain.

Stage 8—Overexposure

Kumiko and I watched the sun rise over the curvature of the earth. I hadn't taken down any notes; Kumiko hadn't sketched the metamorphosis of the Colour Worms. We were no longer experts on the order Lepidoptera, and simply stood inhaling one another's air. We crumpled the powder of the mountain between our fingers and watched the light shift. We imagined the earth covered in new mountains, while silently developing images of the brightest colours inside the dark rooms behind our eyes.

The Wife

I invited the spiders to nest inside my loofah so that I didn't have to wash anymore. It was the colour of cream, which made it seem as though they were living inside a giant egg sack—the daddy long legs and the violin spider and the one who carried her babies on her back like fur. They all grew bloated from not having to spin so many webs anymore. There was enough easy food in my bathroom. The daddy long legs's limbs twitched like the broken seconds hand of my watch, which was the only sign that it was alive. It was winter and in winter it always broke my heart to get out of the tub, warm as a yellow cake from the oven, only to feel the heat drain from my skin again.

“What's that smell?” my husband asked one night, after only a few days had passed. He was smoking in bed, his gracefully wrinkled brow casting a shadow over his eyes.

“It's just our smell, baby. Your pheromones all over me. I'll never wash it off.”

He seemed satisfied with that so I clenched my legs tightly beneath the woolly robe he didn't wear anymore, and curved my arms on the pillow above my head like a ballerina pressed between the pages of an encyclopaedia.

*

My husband left first in the morning, while it was still dark. Listening to the little sighs he let out while concentrating to dress, I pulled the sleeves of his robe over my knuckles and clutched at them. It was something I did when I imagined him on his long journey through the subway tunnels. When his back was turned to me I opened my eyes as wide as I could and rubbed them to create an imprint of him straightening his overcoat. When he faced me I had to keep them shut, so that their watery light would not be something to distract him in the darkness. That particular hue of morning had to be left undisturbed to absorb the sound of horns and of his preparatory whispers.

When he squeezed goodbye into my shoulder I turned onto that side to trap the warmth between me and the sheet. I pressed my hands to the wall like a mime and counted each minute before my alarm went off.

I was docile on winter mornings, as a snow owl might be docile when it rustled its neck feathers in the same way I shivered into my scarf. I nestled into myself and couldn't help trying to warm the brain stem in the nape of my neck where my hair had gathered in dark and oily filigree.

The duvet was warm, but felt stiffer every time I dragged a sock or an undergarment out from under it, the rigor from the cold and the absence of our presence having set in.

And so it came to letting the neighbour's German shepherd in through the front gate, where it always waited for me to tear at the wheels of my bicycle—driven mad by the motion of things that were small enough to chase. It stood in the doorway of our bedroom, its feet slipping apart on the tiles, slowly, like a sagging tower, holding my gaze in its yellow eyes. I lured it onto the mattress with a sausage, which distracted it enough for me to throw the bed things over it. It made a pointed mound under the covers that shuddered and growled when I came near, so that it was impossible for me to make the bed anymore.

When my husband came home, I made sure to be in bed already. Spread out like a snow angel, I must have seemed inviting, because when he lowered himself onto me he made no mention of the deepening dent made by my head in the un-puffed pillows, or of the dark animal hairs like nettles in our bed.

*

At a pet shop I bought a turtle and dressed it in a tea cosy so that it wouldn't be too cold when I put it on the roof. I waited for the golden eagle to scoop it up in its talons and watched it ascend until it was a dark arc of wings like menacing eyebrows against the flurry of snow. As high up as the eagle flew, the world seemed less clear than in the powder on our front steps. There was a grey that blurred the lines where the eagle's claws curved and where the turtle padded the air as if it was still swimming.

I couldn't see the talons relax and release, but I imagined that it must have looked like a dark magician casting an irreparable spell. The turtle dropped for a long time. Because of how it had shown penitence to the earth, grovelling on muddy shores and disappearing into water with nothing but an appetite for green things that would grow again, gravity was kind to the turtle and let it fall evenly like a stone, and let it die instantly when its shell shattered like a bomb on our roof. And before it could bounce down the eagle had caught it, stopping it like a ball, rolling it around under its talons so that it made a sound like dominoes in a bag when all the shards of its shell clobbered against one another inside the parcel the tea cosy had made of its remnants.

From our kitchen table I caught snowflakes on my tongue as I watched, through the hole where the tiles had come off, how the eagle tore flesh from the parcel in a way that seemed delicate. I arranged all our pots to catch the leaks in the roof so that I didn't have to cook anymore.

When my husband came home it was dark, and I was sitting at the kitchen table still, and I admired how exquisite he looked in a brown scarf that hung down his chest and made it swell out. He was hungry for me, his fingers tracing white marks on my frozen skin, but he didn't mention dinner as he must have eaten somewhere else.

*

I bred a colony of moths and silverfish in my closet, so that I didn't have to dress myself anymore. I spared one coat and left it hanging on the door handle, where it trailed down into the bedroom like a veil. I shrugged it over my skin and it reached down to my ankles, covering the boots I wore for the snow and framing my neck in a steep V. When I rode my bicycle the buttons held the coat together and let it fall over me in waves and folds. Because there were other people too in the world, there were glances at my legs spread over the frame. It must have seemed strange to pedal like that, my knees emerging from the obscuring darkness of my coat like oars rising out of the water and the foam and retreating again to produce with sweat what seemed like effortless propulsion.

I did nothing and bought nothing, and returned to our house to fall asleep on the sofa with my one arm reaching over the side and the other hooked over my hip bone like a candy cane. When my husband propped me up and I could feel his breath forming damp inside my belly button, I realised that the hooks of my coat must have come undone and that it must have made me seem to be an alluring present of which the wrapping had fallen short.

*

After my husband had left in the morning, I lay down in front of the doorway with my hands folded over my ribs. Thinking about what to do for the day, I was immobile until after the shadows had crept over to the entrance hall of the house, signifying that he would be returning soon. When he opened the door a draft swept all the way through from the hole in the kitchen ceiling, carrying my smell along with it.

Seeing me draped over the threshold must have reminded him of when he had first carried me over it, because he picked me up and stepped back to repeat the ritual. He looked down at me like he was a lifeguard and bent his knees to place me on my feet. My head was swimming, but he picked me up again, repeating the ritual three more times. When he was done and sweating he put me back where he had found me, stepping carefully over me before disappearing into the house. And when it was dark I wedged myself into the crack in the doorway so that I didn't have to hear it banging shut anymore.

The Man Who Was Gentle With Animals

*And I wish I could fly like a bat from a cave
From darkness of my ignorance to light
And forever live on the echoes of our love
And die like some star burning bright*

- John Martyn

I ended up in the arms of the Man who was gentle with animals at the time in my life when I walked into winter sheets on the laundry rail to see how it would feel. I found him in a cave, where he was hanging upside down with the bats.

I let the bats shit on my head every now and then because I felt responsible for my father. My father thought that the bats were the darkness and pinned them to broken tomato crates before sending them down the river and betting on which one would reach the waterfall first. Even so, he would catch them in a long net before they went over and wring their necks as a mercy kill.

Even while upside down the Man who was gentle with animals had drooping eyes with his eyelids that covered half of his grey irises. It was still light in the mouth of the cave—the only sound was a few screeches as the bats snoozed in pods they created for themselves by wrapping their wings around them. The Man blended in with a black T-shirt and cargo pants that had slipped right up to his knees from gravity. A gigantic utility belt seemed like the only thing preventing the pants from rolling further down and covering the entire Man in a sack-like pod of his own.

The strain in the Man's feet as he clung to the ceiling gave him the same sinewy quality of the bats' skeletal arms and the wing skin spanned over them. As did his protruding ribcage and the veins that bulged on his forehead, on his shaven scalp. His arms hung down and swayed slightly. When he opened one of his palms and swayed more fervently, I interpreted it as a wave and asked him what he was doing.

“Distilling,” he said.

I nodded and fiddled with a button on my dress, afraid that there was something I didn't understand.

I turned my back to him and faced the mouth of the cave, hoping that he would study me.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I'll be done soon.”

I shrugged and opened my arms to the twilight outside. One of the early wakers dipped past me and dropped a white mess on my shoulder before squeaking off into the

sunset. When my hair was sticky with guano and the few bats that had woken up were flitting silhouettes against a pink sky outside, I heard a dripping sound behind me and looked back at the Man who was gentle with animals.

From his fingertips and his ears trickled a dark liquid that dripped on the floor of the cave. The same liquid made trails from his eyes and over his skull, where it flowed from his crown in a steady stream. It collated on the ground, forming first a puddle and then a rubbery mound as it hardened. I watched until it grew into a stalagmite that reached up to where the Man's arms were dangling.

In a heavily nasal voice the Man said to watch out for his legs. When I stepped away he grabbed onto the tip of the growth and swung himself upright and around it in a spiral, sliding down the stalagmite to face me. It wobbled like a jumping castle when he let go of it. He was tall and I thought then that he made his eyelids droop to seem less towering.

"I'm almost done," he said, the black liquid that had gathered in his nasal canals now flowing from his nostrils, which he hurried to wipe with his shirt.

The Man who was gentle with animals fumbled with his belt, which, I then realised, was not attached to his trousers after all and dug into his skin instead. It ran along his waist in a string of bulging pouches like blood packs or catheter bags, but not see-through and each with its own small tap at the bottom.

"You should go outside now," he said. He looked up at the bats who were starting to wriggle as more of their neighbours, one by one, flew off into the sky that was by then a light mauve and sprinkled with the first stars.

"I'm OK," I said. "I want to watch."

He seemed tired and shaking, not up to arguing, and prodded each pouch until he decided on one hanging from his left hip. The Man who was gentle with animals took the small tap between his fingers and turned it anti-clockwise, opening it up for a bubble to form at the bottom. A dark paste oozed out and dropped like the guano, and it must have been some kind of seal because when there was no longer any paste a violet-coloured moth stuck its feelers out of the tap and fluttered up into the cave. It was followed by more—dozens or hundreds more that poured out of the pouch in droves and scattered towards the light before the Man sealed the pouch again.

The bats could sense them—hear them or smell them—and woke up as one, a thick wave of little claws and many ears and much fur, and speeding towards the insects, following them into the night. The Man seemed to move closer to me, as if to shield me, but his thin body did no such thing and all we could do was wait it out and feel the gusts of the bats' wings whip at our clothes.

When they were spread out in the open sky, darting about and devouring their moths, the Man who was gentle with animals opened his palm in front of my nose and presented a gigantic moth that shimmered. I opened my mouth and ate it and he took my shoulders and led me out of the cave.

There was a horse waiting for him—a palomino mare the colour of light stockings. We stroked it for a while as I still chewed on my moth. It flipped its mane and brushed its snout against the Man's chest.

“Is this your ride?” I asked.

He nodded, massaging the horse's neck, tapping it with his palms. Its muscles shuddered. The Man rested his head against its flank, the inky veins from the liquid still engraved on his skull, trailing from his eyes. He seemed to remember his pouches and reached for one behind his back before draining some violet-coloured pellets from it. He presented them to the horse, who nibbled at them gently.

The Man who was gentle with animals gave me one of the pellets, a large crumbling nugget on my tongue, and told me to meet him the next day in the park—the one with the brand new swing.

He mounted his horse, who was not wearing a saddle or bridle, and it bucked off into the night with him. It was not broken in—wild, and snapping at his legs to get to the pellets on his belt. I suspected that the Man would argue that it had something to do with nature not intending for horses to be ridden by men, especially not by Men who were gentle with animals. I watched a few bats follow the Man who was gentle with animals to wherever his home was and he looked back at me and said that he used to have a car but that it no longer had any wheels.

*

The park was in a suburb of the city, and was a circular platform surrounded by houses. It gave the impression of an amphitheatre of sorts, with parents and grandparents brushing their curtains aside to look down into the sandpit and over at the jungle gym where their children played.

I arrived long before the Man who was gentle with animals so that I could lay out a picnic for us and open a blanket under a tree. The blanket felt scraggly and course against my legs, which were crossed under a cutting board that I was using to prepare snacks. Neatly arranging slices of spiced meat and some crackers on a plate, I watched the park teem with children squeezing out the last of their playtime before they would be called inside for their dinners and their baths. I realised that I was not hungry and still satisfied from the treats that the Man who was gentle with animals had given me, but finished preparing the snacks for him as he had looked like he needed to eat.

The children fought for their turn on the tyre swing that dangled from its sagging frame. The swing seemed much newer than any of the other playthings in the park, painted a blossoming red that outshone the rust on the slides and ladders, which had all lost their lustre. A few boys lost interest when a girl refused to get off the swing. They aeroplaned off in another direction, sending some pigeons scattering lazily. The girl seemed invigorated by her freedom and pushed her small body forward and up until she was almost in line with the top of the frame before she swerved back down—a pendulum of colour and hair.

I folded my hands and longed for the Man who was gentle with animals to be next to me. As the air became cooler and the children's numbers dwindled, each of them returning to their houses with drooping shoulders and eyes fixed on their parents in the windows as if waiting for a chance to escape, the last sign of movement was a man in expensive running clothes. He jogged along the borders of the park, repeatedly in circles, with a fat Labrador trailing far behind him.

The dog heaved and panted and its tongue was a foaming waterfall of dribble as it tried to keep up with its master. When the man checked his watch he came to a halt and pressed a button before turning to see where his dog was. The animal used its last bit of energy to hurry over for a treat and a pat—a bit of gentleness that made running in circles worthwhile after all.

It was quiet and the sun was setting, and it was only me and the pigeons in the park, all of them eyeing me for a piece of cracker.

“Are all the children gone?” was what the Man who was gentle with animals asked me from behind the tree. I could feel his voice rumble through its trunk. I was resting my head against it.

“Are you afraid of the children?”

I imagined his drooping eyes looking down on me from behind. “Children always want treats,” was what he said.

He came to sit next to me and took off his boots, nestling his toes in the grass as the blanket could not contain all of his legs, even when they were bent up against his chest so that he could rest his head on them. The Man who was gentle with animals had dark circles under his eyes and his chest bones poked out from under his shirt. His clothes and his skin were clean—no longer covered in the dark marks from his distillation.

He pulled me closer with a feeble grip and then he shifted so that I could lie in his lap, which was hard and pointy from all the bones. He let some violet-coloured crumbs drip from one of his pouches and sprinkled them on the grass for the pigeons, who

pecked at them and went to roost in the trees. The last few crumbs he let drop into my mouth and I chewed on them for a long time, not telling the Man how full I felt.

It was dark by then, and there were bats dipping past us and it was strange to see bats in the city. The Man who was gentle with animals released the moths from his pouch, which was thinner now than all the rest, perhaps almost empty, and we watched the bats' swift movements through the air as they caught the moths and ate them. They were flying high and past the windows of the houses. Behind one of them I could see the girl from the swing, glowing in the yellow light of her bedroom and watching us.

It was then that I remembered the food I'd prepared and hoisted myself up to offer some to the Man who was gentle with animals.

"I should have known you were a vegetarian," was what I said when he politely declined to have any. But the Man who was gentle with animals told me a different story.

"It's just that my mother wanted to eat me," was how it started. And then the Man settled into a tale about his father, who got rid of his mother because she wanted to consume everyone. And at the scrap yard where they lived there was a car that his father climbed into and reversed with, out and away from there, and onto which the Man who was gentle with animals, who was then just a boy, latched himself—to the car door with his hands and then to the rolling tyres with his feral boy teeth that ripped out a piece of rubber that sent the car skidding but still moving fast away from there and over a stuffed animal toy that the boy had dropped in the dust.

And that it was in the smell and the taste of burnt rubber that the boy became docile, distilling all the wisdom and gentleness of old trees from which the tyre was made into a violet gentleness of his own that fermented as he towered over the scrap yard—its torn plastic animal toys and its rubber tyres that he digested and expelled and shared.

And when most of the lights in the houses had gone out, the palomino mare came trotting up the road and the Man who was gentle with animals drained some pellets that looked like pastilles from one of his pouches and wrapped them in a handkerchief and placed them under the swing, which he removed from its chains and carried to wherever his home was, the mare trotting at his side, the girl in the window turning to go to bed, satisfied.

*

It was easy to forget to eat around the Man who was gentle with animals. I had gained a lightness and a fullness simultaneously when he started spending nights at my house. I was convinced that I ached when he left, but managed to live on the saturation from the

violet treats he fed me, the satisfaction I got from them sending ripples through my stomach lining and the rest of me. During times when he was gone, I imagined the Man hanging upside down in the cave to distil some more of his gentleness and bring it back to me as if he had hunted, or fished, or harvested.

I would bathe his head when he returned, washing the tar-like discharge from his scalp and his face, and relishing the bristles of hair that grew there, not nourished enough to become any longer.

The sound of hooves on my driveway became the cue for my fretting limbs to quiet. In my back garden I had made room for the mare—by then inseparable from the Man who was gentle with animals and constantly pushing her head through the kitchen window for a taste of the pellets he fed her.

Despite our harmonious arrangement there were no special treats from the pouches for me. The Man who was gentle with animals would always give me something left over from after he had fed his animals. I did not protest or complain, but I cannot say that I never wanted more. And that is why I built a bat house in my garden, high up on a pole, to harbour the bats that never stopped seeking out the Man ever since our first night in the cave, and to try and catch some of the moths they could not muster for myself.

And then there was the cobra in my garden, long and dark and rearing. And it was then that I said, “OK, look, there is a limit to what you can bring here, snakes cannot be tamed.”

But the Man who was gentle with animals looked resigned as he faced the snake, saying that it was just another animal and lowering his hand ever so slowly to a large pouch dangling over his groin, but jerking it away again when the cobra lashed at him and pierced the thin film of the pouch with its fangs.

And when the Man turned the valve of the pouch a small stillborn violet rabbit was expelled—smooth and curled up and with tiny dark bumps over its unopened eyes. The Man who was gentle with animals cupped it in his palm, laying it down in the grass and stepping back, not offering me a rabbit of my own, just watching forlornly as it travelled down the throat of the cobra—who had dislocated its jaw, for no reason, to devour the small violet bundle—and then through its bowels, its long flat body that was really just an endless throat.

Afterwards I felt sad that I could not comfort the Man who was gentle with animals, who cried silently as he watched the delicate concentration of his gentleness move mercilessly through the snake’s digestive system in a small bump like a twitching finger under a sheet, but I was enthralled by the process and wondered what it would

feel like to consume the rabbit myself, to feel as serene as the cobra slipping passively back into the bushes. It was then that I made out for myself that it was the gentleness to calm the fiercest of animals that was the purest, and that I had to take the Man who was gentle with animals to the zoo.

*

We went at night, walking hand in hand and climbing over the palisades of the zoo with a stealth I can only attribute to two people who were nothing but bones—who had been living only off the gentleness of the Man who was gentle with animals, who, in his own right, had likely been living off of it his entire life as I had never seen him eat anything real.

If I was feeble or dizzy I did not notice feeling so, but my eyes gave it away—my vision blurry, I had difficulty making out the shapes of the nocturnal animals that paced behind the mesh of their cages.

Knowing about our visit in advance, the Man who was gentle with animals had gone to the cave the day before to distil as much as he could. He carried the pouches around his waist and with his stride they wobbled like bulbous fruits—filled to bursting.

“I can only help the small ones,” was what he said to me. “I don’t have enough for the cats. Please don’t take me to the cats.”

I said nothing, hoping for a chance to do exactly that, to weave my arm around his and lead his light, giving body up the incline where the panther melted into the midnight blue foliage of its pen, its eyes like silver jewels catching the light from the gift shop; to make him extend his hand to the tiger that toyed listlessly with the tepid water that dribbled into its play pool, exposing its cracked canines when it yawned; to watch as he could not help but let the lion thrash against its cage, hooking its nails (too long from not having an old and rough tree against which to scratch) into the gaps of the wire, and licking with its sandpaper tongue a scrap of gentleness from the palms of the Man who was gentle with animals; and for me to take whatever was left.

So I strolled patiently through the zoo with the Man, licking his fingers for the violet honey that had spilled over them when he fed the badger, and letting a slippery little fish swim down my throat while we watched the baby seals clap their fins together in contentment. For the parrots he had seeds, and for the lemurs insects and berry-like fruit—all of it violet and shimmering and pouring from his pouches until they were flat and drained.

When all the pouches hung dry and wrinkled from his waist, the Man who was gentle with animals could no longer walk in a straight line—exhausted and malnourished—and asked me to take him home, which I did, because I was worried and

guilty and so incredibly full. It was only when we walked up the street and away from the zoo that I remembered the cats—the big wild cats that were awake at night—and heard them roaring as though they could smell something that could soothe them, dangling right in front of their noses but always out of reach.

*

We hardly ever switched the television on, or anything bearing news from the outside world, especially during the following evening when the Man who was gentle with animals was tired, perhaps even sick. I was occupied with the gentleness, with flinging myself down the staircase when I heard him feeding the mare, to get a small pinch of violet pellets for myself—blind to how thin I'd become and how I stumbled into objects because there appeared to be two of them.

Even if the television had been on, I doubt that we would have heard anything about the escape from the zoo, because it was night time when the animals broke out of their cages, while everyone was still sleeping, and because it was with an eerie stillness that they filed into my garden—their feathers and fur bloodied with the violence of beating against the locks on their cages, their teeth and their beaks broken from ripping at steel.

I brushed the curtains aside and looked into the eyes of two brown bears, who were panting and scratching themselves against the gentle coarseness of the outside living room wall. A few pelicans had settled on the swimming pool steps and were watching me while they regurgitated something inside them. Everything was quiet. There were eyes glinting in the trees.

“The animals are here for you,” I shouted over my shoulder, trying to contain the excitement at reliving our night at the zoo, of sampling the most exquisite and delicate morsels of gentleness that the Man who was gentle with animals could extract.

He came down the stairs, his drooping eyelids lifted momentarily in a storm cloud illuminated by lightning, running to the door—a stickman opening the wood at a crack and standing there for the longest time before closing it again gently, saying “The cats are here too.”

He sidled up to me and showed me a sagging pouch at his hip, saying “This is all I have left.”

But I didn't want to hear it and said what will they do to us if you don't give them any and please you have to try and I can hang you from the curtain railing and I'll catch your sludge in a bucket and you can eat the wheels of my car if you need more.

But the Man who was gentle with animals took his head in his hands and cried. His tears streamed down his arms, from between his fingers where the joints rested

against each other, where there were gaps because there was hardly any flesh to close them. His tears were dark, mingling with the blackness from his last distillation that I had failed to wash properly from his face—black from the hundreds of distillations of all the waste and burnt rubber of his life.

“I’ll take care of it,” I said suddenly, surprising myself. “Don’t worry, just sit right here, I’ll take care of it.”

And I remembered the meat, suddenly, the steaks I liked eating in the time when I still walked into winter sheets to envelop myself in their softness and their warmth, and walked to the freezer in a meaningful way, where I lifted two thick ones and cut them from their polystyrene beds and their plastic wrappings which were stiff and glittering with icicles that became bloody as they lay in the sink.

I cooked for the Man who was gentle with animals, frying the steaks in a pan, watching the shimmering green stamps on their fatty rinds melt away in the heat, and cutting them up into small pieces into which I could slide a fork—which I could slip into the Man who was gentle with animals while rubbing his back and telling him that everything would be OK.

And when we were done and frenzied by the anonymous heap of meat in our bellies our eyes were no longer blurry and we could look out the window and see that the number of animals had halved in size and the Man who was gentle with animals could open the valve of the small pouch of gentleness with his fingers that were no longer shaking and could empty it into his palm, while I flung the door open and told the animals in a firm way that they had to form a neat queue, that the Man who was gentle with animals would get to all of them and that they could not take more than they needed.

And I too, joined the back of the line, right behind the Siberian tiger, waiting for a simple serving of gentleness, a single violet pellet distilled from burnt rubber—a scrap that was small, but more than enough to fill me.

The Wedding

In the Forest of the Last Born everything is monstrously tall. No longer constrained by the shrinking gazes of their families, the Last Born grow to unnerving heights. Their bodies and their ideas swell and stretch towards the sky, infecting everything around them to do the same. The deer are the size of whale sharks and the flowers burst from the forest bed like cycads.

The trees in the Forest of the Last Born are never silent. This is not only because they are encouraged by the Last Born to have a voice, but because they love the Last Born so much that they are constantly groaning from growing to catch up with them. The Last Born love the trees back because the trees are not family trees. Because the trees don't suck the life out of their low-hanging fruit so that they drop to the forest bed and rot.

For a Last Born to forget its small history, a lot of time needs to pass. Even more time than it takes to turn into a stone giant that covers miles of forest bed in one stride. And what takes even more time than turning into stone is waiting for resin to turn into amber—for the drool of the adoring trees to settle into cracks in the stone and turn into something binding and beautiful.

While the Last Born wait for such things to happen, they cannot help but cultivate the habits from their previous little lives. One group of Last Born, a predominantly male group, enjoy playing marbles. All the other Last Born know that when they find a nice round boulder they need to leave it by the riverbank where the marble boys will collect it. The Last Born know how to share even when they really want to keep something just for themselves.

With no older brothers around, the marble boys play freely—always taking equal turns. Sometimes they become confused when they let each other win even though they weren't expected to. Even though no one insisted. The marble boys allow the overeager trees to join in their games even though they drool all over the boulders and make them sticky. At least one day when the resin hardens it will make the boulders more beautiful—more like real marbles. That is what the marble boys tell themselves. The Last Born know how to surrender to things that are out of their control.

A group of females made a girl's dress because they remember how to sew. When they finished making it they wondered why they made only one and why it was too big to fit any of them. Now they take turns to wear it. All the other Last Born trek through the Forest to seek out the girl wearing the dress. She is elusive but beautiful when they find her in a clearing of sunlight and spores or curled up in a gigantic nest.

They can only look at her for a little while before she has to pass the dress on and it makes them sad. But the Last Born know how to appreciate brief moments of happiness. And they certainly know that it isn't good to forever keep wearing something that doesn't fit.

Many of the Last Born, male and female alike, invent and discover things in the Forest. Because the Last Born cannot have children of their own, they nurture their ideas like infants and let them roam the fields of wild flowers. The ideas drift with bees and climb into flower trumpets where they slide down the velvety pinks. The ideas bring back things—cures for diseases and energy-saving mechanisms or sometimes just delicious things, beautiful things. When this happens the Last Born grow quiet for a moment, thinking that they have stumbled onto something meaningful. But then they laugh and shrug it off and the trees grin like idiots and slobber all over them. The Last Born know how to be convinced that everything has already been discovered. That nothing they do can ever be new.

A lot of the Last Born keep to themselves or go about in pairs. There is one pair they call the Bride and Groom because they make such a good pair. Their eyes are green in their sockets, which have not yet hardened to stone because they are new to the Forest. The Groom's eyes are jade and the Bride's like olives and moss which makes seeing them together in the trees or on a pile of leaves like seeing the full spectrum of green. And that is why they are adored. The Last Born know how to accept that you can only have one of something, but somehow seeing the Bride and Groom together lets you have the whole set.

It is natural for Last Born who are new to the Forest to miss their families despite everything and all of them have their own way of coping with being severed. One of the marble boys, when he just came to the Forest, developed a fixation on roots and dug into the soil until his fingernails were torn. One small female saw her mother in every silhouette and suckled on everything until she got sick from stroking a poisonous toad.

The Groom settled for carving little doll figures out of wood—each of them representing a different member of his family or that of his bride. It is the Groom's way to sit quietly and occupy himself. The Last Born know how to be quiet while the old people are sleeping.

The Bride doesn't know why she doesn't miss her family so much. She thinks that perhaps it is because she is too enthralled by what the Forest can offer her. She grew faster than any other Last Born, stretching towards the sky as if she were on endless stilts. More content than ever, the Bride spends all her time in fields of wild

flowers, making wreaths that she wears on her head or around her neck. Peonies are her favourite because they are like the younger sisters of roses, even though they are crumpled and look like artichokes.

What the Bride enjoys most about the Forest is the space to move and breathe. Despite the ever-circling trees the Bride feels light and airy and so far she hasn't seen any dead ends—dark and threatening corners for her to skulk in. The Bride knows how to sit in a corner and listen and wait for the feel of warm breath in her neck, but she would prefer to forget all about it.

She is thrilled by her bellowing new voice that can send birds shooting through the canopy of leaves covering the Forest. The Bride knows all about voices that drown out her own and about little trills that eventually soothe her to sleep on damp pillows, but up to now she knew nothing about seismic shifts within her very own throat.

At night the Bride sleeps in an embrace with the Groom—softly on a bed of grass and petals—and in the mornings they wake up with pollen in their hair, each strand a little tendril tipped with yellow powder. She thought she could keep growing and still be at the right height to see the forest in her groom's eyes, until one day he shouts at her from far down below, "Let's get married for real."

She finds herself shrinking back down to him. Then she shakes the leaves from her body before simply saying, "No."

The Groom smiles at her and strokes her face. "It will be the last thing we do for them."

"They wouldn't even care," says the Bride, but then she realises she's already busy arranging pink peonies in a bouquet.

When the time comes to arrange the wedding, the Bride and Groom leave it up to luck to decide which one of them would go back through the Forest to the houses where their family live. The Bride draws the shortest straw as the wind blows over her hands. The Groom consoles her by arranging the wooden figures of their family around a little table he recently carved. He carefully places them in a pod, which he crafts into a suitcase with wheels and tells the Bride that it would be best to leave in two days.

When she's ready to depart, the Groom grows more and more sleepy and kisses the Bride on her hands before curling up in the husk of a giant cocoon. The Bride knows that his dreams will be soft and quiet until she returns and so she tries not to wake him when removing the old photograph that he hides in his hair.

She looks at it only once—into the eyes of their fathers and their sisters and their mothers—before shrinking back down to the size of a girl along with her makeshift suitcase and her peonies. And all she hears as she plummets are the words of her father,

the meek shall inherit the earth, and all she sees when she's at the edge of the Forest and out into the open is the ugliest version of the earth anyone could possibly have left to their Last Born.

*

The first mother is not her own mother but that of the Groom. The Bride thinks that it would be the simplest mother to visit because the mother has had five weddings of her own and will not be dramatic about the idea.

At the door the Bride puts her suitcase down to straighten herself out. She strokes her peonies to make them open up and be fuller. Their virginal pink is stark against the charred grass of the lawn and the Bride feels proud to hold them in front of her as though she were a choir singer. When she sees a dog trotting down the street, its collar a hoolah hoop around its emaciated neck, she clings more tightly to her flowers and knocks at the door.

When it opens up the first mother stands in a tattered night dress, recognition washing slowly over her face.

The Bride has rehearsed a bit and hastily clears her throat because she knows that family is quick to get the first word in.

“Your last born son is getting married, would you like to attend?” she says.

When the mother is quiet the Bride jumps in again, reaching down to the suitcase which she opens up to display the table arrangement. The Bride leaves her flowers in one hand, sweeping the other over the contents of the suitcase to demonstrate. She takes a breath to speak, but the first mother's words must have warmed up in her throat.

“Darling, how can you *possibly* get married without a ring?”

The Bride opens her mouth, but the first mother keeps talking.

“—Or a *dress*? Just *look* at you, poor thing.”

The Bride looks down at her naked self, suddenly feeling the toxic wind scrape at her skin. She casts her eyes away from the mother, burying her nose in her peonies. Their fragrance swells inside her nostrils, giving her the strength to exhale.

“We don't need clothes where we live,” she says, narrowing her eyes at the mother. “And there aren't any clothes left anywhere,” she says triumphantly.

The mother's eyes trace the outlines of the Bride's body. The Bride suddenly panics because she spoke about the Forest where she lives with her groom. What if someone follows her there?

“You just wait right here,” says the mother, disappearing into the house and closing the door behind her.

The Bride stands shivering in the doorway and looks up at a building so tall her eyes can't distinguish how far it extends beyond the awning of smog.

By the time the mother returns the Bride's lips are slightly green. The mother doesn't seem to notice as she reels in a clothes rack on wheels, filled with immaculate wedding dresses—one in the style of each of the last five decades.

"Now, this is my gift to you—choose any one you like," says the mother.

But when the Bride runs her fingers over the only one that will fit, the mother plucks a different one from the rack and presses it to the Bride's front. "Perfect," she says and commands the Bride to lift her arms up.

The Bride doesn't dare place her peonies on the ground and rests them instead on the top of the suitcase, which is still gaping with the table arrangement, before letting the mother slip the dress over her head.

"Now about this table arrangement," says the mother while the Bride tries to find her own arms inside the dress, "You have to understand that we can't *possibly* sit next to my first husband. This one's very overprotective of me, you know." And the first mother giggles.

She takes the wooden figures of herself and the fourth stepfather and places them at the very end of the table, away from all the others.

The Bride thanks the mother and closes the suitcase before walking off into the street.

The first mother waves her goodbye and says "Tell that son of mine to get you a proper ring!"

And as she waves the Bride is blinded by the light from the congregation of diamonds that bulge atop the mother's finger—a smelting and surging of five rings like a bejewelled tortoise shell. And the Bride thinks how can there possibly be any diamonds left inside the earth?

*

The first older sister the Bride visits is not her own sister. It could be a half-sister of her groom, but she is not sure because the sister doesn't have the same kind jade eyes.

Inside the sister's house there is a husband, which is a second husband, and there are lots of babies. Babies crawling around on the floors, babies dangling from ceiling fans, babies at her breasts—two at a time—and babies in the sink queued up for their baths.

"No thank you," says the Bride when she is offered a baby, preferring to hold her peonies instead. She pulls her suitcase closer to her and pushes a baby away from the wooden dolls with her toes.

“Oh, it’s OK,” says the sister, “They’ve swallowed worse things,” and she cackles.

“You’re drowning in that dress, Sis—I can call you that now, right Sis? Let me fix it up for you,” says the sister, tugging the dress off the Bride with the same dexterity she changes nappies in minute-long intervals.

But the sister doesn’t bring out a sewing kit and scissors, instead pulling the dress over herself and stroking her flaccid belly in the mirror.

The husband doesn’t look up from where he’s sitting with three babies on the sofa.

“Yeah, it’ll take me a while,” she says, twirling in front of the mirror, “I’ll fix it up and bring it you on your wedding day in mint condition.”

But the sister never takes the Bride’s measurements and continues to stare dreamy-eyed at the mirror.

The sofa is sticky on the Bride’s skin—sticky as the collective of dozens of babies. She breathes into her peonies to evade the smell of the room.

“Which one is the last born?” asks the Bride to try and show interest in the babies.

The sister laughs at the mirror and says, “Oh no, sweetie, they all came out at the same time! So I guess they’re all first born! Andrew says we’re definitely not having more, but he’ll come around, right baby?”

The husband mumbles something, gurgling as if he has lost the ability to make any grown-up sounds.

The Bride suddenly likes the babies even less and tries to turn the conversation back to the table arrangement.

“Yeah, it’s a good arrangement, I like it,” says the sister, but purses her lips as if there’s something she really wants to say. “It’s just that, well, weddings are supposed to be fun—it’s a party, right? How about this…” And the sister places the wooden figure of herself on top of the little table.

“We *have* to dance, come on! And what about your bachelorette party? I mean, you *have* to have a bachelorette. I can organise it! I still have loads of stuff left from mine.”

The sister opens a closet and penises come tumbling out. Penis straws, penis glasses, penis hats and other varieties of polymer penises litter the floor where the babies swarm to chew at them.

“They’re teething,” says the sister, making a small effort to push the babies away from the penis memorabilia.

“Shouldn’t we recycle these?” asks the Bride, stroking the shaft of a purple penis cane to determine what type of plastic it’s made of. “Surely we can use it for something else?”

But the sister makes the Bride choose the penises she likes best and wrings the rest from the babies’ fingers before stuffing them back in the closet.

The last thing the sister does is remove a few flowers from the bouquet, twirling them against her cheek. “The bouquet shouldn’t be too heavy, you know. For when you throw it. I mean, if I catch it, I’d need to be able to hold it properly.”

“But married women shouldn’t catch the bouquet?” says the Bride, testing whether she still remembers the traditions.

The sister winks at her, cackling uncontrollably, gasping for air as she laughs and laughs.

The Bride closes her suitcase and takes what’s left of her flowers to the door. She turns back one last time to shake a baby from her leg and to see the husband stuffing one of the plastic penises in the sister’s mouth to shut her up.

Only when the Bride is back in the street does she think, if only the earth was as big as the sister’s mouth and her womb and the hole between her legs, maybe all of us could fit on it. Even the Last Born. And the Bride smiles at the paradox as she steps over the rubble that marks the entrance to where her first born sister lives.

*

It is quiet in the house of the Bride’s sister and the air smells like incense. Barring her own soft footsteps and the rattling of the suitcase over the tiles, the only sounds are those of deep chants that she follows through a hallway in search of life. The Bride knows that her sister already knows she’s there. Her sister could always hear her thoughts.

At the end of the hallway the Bride can see a glow that flickers. Her sister loves the hue of candles. As she gets nearer, the Bride sees that the hallway is lined with canals—carved-out passages filled with what appears to be glittering metal.

When she enters the deep-set chamber, the Bride looks up at her sister, craning her neck to see the small figure perched high on top of something solid and decorated with thin gold plates like scales.

The chants remain soft, but the Bride feels their vibrations in her ribcage. She scours the room to find the source of the sound. It is only when she looks at the floor that she sees a dozen figures in prayer formation—twelve bodies crouching and touching the tiles symmetrically on either side of the sister’s throne. They rise and bow

as though they are cooling the tiles with their fanned hands. The Bride tries to decipher who the people are—her head spiralling along with their chants and their movement.

Their eyes are all painted black and each of them is adorned with the same gold as the dark throne on which the sister sits as she waits for the Bride to recognise her worshippers. The Bride squints to distinguish the smallest figure—a knobbed and wrinkled little person. Next to this androgynous creature is a fat woman and then another. The bride runs her eyes over all of them until she finally recognises a strong man whose bronze muscles ripple in the light of the molten gold circulating between the grooves in the tiles. Her older sister's husband.

“Very good, Little Sis. Now can you guess who the rest of them are?” asks the Bride's sister, her voice like a volcano from which the gold must have spewed like magma.

The Bride has a habit of trying not to disappoint her sister and thinks hard, squeezing the stems of her peonies to give her ideas. The androgynous old person throws a vehement glance at the Bride and then she recognises the look. It is the same set of features as that of the fat woman and one of the bald men—the family trait of the husband. His grandmother. His father and sisters. His mother.

“That's right, Little Sis. They're just so happy that their precious son found another First Born. I'm going to give them a lot of babies.”

The Bride wants to say that there is no more space for babies in the room or on the planet, but instead she only thinks it, and before she can guard her thoughts she thinks about the open spaces in the Forest between the trees and in the clearings where the flowers and the mushrooms grow.

“What's *that*?” asks her sister, leaning over her throne to study the Bride.

The Bride wills herself not to think any more about the Forest, channelling her thoughts to the suitcase at her side.

“Getting married, Little Sis? I always knew you would. Just make sure he worships you,” says the sister and smiles down at the Bride with her long eyelashes like crows' wings.

“And you don't have to worry about seating for us,” the sister continues. “We'll bring our own chair.” The Bride hears the sound of a whip and sees the gigantic throne of the sister shudder. In the dim light of the candles the Bride can't make out its silhouette against the wall when it suddenly starts moving.

A long trunk like a wrinkled root extends to open the suitcase. It sweeps up five small wooden chairs inside and places them on top of each other—constructing a little throne. The dark non-hand curls around the sister-doll and places it on top of the

makeshift throne before it retreats and snakes upward. It hovers there for a moment until the sister places something inside it.

Limp, the trunk coils down and past what the Bride figures to be an eye. The eye is the colour of tree resin and beneath it is a glistening trail of what must be a tear. It is then that the Bride sees little copper hairs sprouting from the trunk and sees the two gigantic tusks with golden caps at the tips.

The only thing she can think, even when she's far from the sister's house, is where her sister got hold of the last elephant on earth. And the only thing she can hear echoing in her head is her sister shouting after her, "I know a guy, Little Sis. I know people."

*

By the time the Bride arrives at the house of the father who is not her own father, she is glad that the first sister took the dress from her. Smaller than ever before, the Bride wilts behind her peonies. For a moment she considers changing her mind about the dress, torn between longing for its shelter from the darkening air and the fear that its creamy white would glow in the dark and attract things. But then she decides that there are worse things than not having clothes.

The Groom's father and his wife that is also not a first wife invites her in despite appearing confused at who she is. The Bride finds it difficult to explain to them when they both fall asleep in intermittent cycles, only offering a few waking minutes before dozing off again.

In between sleeping, the father and the first stepmother eat buckets of food and drink bottles of wine, creating insulin spikes that send them into brief comas.

"Married," says the Bride, attempting keywords and repetition to convey her message more effectively. "Your youngest son."

The Bride notices that all the lights in the house are on, with a yellow glow emanating even from the rooms at the end of the hallway. During one of the comas she gets up to switch some of them off, but then the stepmother awakens and lumbers to the kitchen in a nightgown that glistens lilac like an intestine and spans tightly around her middle. She falls asleep again while the stove heats up and wakes just in time to save the frying mess from burning.

"A wedding, that's nice," she says, falling asleep long enough for a spatula to fuse with a pan.

"Expensive," she says, awake again and licking the cooling contents from the pan.

“Pointless,” shouts the father from the living room. The Bride hears a gulping sound and then a loud snore.

The Bride takes the fresh batch of food from the sleeping stepmother and places it on the coffee table in front of the indents in the sofa where the pair must hardly ever get up from.

The father jerks awake from the sound and mutters, “Always ends in divorce.”

The Bride shakes droplets of grease from her peonies and places them on a clean chair where it seems no visitors ever sit. She makes sure to open the suitcase and ready herself for the demonstration of the table arrangement before the pair wake up again.

“That’s you,” she rapidly recites and points to the two round wooden figures at the important part of the table.

The pair gawk at the little diorama, their eyes swimming as though they have been asleep for hours and do not know where they have woken up.

“Put us closer to the bar,” says the father and passes out again, letting a half-full bottle of wine roll to the carpet. The stepmother’s knee twitches, so that her foot bounds through the air and pushes the two dolls to the opposite side of the little table the Groom so carefully crafted.

The Bride is not sure what it is that wakes them every time but nevertheless tries to close the door softly behind her. When she is out in the street again she can only imagine that it must be an unwavering and unbearable hunger.

*

By the time the Bride nears the house where she grew up in, the night is glowing orange as though the whole world is a forest ablaze. She breathes into her bouquet of peonies as one would into gas mask, but quickly pulls away when she notices that their petals are turning brown at the edges. She doesn’t worry when a tall apartment block and a warehouse cover the area where she remembers the house to be—knowing that it will still be standing in exactly the same place.

In the shadow of the monstrous buildings the house shimmers from a recent coat of paint, over which her mother is spraying water with a hose pipe. The Bride stands watching the small woman steadying herself to handle the immense pressure of the device—her feet spread far apart and her toes digging into the grass that also glistens from the spray.

“This is my last stop,” she says, just loud enough for her mother to hear over the hiss of the pipe.

The Bride puts her suitcase on the neat tiles of the footpath and waits patiently while her mother twists the spout. The water drips from the pipe like the exiting words of an argument.

The mother walks around to the back of the house. The Bride watches her disappear and listens as the water is turned back on. She stands for a moment before closing her hand around the suitcase and once again pulling it along in the direction of the pipe's mist. She looks back to the wall her mother just finished spraying and sees that dirt is already caking on the surface, in small craters eroded by the wind.

Around the corner the Bride keeps her distance to avoid the water bubbling up from a mound of dirt surrounding a tree. Her mother keeps a steadfast hand on the hose, spewing the stream of water at the hidden roots without blinking. The tree is small and gnarly, especially in comparison to its neighbour—a succulent and leafy growth that reaches for the heavens just like the apartment block behind them. The Bride has a picture of the healthy tree engrained in her—it has been there ever since she could remember. The smaller one grew with her too, slowly and painfully—from the day she was born. Even so, her mother nurtured it, kneeling at its trunk while she told the Bride stories of how she planted a tree for each sister.

“Don't you think that's enough?” says the Bride, lifting her suitcase as the lawn floods with water. “You should water the other one.”

The mother remains unmoved, her ankles disappearing beneath the water. “This one needs it more.”

The Bride wades over to her mother, lifting her suitcase and her peonies above her waist. She opens the suitcase as if selling something no one ever buys and shows her mother the haphazard arrangement of dolls inside.

“Where would you like to sit?” she asks.

The mother turns the water off with a hard twist and faces the Bride, a dark line separating the soaked hem of her dress from the thin fabric above her knees.

As the ever-thirsty grass soaks up the water, the mother seems to study the table arrangement. The Bride knows that she will most certainly change something about it, but is surprised when she decides to consult her father.

A thick stream of water bounds through the window of their bedroom before her father appears leaning over the sill. He drips water over the walls, leaving snail trails of cleanliness before the grime covers it again.

“Where would you like to sit?” shouts her mother, turning the water to a dribble to hear his answer.

The father squints behind his glasses and frowns, trying to decipher the contents of the suitcase. “We’re sitting next to God,” he says, still trying to locate his preferred company in the scale model.

The Bride looks at the suitcase, hoping with all her heart that there is a spare doll left to put next to the one of her father. Unable to find one, she settles for saying, “God will be in the flowers that grow in the fields, Father. Then when we hold hands he’ll be there too, in our palms. He’ll be all around, that’s why you can’t see him here.”

Satisfied, her father retreats back into the room—the droplets on his glasses reflecting a thousand orange skies.

“Flowers?” asks her mother, half a smirk on her face. “Like these?” she lifts a drooping peony with her finger, letting it drop again with enough force for the stem to snap.

The Bride refuses to meet her mother’s eyes, fighting back tears as she hones in on the flower.

“Oh alright,” says the mother and takes the bouquet. She rearranges the peonies skilfully, putting the fresh ones in places where they perk up the whole arrangement.

The Bride regains herself and allows her mother to look at her as they stand in silence while the grass grows parched beneath them.

“Do you think it would have helped if I had arranged *them* differently?” asks the mother, looking wistfully at the two trees. “Maybe if I had planted the small one earlier it would have grown.”

The Bride closes her suitcase and straightens herself up to make for the road. “I don’t think it would have made a difference,” she says, before closing her suitcase—the mother-doll in exactly the same spot as when she arrived.

*

The Bride stops again, but only once—at the edge of the Forest where she can feel her feet tingling and ready to send her sprouting. She takes some time, then, to open the suitcase and study its contents. So many dolls secured to the spots they have chosen for themselves—or was it decided by somebody else? She considers how haphazard the whole arrangement seems and wonders whether they might not have been mixed up during the journey.

She draws her bouquet of peonies to her and tries to extract a last strand of scent from them, taking a deep slow breath. Depleted, they droop over her fingers, seeming more artificial to her than the comfort they used to give her.

Her mind drifts to the field of wild flowers instead—their effortless beauty, the scattered seeds from which they grow. The flowers, the Bride decides, are much better

at arranging themselves. She knows, too, that when she lies down among them they will receive her and that their scent will waft up in the shape of her—waking her Groom to tell him that something in the air has changed.

The End

I don't know, I mean, I try to stay away from the internet but I think the chances of finding a snow leopard in an abandoned parking lot are just about as high as finding one in the wild—in Nepal or Afghanistan or Mongolia. If you really go and calculate probabilities. They're pretty rare and their habitat is all fucked up or something, I don't know. But anyway, I found one, just like that. On a night that was really cold when I went to park my car in this parking lot to slit my wrists somewhere else than in the bathtub. It seemed like a lot of people were doing that—slitting their wrists in the bathtub. Like I say, I try to stay away from the internet, but slitting your wrists in the bathtub seemed like something everyone was doing. I must have heard that somewhere. I guess an abandoned parking lot is just another one of those things I must have read about.

Tallulah was very pretty—her fur with its hues like slurry and her gigantic spots scattered like fruit around a tree. The parking lot was out in the open and the road was frozen and it was misty, so that all the streetlamps gave off a hazy ring of light. Tallulah was chasing a moth under one of the lamps and I thought that it didn't seem like there were supposed to be moths in that kind of weather. Her tail was something else altogether—swooshing through the air as she leapt. It was so long and curved and thick, but it seemed soft enough to stuff inside one of those tall Pringle tubs and take out whenever you wanted to powder your face or the scars on your wrists.

I climbed out of my car and locked it, hoisting myself onto the roof where I could watch her. There was nothing else around except for a few old corroded trucks—some with bodies and others with tanks that jutted out misaligned with the axes. Tallulah knew I was there, of course, and stared at me for a minute with her eyes that were grey and gelatinous-looking like pebbles underwater. She was really beautiful and a bit scary when her pupils shrunk as she looked into the headlights of my car. It frustrated me a little that I wasn't more amazed by her and that really made me want to slit my wrists.

A carpet knife is best for that—slitting your wrists. I don't know how other people do it, I mean you'd see pictures of people with bandages on their arms, but I could never manage to do both sides. It's like once you've cut the one side you go a little numb and lose interest and then just wait to get dizzy before you wrap some dank navy cloth around the wound. Everybody has a piece of soft navy cloth from their garage or wherever—it just works out that way. Something the internet wouldn't tell me was how once you really hit a vein with a thick blunt carpet knife, it makes a scar like

pink silicone that makes it hard to get to that vein ever again. Everyone feels a little sorry for scar tissue. It seems a bit desecrating to cut there again. So instead you're stuck with pieces of flesh around the area and some of them are bloodless so that when you cut it's just grey and gaping—like a really depressing concrete skate park with this gash like a big sad half-pipe.

“Sorry, I probably shouldn't make you smell blood,” I said, running the carpet knife over a centimetre of skin next to the little tendons that were most likely responsible for my finger movement or something.

Tallulah turned to me with silver moth dust on her nose and just gave me that half-pious half-fuckyou look of cats.

“Cause, you know, you might frenzy and eat me or whatever.”

She licked her paw and ran it over her ears and then said, “I only eat like once a year. Slow metabolism up in the mountains, you know?”

I did know. “So what are you doing down here?”

“Well, everything's changing. Thought I might get ahead if I adapt.”

“That's really pro-active. That's cool,” I said.

She yawned and I thought that her teeth seemed very clean. It's weird how much cats look like snakes when they yawn. Makes you want to press a jar to their fangs.

“But how does your body cope with this new environment and everything?”

She seemed to shrug a little. “There's a lot more oxygen down here so I'm a little bit dizzy most of the time. Other than that I try to find warehouses. Warehouses seem to be the coldest places except for snow.”

“Sucks about your habitat. I read about it on the internet, but that was long ago, so it must be really fucked up by now.” I said.

“Yeah, thanks. Everything's gone to shit. Do you really want to die?”

“Nah. It's just a tic I have. Kind of like tucking your hair behind your ears or twitching when you talk. There are many things that can piss a person off or make you sad,” I said, already cutting again.

“Yeah. Sucks,” she said and curled up in my headlights. She blinked really slowly at me for a while and I knew that she had fallen asleep when she stopped purring.

“Like, even words,” I said loud enough to wake her. She whipped her tail a few times—which I had read meant she was annoyed. “Look at the moon, for example. How many times have you heard that word, or looked up at the thing itself? Always just hanging there in space and in poetry, expecting you to marvel at it. But it doesn't make you feel a thing. And *that* makes me want to slit my wrists. All. The fucking. Time.

She glared at the moon through the slits between her third eyelids that had wrapped themselves around her eyeballs as she resumed her cosiness. “I’m glad I don’t have to worry about things like that,” she said and lay her head down on her massive front paws.

I watched her heave very evenly for a while, her dreams sending ripples through her body, making her spots pulsate like dark anemones.

While she slept I thought of waking up in the morning—of the sound of a blaring alarm clock and turning on a computer that hummed and flickered. I smoked a cigarette and waited for her to be woken by a car somewhere far-off before saying, “You really are something. I bet people would never get tired of looking at you.”

“Thanks,” she sighed dreamily. It didn’t seem like she was planning on getting up to leave.

“The sun comes out during the day, you know, and most of the frost melts around here. I know a place where you can have your very own air-conditioning. As cold as you want.”

And that’s how we started our business.

*

The best thing about the office where I had always worked was that the air-conditioning was permanently set on nearly freezing temperatures. Most people wore long sleeves to hide their wrists and got even more hot and itchy when they had to do something difficult on their computers. Yet there I was, brandishing my wrists—flashing the secret white skin of my left arm despite the cold. Showing the scars like molten mozzarella for the entire world to see. I kind of figured that that was what was expected of a wild animal tamer—someone a little rough and fearless. It was what I had seen somewhere a long time ago anyway. Not only that, but Tallulah and I were contract workers which meant that they could no longer make me adhere to dress codes or put up discriminating signs that read NO ANIMALS.

The thing about Tallulah, and that was what I had known about her right from the start, is that she was just like the Eiffel Tower or a baby. No matter how many times you see pictures of it, the real thing never ceases to catch your attention. The only problem was that we all tried so very hard to stay away from the internet—which meant no more pictures of the Eiffel tower except on screensavers and in the little coffee room where people had to take turns to look at the prints on the wall.

“We’re needed on level three,” I said to Tallulah one day when we were both still out of breath from having run up to level five and back down to ground again. We took great care in not taking the elevator. The elevator meant running into people and

giving them a free look at Tallulah, even bringing her in close enough range to be touched. It was important for us to get billed to specific cost centres. It was important for Maintenance to announce our entry into a section of cubicles with an abrupt drop in temperature, to make people wait for it, beg for it.

“So what’s the deal with this guy?” asked Tallulah, gliding up three steps at a time without looking back to see if I could keep up.

“Oh you know, client shouted at him in front of a whole boardroom. It’s hard without e-mail. It gets a lot more personal. He just ‘wants to be somewhere else’ for a while.” I shook my head and looked at the walkie-talkie that was permanently strapped to my good wrist. *Poor guy*, I thought and slit my wrist a little with the small blade I had glued to the base of the walkie-talkie. “You know what most people used to look at to deal with this kind of stress? Bulk automatic e-mails of holidays to Thailand. Mostly in monsoon season. It didn’t matter. You knew you were never really going there.”

Tallulah knew all about e-mail by then. She was a very fast learner. “I sure am glad that I don’t have to worry about things like that,” she said and stopped at the fire escape door leading into level three. She waited for me to tie the rattan leash to her collar. It was a big part of the experience for people to think she came from Nepal—imbued with the earthliness and wisdom of Buddhist monks.

“Where do you come from originally anyway?” I asked her, but she was already pushing the door open.

The level three business development team waited patiently at their desks. They were already dressed up in their parkas—for them it was part of the ritual. The women’s cheeks were flushed under their make-up and the man who had called us stood leaning on his desk, stopping himself from running over to Tallulah and burying his fingers in her musky fur. Holding up the little paw-sign to indicate to us, his eyes were glistening—either from wonder or the recent trauma he had suffered in front of his bosses.

Tallulah gave a nearly occult-like growl from deep within her throat when he tried to touch her. Not that she would mind, but it was important to maintain the mystery—the exoticism.

“She’s magnificent,” I heard him mumble as he watched us retreat back into the fire escape.

When we were done for the day and had ascended to our very own air-conditioned lodgings on the roof of the building, Tallulah grew quiet and asked to be left alone—outside where she could feel the winds of winter. Long ago I had been subscribed to a mailing list for fun animal facts and it was there that I had read about the

solitary nature of leopards. I was pretty sure that it applied to the snowy kind as well. Yet looking at her sniff the air out there I couldn't help myself from sneaking up on her. Tiptoeing up behind her on my softest socks, I felt a dull throb in my wrist. I was glad she was such a passive animal—not minding the way I had invaded her privacy—just panting softly with her mouth open, her back to me as if she was only talking to the moon. “It’s a lot warmer out here than I thought.”

*

“You sure? I haven’t seen you eat a single thing since I met you,” I said to Tallulah after sending another load of meat back down to the cafeteria.

“Is it still winter?” she asked, lying on top of a shelf where I had put a giant pillow up for her.

“What do you mean? Aren’t you supposed to be attuned to the cycles of nature?”

“It’s hard to tell in here. It’s cold all the time. But not real winter cold. And there’s a lot of light.”

I looked at my watch and told her that it was almost the middle of winter.

“Then I don’t need to eat yet.”

I slit my wrists a little because I was worried about her. She had grown very thin. Her beautiful belly was gone—the Maltese-like fur underneath hanging down in wisps, no longer taut over her flesh. The skin on her hips shifted over her bones as she climbed down from her perch.

“You should stop doing that,” she said, chewing at an itch in her side.

“Cutting?”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” she said.

“I went to a meeting yesterday,” I said. “They asked me how you feel about water.”

Tallulah perked her ears up towards me. “My coat is pretty waterproof. I mean, for snow and all. Sometimes where I lived I would catch fish too—before the streams froze over.”

“So how would you feel about a... a show of sorts?”

The company was planning on laying off a lot of people all at once. They wanted to gather everyone as soon as they released the news—containing the drastic drop in morale that would ensue. They wanted to give everyone a big show to transport them out of their situation for a while.

When Tallulah agreed, the preparations began almost immediately. The biggest boardroom in the building was on the top floor, in the middle. Its walls were made of

glass so that everyone could see through to the inside where the important things were happening.

All the chairs were taken out and so was the massive table of dark varnished wood. The flipcharts and the projector were put into storage and all the plugs were covered up. The door was sealed with a thick layer of silicone that needed two days to dry.

Around the walls, at waist height, a waterproof layer of plastic was rolled out and pasted. It was coarse and shimmered like fish scales. Two layers of the same substance were secured to the floor to avoid water damage to the carpet. Like a good open office plan type of room, the boardroom was not a room at all—instead an arrangement that could be moved swiftly when necessary. This meant that it had no ceiling, since its walls only reached high enough to keep most of the sounds inside.

They must have calculated exactly how much water it could hold before the glass would crack. Not that they could fill it all the way—the people needed to be able to see Tallulah—to look down at her inside the makeshift tank as though they had somewhat of an aerial view.

I had no idea how they got the slab of ice in there. They must have used a crane or something. But there it was—resting on the floor like a piece of broken shell from a dinosaur egg. Since there was no longer a door they offered to bring Tallulah in the same way as they did the ice, but she just jumped up on the rim all by herself—her pupils dilated from the thrill of climbing.

Inside the tank she looked amazing, just sitting there on the ice and licking it for its coolness.

“All good?” I asked her when the Maintenance guy had left to fetch the hose.

She rolled over on the slab and rubbed her fur against it. It didn't look like she had heard me.

I preferred to stay up there on the top floor with Tallulah while the water was being pumped into the tank. The rising liquid pushed her ice raft up up up so that it bobbed in the tiny waves that rippled out from where the steady stream penetrated the water mass. On the lower floors they were probably already busy with the announcement over the intercom. Hundreds of people receiving the news that they may no longer have a job in a few days.

A silence overcame the building as the last water dribbled into the tank. For a few minutes the only sound was that of droplets hitting the surface and of Tallulah softly pawing the water—all the while using her excellent balance to stay afloat on the slab of ice.

The first people came up with the elevator. It PING!ed to let out about a dozen bodies attached to shiny faces with bulging eyes—all of them storming to secure their spot. The Maintenance guy and I, we plastered ourselves to the glass so that none of them could shove us out of the way. When the bodies flung themselves at the tank, Tallulah jerked her head and gave a startled hiss. She was a really good actress.

More bodies filed up the stairs and swelled out of offices to join the spectacle until there wasn't a single spot open around the tank and the late-comers had to stand on tiptoe behind the rest.

When it looked like everyone was there, Tallulah watched me for the signal and I twitched my nose to indicate that she should start. She was so talented, my beautiful snow leopard, balancing on that ice and rocking it not so that you would notice, but just enough to create waves that grew bigger and bigger as they merged. The people gasped and shouted and pressed their hands against the tank. They begged Tallulah to just hang on, to not fall in and drown.

When there was chaos in the tank—just like the dark open sea—Tallulah allowed herself to be knocked off her raft by a particularly big little wave that lapped at the ice and slipped in underneath her paws.

Over the din of people roaring and pushing each other aside to see if she would emerge again from the water, I noticed that the Maintenance guy had pressed his palms to his mouth and was holding his breath.

“This is actually more of a polar bear gig, you know?” I said into his ear to ease the tension. “Snow leopards don't really go near the ocean. They live in the mountains.”

But everybody had grown quiet and was waiting only for Tallulah to push through the surface.

And when she finally did, nobody was disappointed. She did such a magnificent job of being wide-eyed and scraggly-whiskered, clinging to the ice and digging her nails into it. She tried to hoist herself up but kept falling back in—her skin like a wet rag around her, its weight keeping her down in the water. It was when she gave a panicked roar that I realised how very much she resembled a wild animal at the end of its rope.

*

The next week they sent about thirty people packing. The building was very quiet. People kept to their work, mostly, and tried to stay productive so that they wouldn't give anyone a reason to doubt their usefulness. Because it was so quiet, Tallulah and I had a lot of free time on our hands and didn't think it weird at all that a day or two went by without any activity on the walkie-talkie. I took the opportunity to let her rest as she seemed even thinner to me after the thing with the ice and the tank.

“Today is the middle of winter. Like, officially. The longest night. The season will start turning from tomorrow,” I said to make some conversation.

Tallulah seemed to be happy about that. She opened her eyes a little and let out a deep sigh, which I had learned to take as contentment.

“They say it’s gonna be really cold tonight too. Might even snow.” I looked out the window to watch the sky. “So how about we go out tonight? There’s a hill close to where I used to live. I’m sure we’ll have a good view of the moon up there.” Tallulah seemed to be asleep again. “You like that, don’t you? Looking at the moon?”

Unlike Tallulah I couldn’t sleep so much during the day and quickly grew bored of being cooped up without so much as occasional conversation. The traffic down below could only amuse me for so long, which is why I decided to take a walk through the building.

“Maybe there’s a job for us,” I said to her as I left. “I’ll come and get you when I find something.”

Taking the stairs so frequently had made me fit. I ran up to the top floor in no time, planning to comb the building by working my way down. I liked to think of the sound of the fire escape door opening as a sort of Pavlov whistle or whatever—imagining that people would start to drool in anticipation of seeing Tallulah.

But not a sound emanated from where there would usually be fingers over keyboards or teaspoons tinkling against cups. I reached the first cluster of cubicles without running into anyone.

Behind their computers the people sat hunched, staring at the screens with their hands on the desks.

“What’s up?” I asked a secretary. She twitched a little but didn’t take her eyes off the screen. “What’s going on?”

I peeked through one of the glass offices to see an executive staring blankly at his screen as well. I tapped lightly against the glass with the walkie-talkie but he didn’t look up.

I walked down to the next floor and into the same eerie silence. “Hey, what’s happening?” I asked the guy at the first desk I found. Some spittle had formed at the corner of his mouth and it made a bubble when he moaned something at me.

“Can’t hear you, man. What’s going on?”

The guy managed to lift a finger from where it rested on the scroll wheel of his mouse. The finger seemed to weigh a ton as it quivered in pointing at the screen.

“Oh *shit*,” I heard myself whispering. “Oh shit shit shit.” The familiar little Wi-Fi bars were at full strength in the corner of the screen, flickering green to indicate a healthy connection.

I backed up against a cabinet and felt myself slipping down onto the carpet. “But we all worked so hard,” I mumbled. “We all tried so very hard.”

There was still one vein I had left. I’d been saving it for something like this. Beginners probably wouldn’t know, but there’s this one vein on the side of your arm that’s hidden a bit better under your hair and your tan and it’s a bit less blue because of being flattened by the curve of your bone. But it’s also an artery, working together with the ones on your wrist to get all that blood to your hands. It’s easier to cut there too, because the muscle is stronger and tighter.

You lose a lot of blood that way. I think I even passed out. All I really remember was being on the floor on my one cheek, unable to get that screen out of my mind. I think it was an e-mail that was distributed to the whole company. I couldn’t be sure. But it was really colourful and I remember saying to Tallulah as she closed her jaw around my wrist “We should go on an island holiday, just you and me and the sun and the ocean and the cocktails inside coconuts.”

*

“Sorry about biting you,” said Tallulah when I came to. She must have dragged me up to our room and out onto the roof where it was already dark. There was an icy wind blowing and almost no traffic down in the streets below.

“I tried to stop the bleeding.”

“Shit,” I mumbled and cradled my wrist.

It took a few minutes for me to orientate myself properly. I wasn’t dressed for the cold at all, my left arm exposed to the freeze and going numb.

“What a fucking mess,” I said and looked at my arm. So many criss-crosses and white scars like worms. Patches of dried blood looked dark against my skin.

Tallulah stood regally with her chest in the air. As I watched her sniff the wind I wondered how cold it must have been where she came from. Even with the first flakes of snow swirling towards us, she seemed comfortable and alive.

“So what do we do now?” she said.

“Everything’s gone to shit again. After all this time. Back to where we started.”

My arm pulsed from the wound and the cold. When I touched it I felt nothing.

Tallulah turned her back to me and swung her tail from side to side. She licked at the snowflakes that had by then started making the air a little blurry.

“There are lots of other places we can go,” she said softly. I imagined her honing in on movement somewhere out in the Tundra, charging and pouncing in all her liveness and her strength.

When she turned to me there were droplets on her whiskers and I could see that her little beard was spattered with something darker. “I think I need to eat something now,” she said. She sounded dreamy and remote, but her eyes took me in like when she had first curled up in my headlights.

“OK,” I said and laid my arm down on the ground, palm facing upward for the snowflakes to melt on my wrist.

I don’t think it was so much the sharpness of her teeth. It must have been the sheer strength of her—her predatory jaws that could crush and press down on a throat like the same stifling tourniquet that had stopped my own bleeding only moments before. It was easy because I couldn’t feel my arm much anyway.

And I think I was preoccupied as well—looking at the moon. I didn’t know if Tallulah could hear me. I was kind of feeble and she was far away from me then—skulking in a corner to eat. But we were both under it, that moon, and I even said it out loud then.

“Moon.”

And it sounded kind of new in my mouth and it looked different than before—brighter up there above all the snow.

“Moon.”

The Evolution

At first we were balloons, with an endless source of air. We filled out and almost popped, drawing faces on ourselves and wiping them off. We were supple on our strings. We coloured the sky and bobbed in the wind and when we got puncture wounds we hovered while they reeled us in and patched us up with plasters. We did not deflate, only swelled so we could see how much air we could suck into ourselves. We kept growing outward when we learned we had no seams at which to burst.

When we learned that we were only thin films containing the same air that filled everything, some of our friends shrivelled up and discarded themselves in fields, taking centuries to disintegrate as rubbery piles that the foxes ended up choking on. Some of our friends inflated themselves further, saying that it didn't matter whether the air was inside them or around them, and exploded. The force and the shrapnel blinded the rest of our friends and knocked them off their strings, leaving them bumping into each other and holding their breath. But most of our friends, and you and I, cut ourselves off and circled the earth. We crafted ourselves into balloon animals, tying knots and filling our domes with the cleanest air we could find. Not much different from anything around us, we comforted ourselves with how we had grown twisted and shapely.

I crafted myself into a balloon whale because of the shape I had been at first. An eggplant shape of sorts—I did not need many knots and loops to turn me into a model of a blue sea creature. You were a giraffe because you'd been an orange string bean balloon and you had become skilful at blowing your air into the narrowest of crevices—you shaped your knob-knees and your neck. Whether you were drawn to the idea of an ocean into which you could sink instead of float on top of, I do not recall. We might have run into each other at the convention for gigantic mammal balloons, but I do remember that our bubbles and pockets locked into one another's not like a puzzle but like a tangle of strings—and that we grew entwined.

It came to an exchange of air, which led to complications. We grew fuller and we grew lungs and I grew into a real whale and you a real giraffe. I managed to blow bubbles for you to visit me underwater, and I beached myself to be with you on land where I would breathe before being hauled back into the ocean. You rode the waves I made and I watched you graze on trees until the barnacles lodged themselves on my skin and the

ticks themselves on yours. We grew heavy with symbiotic crusts, we grew swollen with pests. We grew large enough not to notice them for long.

I swam through the currents with you on my back—the snorkel of your neck keeping your head above the water. It grew longer and couldn't bend any further to dip beneath the surface. You could not see that your folded limbs clinging to me blocked the air from my blow hole. I was dizzy and retreated into the depths. Your head reached for the sky and I became a shimmering form that sifted through the plankton until I understood the sonar that you could not decipher as anything but tremors that sent the saline droplets rolling from your lashes. You were buoyant and drifted. It came to growing apart.

I must have inhaled a seed with the breath I took when you were no longer stifling me. It incubated in the time it took your hooves to dry and shot its roots into the pillows of my tissue. It took to growing inward, through my tunnels filled with air. I could see it when I rolled my eyes back. I took to looking inward. There is no backward in the ocean. You must have grown steady on your feet on dry land by then. You must have grown old and light.

When they found our bones contained in rocks scattered not so far apart, they took to building a wall. They stacked parts of us together and fused them with cement. When we swelled and settled with a rhythm like respiration, there came a crack that grew through all of us. It was there that the vines found footing, dropping their hooks into our pockets and steadily growing over us.

When they broke us down to build a museum of natural history, we grew into a pile at a construction site and let the air move through our pores.