

Orange World

and Other Stories

KAREN RUSSELL



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THIS IS A BORZOI BOOK
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For Tony & Oscar

real. It was agitating its wings in the polar air, as alive as we were. Its shadow was denser than anything in that ice palace. Its song split our eardrums. Its feathers burned into our retinas, rich with solar color, and its small body was stuffed with life.

At the Evergreen Lodge, on the opposite side of the mountain, two twelve-foot doors, designed and built by the CCC, stand sentry against the outside air—seven hundred pounds of hand-cut ponderosa pine, from Oregon's primeval woods. Inside the Emerald Lodge, we found their phantom twins, the dream originals. Those doors still worked, thank God. We pushed them open. Bright light, real daylight, shot onto our faces.

The sun was rising. The chairlift, visible across a pillowcase of fresh snow, was running.

We sprinted for it. Golden sunlight painted the steel cables. We raced across the platform, jumping for the chairs, and I will never know how fast or how far we flew to get back to the Earth. In all our years of prospecting in the West, this was our greatest heist. Clara opened her satchel and lifted the yellow bird onto her lap, and I heard it shrieking the whole way down the mountain.

The Bad Graft

I. GERMINATION

The land looked flattened, as if by a rolling pin. All aspects, all directions. On either side of Highway 62, the sand cast up visions of evaporated civilizations, dissolved castles that lay buried under the desert. Any human eye, goggled by a car's windshield, can graft such fantasies onto the great Mojave. And the girl and the boy in the Dodge Charger were exceptionally farsighted. Mirages rose from the boulders, a flume of dream attached to real rock.

And hadn't their trip unfolded like a fairy tale? the couple later quizzed each other, recalling that strange day, their first in California, hiking among the enormous apricot boulders of Joshua Tree National Park. The girl had gotten her period a week early and was feeling woozy; the boy kept bending over to remove a pebble from his shoe, a phantom that he repeatedly failed to find. Neither disclosed these private discomforts. Each wanted the other to have the illusion that they might pause, anywhere, at any moment, and make love.

And while both thought this was highly unlikely—not in this heat, not at this hour—the possibility kept bubbling up, everywhere they touched. This was the only true protection they'd brought with them as they walked deeper into the blue-gold Mojave.

On the day they arrived in Joshua Tree, it was a hundred and six degrees. They had never been to the desert. The boy could scarcely believe the size of the boulders, clustered under the enormous sun like dead red rockets awaiting repair, or the span of the sky, a cheerfully vacant blue dome, the desert's hallucinatory choreography achieved through stillness, brightness, darkness, distance—and all of this before noon. It was a big day, they agreed. It was a day so huge, in fact, that its real scale would always elude them. Neither understood that a single hour in the desert could mutate their entire future as a couple. In a sense, they will never escape this trail loop near Black Rock Canyon. They had prepared for the hike well, they thought, with granola bars, water, and an anti-UV sunscreen so powerful that its SPF seemed antagonistic. "Albino spring break," the boy said, rubbing the cream onto her nose. They'd heard about the couple who had died of dehydration six miles from where they were standing. They congratulated themselves on being unusually responsible and believed themselves to be at the start of a long journey, weightless spores blowing west.

The trip was a kind of honeymoon. The boy and girl were eloping. They weren't married, however, and had already agreed that they never would be—they weren't that kind of couple. The boy, Andy, was a reader; he said that they were seafarers, wanderers. *EVER UNFIXED*, a line from Melville, was

scraped in red ink across the veins of his arm. The girl, Angie, was three years sober and still struggling to find her mooring on dry land. On their first date they had decided to run away together.

Andy bought a stupidly huge knife; Angie had a tiny magenta flashlight suspended on a gold chain, which she wore around her throat. He was twenty-two; she had just turned twenty-six. Kids were for later, maybe. They could still see the children they had been: their own Popsicle-red smiles haunting them. Still, they'd wanted to celebrate a beginning. And the Mojave was a good place to launch into exile together; already they felt their past lives in Pennsylvania dissolving into rumor, sucked up by the hot sun of California and the perfectly blue solvent of the sky.

They'd been driving for three days; almost nobody knew yet that they were gone. They'd cashed old checks. They'd quit their jobs. Nothing was planned. The rental Dodge Charger had been a real steal, because the boy's cousin Sewell was a manager at the Zero to Sixty franchise, and because it smelled like decades of cigarettes. Between them they had nine hundred and fifty dollars left now. Less, less, less. At each rest stop, Angie uncapped the ballpoint, did some nauseating accounting. Everything was going pretty fast. By the time they reached Nevada, they had spent more than eight hundred dollars on gasoline.

Near Palm Springs, they stop to eat at a no-name diner and nearly get sick from the shock of oxygen outside the stale

sedan. The night before, just outside Albuquerque, they parked behind a barbecue restaurant and slept inside a cloud of meat smells. The experience still has the sizzle of a recent hell in Angie's memory. Will they do this every night? She wants to believe her boyfriend when he tells her they are gypsies, two moths drunk on light, darting from the flower of one red sunset to the next; but several times she's dozed off in the passenger seat and awakened from traitorous dreams of her old bedroom, soft pillows.

After dinner, Andy drives drowsily, weaving slightly. Sand, sand, sand—all that pulverized time. Eons ago, the world's burst hourglass spilled its contents here; now the years pile and spin, waiting with inhuman patience to be swept into some future ocean. Sand washes right up to the paved road, washes over to the other side in a solid orange current, illuminated by their headlights.

"Who lives way out like that?" Angie says, pointing through the window at a line of trailer homes. *Why* is the implied question. Thirteen-foot saguaro cacti look like enormous roadside hitchhikers, comical and menacing. Andy is drifting off, his hand on Angie's bare thigh, when a streak of color crosses the road.

"Jesus! What was that?"

A parade of horned beasts. Just sheep, Angie notes with relief.

Andy watches each animal go from sheep to cloud in the side mirror, reduced immediately into memory. The radio blares songs about other humans' doomed or lost loves, or their bombastic lusts in progress. Andy watches his girlfriend's red lips move, mouthing the lyrics to a song Andy

didn't realize he knew. *My wife's lips*, he thinks, and feels frightened by the onslaught of an unexpected happiness. Were they serious, coming out here? Were they kidding around? Are they getting more serious? Less? Perhaps they'll sort it all out at the next rest stop.

That night, they stay in a fifty-dollar motel. By dawn, they are back on the highway. They don't try to account for their urgency to be gone. Both feel it; neither can resist it.

At 10 a.m., Angie lifts her arm to point at the western sky. There is a pale rainbow arcing over the desert. It looks as if God had made a bad laundry error, mixed his colors with his whites. *How could even the rainbow be faded?* she wonders. "Look!" she blurts. "We're here."

The sign reads ENTERING JOSHUA TREE NATIONAL PARK.

Quietly, they roll under the insubstantial archway of the rainbow. Andy slows the Charger. He wants to record this transition, which feels important. Usually, you can only catch the Sasquatch blur of your own legendary moments in the side mirrors.

More and more slowly, they drive into the park. Sand burns outside their windows in every direction. Compass needles spin in their twinned minds: everywhere they look, they are greeted by horizon, deep gulps of blue. People think of the green pastoral when they think of lovers in nature. Those English poets used the vales and streams to douse their lusts into verse. But the desert offers something that no forest brook or valley ever can: distance. A cloudless rooming house for couples. Skies that will host any visitors' dreams with the bald hospitality of pure space. In terms of an ecology that can support two lovers in hot pursuit of each other, this is the

nation system in nature. "There is no romance more dire and pure than that of the desert moth and the Joshua."

"Dire?" the girl asks. And learns from the ranger that the Joshua trees may be on the brink of extinction. Botanists believe they are witnessing a coordinated response to crisis. Perhaps a drought, legible in the plants' purplish leaves, has resulted in this push. Seeds in abundance. The ancient species' Hail Mary pass. Yucca moths, attracted by the flowers' penetrating odor, are their heroic spouses, equally dependent, equally endangered; their larval children feast on yucca seeds.

"It's an obligate relationship. Each species' future depends entirely on the other," the ranger says, and then grins hugely at them. The boy is thinking that the math sounds about right: two species, one fate. The girl wonders, of their own elopement: Who is more dependent on whom? What toast might Charles Darwin make were they to break their first vows and get married?

So they obey the ranger, drive the Charger another quarter mile, park at the deserted base of Warren Peak.

Angie says she has to pee, and Andy sits on the hood and watches her.

They set off along the trail, which begins to ascend the ridgeline east of Warren Peak. Now Joshua woodland sprawls around them.

This is where the bad graft occurs.

For the rest of her life, she will be driven to return to the park, searching for the origin of the feeling that chooses this day to invade her and make its home under her skin.

Before starting the ascent, each pauses to admire the plant that is the park's namesake. The Joshua trees look *hilariously*

place; everywhere you look, you'll find monuments to fevered longing. Craters beg for rain all year long. Moths haunt the succulents, winging sticky pollen from flower to flower.

Near the campground entrance, they are met by a blue-eyed man of indeterminate age, a park employee, who comes lunging out of the infernal brightness with whiskey urgency. His feet are so huge that he looks like a jackrabbit, even in boots.

"Where did you folks wash up from?" he asks.

Their answer elicits a grunt.

"First timers to the park?"

The boy explains that they are on their honeymoon, watches the girl redden with pleasure.

Up close, the ranger has the unnervingly direct gaze and polished bristlecone skin of so many outdoorsmen. A large bee lifts off a cactus, walks the rim of his hat, and he doesn't flick it off, a show of tolerance that is surely for their benefit.

"Do Warren Peak. Go see the Joshua trees. Watch the yucca moths do their magic. You're in luck—you've come smack in the middle of a pulse event. As far as we can tell, the entire range of Joshuas is in bloom right now. You think you're in love? The moths are smitten. In all my years, I've seen nothing to rival it. It's a goddamn orgy in the canyon."

It turns out that their visit has coincided with a tremendous blossoming, one that is occurring all over the Southwest. Highly erotic, the ranger says, with his creepy bachelor smile. A record number of greenish-white flowers have erupted out of the Joshuas. Pineapple-huge, they crown every branch.

"Now, there's an education for a couple, huh? Charles Darwin agrees with me. Says it's the most remarkable polli-

alien. Like Satan's telephone poles. They're primitive, irregularly limbed, their branches swooning up and down, sparsely covered with syringe-thin leaves—more like spines, Angie notes. Some mature trees have held their insane poses for a thousand years; they look as if they were on drugs and hallucinating themselves.

The ranger told them that the plant was named in the nineteenth century by a caravan of Mormons, passing through what they perceived to be a wasteland. They saw a forest of hands, which recalled to them the prayers of the prophet Joshua. But the girl can't see these plants as any kind of holy augury. She's thinking: *Dr. Seuss. Timothy Leary.*

"See the moths, Angie?"

No wonder they call it a pulse event—wings are beating everywhere.

Unfortunately for Angie, the ranger they encountered had zero information to share on the ghostly Leap. So he could not warn her about the real danger posed to humans by the pulsating Joshuas. Between February and April, the yucca moths arrive like living winds, swirling through Black Rock Canyon. Blossoms detonate. Pollen heaves up.

Then the Joshua tree sheds a fantastic sum of itself.

Angie feels dizzy. As she leans out to steady herself against a nearby Joshua tree, her finger is pricked by something sharp. One of the plant's daggerlike spines. Bewildered, she stares at the spot of red on her finger. Running blood looks exotic next to the etiolated grasses.

Angie Gonzalez, wild child from Nestor, Pennsylvania, pricks her finger on a desert dagger and becomes an entirely new creature.

When the Leap occurs, Angie does not register any change whatsoever. She has no idea what has just added its store of life to hers.

But other creatures of the desert *do* seem to apprehend what is happening. Through the crosshairs of its huge pupils, a tarantula watches Angie's skin drink in the danger: the pollen from the Joshua mixes with the red blood on her finger. On a fuchsia ledge of limestone, a dozen lizards witness the Leap. They shut their gluey eyes as one, sealing their lucent bodies from contagion, interkingdom corruption.

During a season of wild ferment, a kind of atmospheric accident can occur: the extraordinary moisture stored in the mind of a passing animal or hiker can compel the spirit of a Joshua to Leap through its own membranes. The change is metaphysical: the tree's spirit is absorbed into the migrating consciousness, where it lives on, intertwined with its host.

Instinct guides its passage now, through the engulfing darkness of Angie's mind. Programmed with the urgent need to plug itself into some earth, the plant's spirit goes searching for terra firma.

Andy unzips his backpack, produces Fiji water and a Snoopy Band-Aid.

"Your nose got burned," he says, and smiles at her.

And, at this juncture, she can smile back.

He kisses the nose.

"C'mon, let's get out of here."

Then something explodes behind her eyelids into a radial green fan, dazzling her with pain. Her neck aches, her abdomen. The pain moves lower. It feels as if an umbrella were opening below her navel. *Menstrual cramps*, she thinks. Sec-

onds later, as with a soldering iron, an acute and narrowly focused heat climbs her spine.

At first, the Joshua tree is elated to discover that it's alive: *I survived my Leap. I was not annihilated. Whatever "I" was.* Grafted to the girl's consciousness, the plant becomes aware of itself. It dreams its green way up into her eyestalks, peers out:

Standing there, in the mirror of the desert, are a hundred versions of itself. Here is its home: a six-armed hulk, fibrous and fruiting obscenely under a noon sun. Here is the locus that recently contained this tree spirit. For a tree, this is a dreadful experience. Its uprooted awareness floats throughout the alien form. It concentrates itself behind Angie's eyeballs, where there is moisture. This insoluble spirit, this refugee from the Joshua tree, understands itself to have leapt into hell. The wrong place, the wrong vessel. It pulses outward in a fuzzy frenzy of investigation, flares greener, sends out feelers. Compared with the warm and expansive desert soil, the human body is a cul-de-sac.

This newborn ghost has only just begun to apprehend itself when its fragile tenancy is threatened: Angie sneezes, rubs at her temple. Unaware that this is an immunologic reflex, she is convulsed by waves of nostalgia for earlier selves, remote homes. Here, for some reason, is her childhood backyard, filled with anarchic wildflowers and bordered by Pennsylvania hemlock.

Then the pain dismantles the memory; she holds her head in her hand, cries for Andy.

This is the plant, fighting back.

The girl moans.

"Andy, you don't have any medicine? Advil . . . something?"

The vegetable invader feels the horror of its imprisonment. Its new host is walking away from the Joshua-tree forest, following Andy. What can this kind of survival mean?

Although they don't know it, escape is now impossible for our vagabonding couple. Andy opens the sedan door, Angie climbs in, and in the side mirrors the hundreds of Joshuas shrink away into hobgoblin shapes.

"Angie? You got so quiet."

"It's the sun. My head is killing me, honey."

Dispersed throughout her consciousness, the tree begins to grow.

Andy has no clue that he is now party to a love triangle. What he perceives is that his girlfriend is acting very strangely.

"Do you need some water? Want to sit and rest awhile?"

At the motel, the girl makes straight for the bathroom faucet. She washes down the water with more water, doesn't want to eat dinner. When Andy tries to undress her, she fights him off. Her movements seem to him balletic, unusually nimble; yet, walking across the room, she pauses at the oddest moments. That night, she basks in the glow of their TV as if it were the sun. Yellow is such a relief.

"I hate this show," the boy says, staring not at the motel TV but at her. "Let's turn it off?"

Who are you? he does not bother to ask.

Calmly, he becomes aware that the girl he loves has exited

the room. Usually, when this sensation comes over him, it means she's fallen asleep. Tonight she is sitting up in bed, eyes bright, very wide awake. Her eyes in most lighting are hazel; tonight they are the brightest green. As if great doors had been flung open onto an empty and electrically lit room.

The Joshua tree "thinks" in covert bursts of activity:

Oh, I have made a terrible mistake.

Oh, please get me out of it, get me out of it, send me home.

"The headache," she calls the odd pressure at first. "The green headache."

"Psychosis," at 4 a.m., when its power over her crests and she lies awake terrified. "Torpor" or "sluggishness" when it ebbs.

Had you told her, *The invader is sinking its roots throughout you, tethering itself to you with a thousand spectral feelers—who knows what she would have done?*

The next day, they wake at dawn, as per their original plan: to start every day at sunup and navigate by whim. They go north on 247, with vague plans to stop in Barstow for gas. The girl's eyes are aching. Partway across the Morongo Basin, she starts to cry so hard that the boy is forced to pull over.

"Forget it," she says.

"Forget what?"

"It. All of it. The seafaring stuff—I can't do it anymore."

The boy blinks at her. "It's been four days."

But her lips look blue, and she won't be reasonable.

"Leave me here."

"You don't have any money."

"I'll work. They're hiring everywhere in town, did you notice that?" A job sounds unaccountably blissful to the girl. Drinking water in the afternoon. Sitting at a desk.

"What? What the hell are you talking about?"

The boy scowls down at his arm, flipped outward against the steering wheel. She keeps talking to him in a new, low monotone, telling him that she loves the desert, she loves the Joshua trees, she wants to stay. Dumbly, he rereads his own tattoo: EVER UNFIXED. For some reason, he finds that he cannot quite blame the girl for ruining things. It's the plan he hates, their excellent plan, for capsizing on them.

The crumbly truth: the boy imagined that he'd be the one to betray the girl.

"Andy, I'm sorry. But I know that I belong here."

"Okay, just to be clear: When you say 'here,' you mean this parking lot?" The sedan is parked outside Cojo's Army Surplus and Fro-Yo; it's a place where you can purchase camouflage underwear and also a cup of unlicensed TCBY swirl. "Or do you mean this?" He waves his arms around to indicate the desert.

Had they continued, just a short distance northwest of Yucca Valley they would have reached the on-ramp to I-15 north and, beyond that, the pinball magic of the tollbooths, that multiverse of possible futures connected by America's interstate system.

For the next two hours, they fight inside the car.

Round clusters of leaves shake loose in front of her eyes,

greeny-white blossoms. If she could only show him the desert in her imagination, Angie thinks, the way she sees it.

When it becomes clear that she's not joking, the boy turns the car around. Calls Cousin Sewell in Pennsylvania, explains their situation. "We want to stay awhile," he says. "We like it here."

Sewell needs to know how long. They'll have to put the car on some conveyance, get it back to Pennsylvania.

"Indefinitely," the boy hears himself say. Her word, for what she claims to want.

They decide to pay the weekly rate at the motel. They go for walks. They go for drives. Her favorite thing seems to be sitting in a dry wreck of a turquoise Jacuzzi they discover on the edge of town, some luckless homesteader's abandoned pleasure tub. And he likes this, too, actually—sitting in the tub, he finds it easy to pretend that they aren't trapped in a tourist town, that they are sailing toward an elsewhere. And he loves what happens to her face right at sunset over the infinite desert. Moonlight, however, affects her in a way that he finds indescribably frightening. *The change is in the eyes,* he thinks.

II. EMERGENCE

Two weeks later, in late April, their money runs out. They've spent the days outside, Angie doing stretches in the motel courtyard, Andy reading his stolen library books from back east, waiting for the bad enchantment to break. Andy tells Angie he is leaving her. They have no vehicle, the rental

Dodge having been chauffeured east by a genial grifter pal of Sewell's. Angie nods, staring out the window of their room as the rain sweeps over the desert. All the muddy colors of the sky touch the earth.

"Did you hear me? I said I'm leaving, Angie."

That afternoon, Andy gets a job at the Joshua Tree Saloon. Then there is a period of peace, coinciding with the Joshua tree's dormancy inside Angie, which lasts from April to mid-May. In the park, the Joshuas' blossoms have all dropped off, leaving dried stalks. Andy does not even suggest "moving on" anymore, so thrilled is he to laugh with Angie again. He comes home with green fistfuls of tourist cash, reeking of Fireball and Pine-Sol. *Okay*, he thinks. *Oh, thank God. We're getting back to normal.*

Then one day, after a spectacular freak thundershower, Angie tells him that he needs to go home. Or away. Elsewhere, a bedroom other than the motel.

She feels terrible, she doesn't know what she is saying.

Get me out of it, the plant keeps throbbing like a muscle in Angie's mind. A rustling sound in her inner ear, the plant's footsteps. A throaty appetite makes her imagine stuffing herself with hot mouthfuls of desert sand. Once Andy leaves her, she'll have a chance to inspect her interior, figure out what's gone haywire.

"Let's go to Reno," Andy says. He feels quite desperate now, spinning the radio dial through seas of static. His great success this week at work was formalizing, via generous pours of straight gin, a new friendship with Jerry the Mailman, who has given him access to his boxy truck.

"Go to Reno. Win big. I'll be right here. I don't want to leave the desert."

Why doesn't she? The girl grows hysterical whenever Andy drives toward the freeway that might carry them away from the Mojave. She feels best when they are close to Warren Peak and the Black Rock Canyon campground.

For the next two weeks, she keeps encouraging Andy to leave her. Sometimes she feels a lump in her throat that she can't swallow, and it's easy to pretend that this is a vestige of who she used to be, her Pennsylvania history, now compacted into a hard ball she cannot access or dissolve; for Andy's sake, she wishes she could be that girl again. Dimly she is aware that she used to crave travel, adventure. She can remember the pressure of Andy's legs tangled around her, but not what she held in her mind. The world has grown unwieldy, and there are days now when the only thing that appeals to her is pulling up her T-shirt and going belly flat on the burning pink sand beyond the motel walkway.

One night, Angie turns to face the wall. Golf-ball-sized orange-and-yellow flowers pattern their wallpaper. Plus water stains from ancient leaks. She has never noticed this before. Under the influence of the Joshua, she sees these water stains as beautiful. That Rorschach is more interesting than TV. "What do you see?" she asks the boy.

"I'm not in the mood," he says, having at last been granted the opportunity to have a mood, after days and hours spent trying to rekindle her appetite for pleasure, for danger. He realizes that he has cut all ties for her, that he has nothing he wants to return to in Pennsylvania. It's a liberating, terrifying feeling. If she leaves him—if he leaves her—what then?

Now the plant is catching on to something.

In its three months of incubation, it grows exponentially in its capacity for thought. Gradually, the plant learns to "think" blue, to "smell" rain through a nose.

Unfurling its languorous intelligence, it looks out through her eyes, hunting for meaning the way it used to seek out deep sun, jade dew, hunting now for the means of imagining its own life, comprehending what it has become inside the girl.

The Joshua tree discovers that it *loves* church! Plugging one's knees into the purple risers, lifting to enter a song. The apple-red agony painted onto the cheeks of the sallow man. All the light that fills the church drifts dreamily over the Joshua tree, which stretches to its fullest extension inside the girl during the slow-crawling time of the service. It approves of this place, which resembles a massive seed hull. Deeply, extrapolating from its forays into the earth, it understands the architecture and the impulse. Craving stillness, these humans have evolved this stronghold.

"How was it?" Andy asks, picking her up. He refused to go with her. Sundays are his day off. "Delicious God-bread? Lots of songs?"

"It was nice. What are you so jealous about?"

"Angie, you never said."

"Mmm?"

"I didn't know you were religious."

Her head bobs on the long stem of her neck, as if they were agreeing on a fascinating point.

"Yes. There's plenty we don't know about each other." *I can still get out of this*, he thinks. Without understanding exactly how the trap got sprung, he can feel its teeth in him. "You should come in next time," she offers. "You'd like the windows."

"I can see the windows right now."
 "You'd like being on our side of them."
Seed hull, the girl thinks, for no reason.

Sometimes, to earn extra money, she watches kids who are staying at the motel. Six dollars an hour, four dollars for each additional kid. She is good at it, mostly.

Timmy Babson hates the babysitter. Sometimes her eyes are a dull, friendly brown and as kind as his sister's; sometimes they are twin vacuums. This is already pretty scary. But tonight, when he looks over, he sees the bad light flooding into them. Not yellow, not green. An older color, which Timmy recognizes on sight but cannot name. And this is much worse.

His own eyes prickle wetly. His blond hair darkens with sweat; pearls of water stand out on his smooth six-year-old forehead. The longer he stares back, the wider the gaze seems to get, like a grin. Her eyes radiate hard spines of heat, which drill into him. Timmy Babson feels punctured, "seen."

"Jane!" Timmy screams for his mother, calling for her by her first name for the first time. "Jane, Jane! It's looking at me again!"

On her good days, Angie tries to battle the invader. She thinks she's fighting against lethargy. She does jumping jacks in the motel courtyard, calls her best friend in Juneau from the motel pay phone, and anxiously tries to reminisce about their shitty high-school band. They sing an old song together, and she feels almost normal.

But, increasingly, she finds herself powerless to resist the warmth that spreads through her chest, the midday paralysis, the hunger for something slow and deep and unnameable. Some maid has drawn the blackout curtains. One lightbulb dangles. The dark reminds Angie of packed earth, moisture. What she interprets as sprawling emotion is the Joshua tree. Here was its birth, in the sands of Black Rock Canyon. Here was its death, and its rebirth as a ghostly presence in the human. Couldn't it perhaps Leap back into that older organism?

The lightbulb pulses in time with Angie's headache. It acquires a fetal glow, otherworldly.

Home, home, home.
Down, down, down.

Her heels grind uselessly into the carpet. Her toes curl at the fibers. She stands in the quiet womb of the room, waiting for a signal from the root brain, the ancient network from which the invader has been exiled. She lifts her arms until they are fully extended, her fingers turned outward. Her ears prick up like sharp leaves, alert for moisture.

She is still standing like that when Andy comes home with groceries at 10 p.m., her palms facing the droning lightbulb, so perfectly still that he yelps when he spots her.

How old such stories must be, legends of the bad romance between wandering humans and plants! How often these bad grafts must occur, and few people ever the wiser!

In 1852, the Mormon settlers who gave the Joshua tree its name reported every variety of disturbance among their party after hikes through the sparse and fragrant forests of Death Valley. One elder sat on a rock at the forest's edge and refused to move.

Eighteen seventy-three, in the lawless town of Panamint City. Darwin in 1874; Modoc in 1875. During the silver boom dozens of miners went missing. Many leapt to their deaths down the shafts. The silver rush coincided with a pulse event: the trees blossomed unstopably, wept pollen, and Leapt, eclipsing the minds of these poor humans, who stood no chance against the vegetable's ancient spirit. Dying is one symptom of a bad graft. The invasive species coiled green around the silver miners' brains.

Eighteen seventy-nine: All towns abandoned. Sorted ore sat in wheelbarrows aboveground, winking empty at the nearby Joshuas.

In 1922, in what is now the southern region of the park, near the abandoned iron mines of Eagle Mountain, a man was killed by the human host of a Joshua tree. It was not dif-

ficult to find the murderer, since a girl was huddled a few feet from the warm body, sobbing quietly.

"A crime of passion," the young officer, who tended to take a romantic view of motives, murmured. The grizzled elder on the call with him had less to say about what drove anyone to do anything.

All the girl could remember was the terrible, irremediable tension between wanting to be somewhere and wanting to be nowhere. And the plant, crazed by its proximity to rich familiar soil, tried repeatedly to Leap out of her. This caused her hand to lift, holding a long knife, and plummet earthward, rooting into the fleshy chest of her lover, feeling deeper and deeper for moisture.

The Joshua tree's greatest victory over the couple comes four months into their stay: they sign a lease. A bungalow on the outskirts of the national park, with an outdoor shower and a fence to keep out the coyotes.

When the shower water gets into their mouths, it tastes like poison. Strange reptiles hug the fence posts, like colorful olives on toothpicks. Andy squeezes Angie's hand and returns the gaze of these tiny monsters; he feels strangely bashful as they bugle their throats at him. Four months into his desert sojourn, and he still doesn't know the name of anything. Up close, the bungalow looks a lot like a shed. The bloated vowels of his signature on the landlord's papers make him think of a large hand blurring underwater.

Three Joshua trees grow right in their new backyard.

Rent, before utilities, is four hundred dollars.

"We can't afford this," he tells the girl, speaking less to her than to the quiet trees, wanting some court stenographer in the larger cosmos to record his protest.

The landlord, who is a native of Yucca Valley, is taking the young couple through the calendar. His name is Desert John, and he offers these eastern kids what he calls Desert John's Survival Tips. With laconic glee, he advises Andy to cut back the chaparral in their backyard to waist height in summer, to avoid the "minimal" danger of baby rattlesnakes. He tells Angie to hydrate "aggressively," especially if she's trying to get pregnant. (Angie starfishes a hand over her belly button and blanches; nobody has said anything to suggest this.) With polite horror, the couple nods along to stories of their predecessors, former tenants who collapsed from heat exhaustion, were bitten by every kind of snake and spider: "Fanged in the ankle and ass, I shit you not, kids. Beware the desert hammock."

Average annual rainfall: five inches. Eight-degree nights in December, one-hundred-and-twelve-degree July days. Andy is thinking of Angie's face on the motel pillow. He calculates they've slept together maybe fourteen times in four months. In terms of survival strategies, in a country hostile to growth? These desert plants, so ostentatiously alive in the Mojave, have got zero on Andy.

III. ESTABLISHMENT

Once, and only once, the three of them achieve a perfect union.

It takes some doing, but Andy finally succeeds in getting her out of the house.

"It's our anniversary," he lies, since they never really picked a day.

He's taking Angie to Pappy & Harriet's Pioneertown Palace, a frontier-themed dance hall frequented by bikers and artists and other jolly modern species of degenerates. It's only six miles northeast of their new home and burns like a Roman candle against the immensity of the Mojave. Through surveying expeditions made in Jerry's truck, Andy has delimited the boundary lines of Angie's tolerance; once they move beyond a certain radius, she says that her head feels "green" and her bones begin to ache. Pain holds her here—that's their shared impression. So when Andy parks the truck, they are both relieved to discover that she is smiling.

The Joshua tree discovers that it *loves* to dance! Better even than church is the soft glow of the uneven dance floor. Swung around in strangers' arms, Andy and Angie let themselves dance until they are sick, at the edge of the universe. Andy lets Angie buy him three shots of rum. A weather seizes them and blows them around—a weather you can order for a quarter, the jukebox song.

It is a good night. Outside the dance hall, the parking lot is full of cars and trucks, empty of humans. The wind pushes into them, as hot as the blasts of air from a hand dryer.

It is the success of the invading plant, which seeks only to anchor itself in the past. Why move forward? Why move at all?

"Is this the spot? Are you sure?"

Andy spreads out the blanket. A soft aura surrounds the low moon, as if the moon itself were dreaming. The red halo reminds him of a miner's carbide lantern.

At first, when the girl suggested that they drive out to the park, he felt annoyed, then scared; the light was in her eyes again, eclipsing the girl she'd been only seconds earlier. But once he'd yielded to her plan, the night had organized itself into a series of surprises, the first of which was his own sharp joy; now he finds he's thrilled to be back inside the Black Rock Canyon campground with her. (The Joshua is also pleased, smiling up through Angie's eyes.) It is her idea to retrace the steps of their first hike to Warren Peak. "For our anniversary," she says coolly, although this rationale rings hollow, reminds Andy of his own bullshit justifications for taking out a lease on a desert "bungalow." He does not guess the truth, of course, which is that, slyly, the Joshua tree is proliferating inside Angie, each of its six arms forking and flowering throughout her in the densest multiplication of desire. *Leap, Leap, Leap*. For months it has been trying to drive the couple back to this spot. Its vast root brain awaits it, forty feet below the soil.

Angie has no difficulty navigating down the dark path; the little flashlight around her neck is bouncing like a leashed

Angie draws Andy's attention to the claret cup of the moon. "It looks red," she says. And it does. Sitting on a stranger's fender, listening to the dying strains of a pop song they both despise, Andy asks her softly, "What's changed, Angie?" And when she doesn't or can't answer, he asks, "What's changing now?"

A question they like better, because at least its tense sounds more hopeful.

The Joshua tree leafs out in her mind. Heat blankets her; for a moment she is sure she will faint. Her vision clears. "Bamboleo" plays inside the dance hall. Through the illuminated squares of its windows, they can see the waving wheat of the dancers' upper bodies. Mouths gape in angry shock behind the frosted glass; they are only singing along to the music, Angie knows. Outside, the boy presses his mouth against hers. Now he is pressing every part of himself against the girl; inside her, his competitor presses back.

"Let's go. Let's go. Let's get the fuck out of here."

"Let's go back inside."

In the end, the three of them settle on a compromise: they dance in the empty parking lot, under stars that shoot eastward like lateral rain.

For a second, the Joshua tree can feel its grip on the host weakening. The present threatens its existence: the couple's roaring happiness might dislodge the ghostly tree. So it renews its purchase on the girl, roots into her memory.

"Remember our first day, Andy? The hike through Joshua Tree?"

Compared with that, Angie thinks, *what is there for us in the present?* "Nostalgia," we are apt to label this phenomenon.

flowing all around them. Even the Joshua trees, sham dead, now begin to move; or so it seems to the girl, whose blinded eyes keep stuttering.

The boy's mouth is at the hollow of the girl's throat, then lower; she moans as the invader's leaves and roots go spearing through her, and still he is unaware that he's in any danger. *I can Leap back*, the plant thinks.

Angie can no longer see what she is doing. Her eyes are shut; her thoughts have stopped. One small hand rests on Andy's neck; the other fist withdraws until the knife points earthward. *Down, down, down*, the invader demands. Something sighs sharply, and it might be Andy or it might be the entire forest.

Leap, Leap, Leap, the Joshua implores.

What saves the boy is such a simple thing. Andy props himself up on an elbow, pausing to steady his breath. He missed the moment when she slid the knife from the crumpled heap of his clothing; he has no idea that its blade is sparkling inches from his neck. Staring at Angie's waxy, serious face, he is overcome by a flood of memories.

"Hey, Angie?" he asks, stroking the fine dark hairs along her arm. "Remember how we met?"

One of the extraordinary adaptive powers of our species is its ability to transmute a stray encounter into a first chapter.

Angie has never had sticking power. She dropped out of high school; she walked out of the GED exam. Her longest relationship, prior to falling for Andy, was seven months. But

green sun. Her smile, when she turns to find Andy, is so huge that he wonders if he wasn't the one to suggest this night hike to her. Something unexpected happens then, for all of them: they reenter the romance of the past.

Why didn't we then . . ., all three think as one.

Quickly that sentiment jumps tenses, becomes:

Why don't we now . . .

When they reach the water tank, which is two hundred yards from the site of the Leap, Angie asks Andy to shake out the blanket. She sucks on the finger she pricked.

Around the blanket, tree branches divide and braid. They look mutinous in their stillness. Andy can see the movie scene: Bruce Willis attacking an army of Joshuas. He is imagining this, the trees swimming across the land like sand octopuses, flailing their spastic arms, when the girl catches his wrist in her fingers.

"Can we . . ."

"Why not?"

Why didn't we, Andy wonders, *back then?* The first time they walked this loop, they were preparing to do plenty. Andy unzips his jeans, shakes the caked-black denim off like solid dust. Angie is wearing a dress. Their naked legs tangle together in a pale, fleshy echo of the static contortionists that surround their blanket. Now the Joshua tree loves her. It grows and it flowers.

Angie will later wonder how exactly she came to be in possession of Andy's knife. Its bare blade holds the red moon inside it. She watches it glimmer there, poised just above Andy's right shoulder. The ground underneath the blanket seems to undulate; the fabric of the desert is wrinkling and

then they'd met (no epic tale there—the game was on at a hometown bar), and something in her character was spontaneously altered.

He remembers the song that was playing. He remembers ordering another round he could not afford—a freezing Yuengling for himself, ginger ale for her. They were sitting on the same wooden stools, battered tripods, that had supported the plans and commitments of the young in that town for generations.

The Joshua tree flexes its roots. Desperately, it tries to fix its life to her life. In the human mind, a Joshua's spirit can be destroyed by the wind and radiation fluxes of memory. Casting its spectral roots around, the plant furiously reddens with a very human feeling: humiliation.

What a thing to be undone by—golden hops and ginger-root, the clay shales of Pennsylvania!

It loses its grip on her arm; the strength runs out of her tensed biceps.

The girl's fingers loosen; the knife falls, unnoticed, to the sand.

The green invader is displaced by the swelling heat of their earliest happiness. Banished to the outermost reaches of Angie's consciousness, the Joshua tree now hovers in agony, half forgotten, half dissolving, losing its purchase on her awareness and so on its own reality.

"What a perfect night!" the couple agrees.

Angie stands and brushes sand from her dress. Andy frowns at the knife, picks it up.

"Happy anniversary," he says.

It is not their anniversary, but doesn't it make sense for them to celebrate the beginning here? This desert hike marked the last point in space where they'd both wanted the same future. What they are nostalgic for is the old plan, the first one. Their antique horizon.

Down the trail, up and down through time, the couple walks back toward the campground parking lot. Making plans again, each of them babbling excitedly over the other. Maybe Reno. Maybe Juneau.

Andy jogs ahead to their loaner getaway vehicle.

The Black Rock Canyon campground is one of the few places in the park where visitors can sleep amid the Joshua trees, soaking up the starlight from those complex crystals that have formed over millennia in the desert sky. Few of these campers are still outside their tents and RVs, but there is one familiar silhouette: it's the ranger, who is warming his enormous feet, bony and perfectly white, by the firepit. Shag covers the five-foot cactus behind him, which makes it look like a giant's mummified thumb.

"You lovebirds again!" he crows, waving them over.

Reluctantly, Andy doubles back. Angie is pleased, and frightened, that he remembers them.

"Ha! Guess you liked the hike."

For a few surreal minutes, standing before the leaping flames, they talk about the hike, the moths, the Joshua woodland. Andy is itching to be gone; already he is imagining giving notice at the saloon, packing up their house, getting back on the endlessly branching interstate. But Angie is curious. Andy is a little embarrassed, in fact, by the urgent tone of her

questions. She wants to hear more about the marriage of the yucca moth and the Joshua—is theirs a doomed romance? Can't the two species untwine, separate their fortunes?

Andy leaves to get the truck.

And the pulse event? Have the moths all flown? Will the Joshua tree die out, go extinct in the park?

A key turns in the ignition. At the entrance to Black Rock Canyon, Andy leans forward against the wheel, squinting through the windshield. He is waiting for the girl to emerge from the shadows, certain that she will do so; and then a little less sure.

"Oh, it's a hardy species," the ranger says. His whiskers are clear tubes that hold the red firelight. "Those roots go deep. I wouldn't count a tree like that out."

Bog Girl: A Romance

The young turf cutter fell hard for his first girlfriend while operating heavy machinery in the peatlands. His name was Cillian Eddowis, he was fifteen years old, and he was illegally employed by Bos Ardee. He had celery-green eyes and a stutter that had been corrected at the state's expense; it resurfaced whenever he got nervous. "Th-th-th," he'd said, accepting the job. How did Cillian persuade Bos Ardee to hire him? The boy had lyingly laid claim to many qualities: strength, maturity, experience. When that didn't work, he pointed to his bedroom window, a quarter mile away, on the misty periphery of the cutaway bog, where the undrained water still sparkled between the larch trees. The intimidation was clear: what the thin, strange boy lacked in muscle power he made up for in proximity to the work site.

Peat is harvested from bogs, watery mires where the earth yawns open. The bottom is a breathless place—cold, acidic, anaerobic—with no oxygen to decompose the willow

In addition to the testimony of the doctor's student, Jure da Mosto, the archive includes two depositions of witnesses, Don Anthony Deševic and Janez Krčelić, confirming under oath that on the sixth of January 1620 the cemetery soil was disrupted and the body of a young countess had vanished.

Yet the grave was closed, and the investigation abandoned; it is unclear from these documents if or how the case of the accused was ever resolved.

Something comes whistling out of the cave—not stumbling, not lurching, but running down the hillside. Something becomes someone. On shaky legs, the *vučodlak* stalls between two yellow-mossed boulders. Thoughtfully, he pops a finger into his mouth. It is as cold and as dry as the cave he has just exited, devoid of even a drop of fluid. Plants lisp up around him, dark vines with turbulent blossoms. It was winter when he died, but as a *vučodlak* the doctor has emerged into a new season. The air, which he can still smell, is thick with pine resin and salt. He bends a knee and genuflects, staring up at the towering pines. Thin red scars cover the backs of his thighs. He touches these wonderingly, amazed at the supple angle of his leg unbending itself. From a numb core, he watches as pain explodes around him. He is lifted to his feet. Has the operation been a failure, then? For here he stands.

"Perhaps," the doctor's *vučodlak* admits softly to the thousand whispering pines of Black Corfu, "I made a mistake."

The Gondoliers

I. THE CHORUS

Dr. Glim was supposed to be my last fare of the evening, but when I am a quarter mile from home I hear a man coughing on South Jetty, and against my better judgment, I am drawn down the foamy water of a side canal toward the rattling sound. Through the keyhole spaces in the mangroves, I can see a tall figure in a long green slicker pacing on the jetty. He cries out when he sees me, flagging me down with his whole body.

The sky is two-toned, fiery pink above the green horizon line. It's too late for a passenger, even a regular, someone trusted and familiar. A happy story ends here; a responsible gondolier poles homeward. I can hear my sisters doing just that. They are singing in a wide canal, three boats pulling into a line. Echoes fly into the birdcage of my sternum. Even miles apart, we are always audible to one another.

When I am twenty feet from the jetty, I raise the pole and wave it slowly at him. Power gathers in my cracked heels and

pulses upward. Will I take him to his destination? We are equals in our suspense.

"What luck," cries the man. "Are you going north?"

"Push your hood up. I want to see who's asking."

Sunset is less than an hour away, and he won't find another boat if I refuse him. His fear reaches out to stroke my cheek. It makes me feel tenderly toward the white-faced old man; also, powerful. On the poling platform, I am almost eye level with him. Old, I guess that's always relative. Older than me, I should say. Thirty? Forty? But perhaps I look old to him.

"Thank God you spotted me. Please, I'm in a real jam."

He keeps a finger trained on me, as if at any moment I might disappear.

"The boat I hired never showed."

His voice catches. Now that I am closer, I can hear how deeply this rattle has lodged itself inside his body. Even at sunset, it's eighty degrees, but this stranger is shivering. His desperation perfumes the air, a soaking underarm smell. Under the jutting limestone, as if in secret mimicry of him, a thousand tiny, sharp wavelets jump and fall. He is nervous. I am making him nervous. Power whips through me again, and I almost laugh, it feels so good to be alive on the poling platform. Song gathers under my navel and I make no effort to contain it.

"OoOoOoOo—"

I watch him jump.

"Miss, won't you help me?"

"Miss." I smile. "That's a first."

I have two names: Janelle Picarro and Blister. My mother

gave me the first name, my sisters, the latter. Nobody has ever addressed me so formally.

"Can you take me to the seawall in Bahía Rosa?"

A visitor to New Florida usually wants to see the jungle, the ruins. Locals hire us to pole them to the fishing nets, the floating markets. We take children to the school in the morning, weaving around the shadows of the wrecked cruise liners, helping them up the gangplanks to their classrooms. Nobody asks to go to the seawall. My sisters won't pole within a mile of the black buoys.

"We don't go there."

"We?" The man opens an antique red wallet. "But I'm asking you."

Two miles away, behind the tangled red mangroves, home calls to me. My sisters and I live inside the ruins of a seaplane hangar, built out of metal and glass a hundred years ago. By now my sisters will be rinsing the salt water from their gondolas. Only my boat slip will be empty. I can hear the twangy echo of my absence in the hangar, a hollow note that gives me a queer twist of pleasure in my gut.

"Money can make sense out of almost anything, can't it?" I watch his black thumbnail riffle the paper. "It's magic that way. But no amount of money can turn a trip to the seawall into a sane journey."

The seawall was erected by the army corps as a last-ditch attempt to protect the city from getting swallowed. It failed, of course, and thousands drowned. We call the silent bay that surrounds it Bahía Rosa—a pretty name for a rippling nowhere. Once, the green lights used by fishing boats draped the ocean in a miasmic fog, so bright it was visible from outer

with the fast-moving current. We go rushing into the wide bay, where the echoes make my decisions for me.

Two birds, one stone. The old, brutal saying returns to me out of the blue. I can't remember where I first heard it; I house thousands of these fragments. Echoes of unknown origin. Words that went skipping across minds for centuries, apparently, before sinking into mine.

The current races us through the ruins of Old City, where a teenage boatman drowned just last week. My sisters and I have a monopoly on this territory. Even locals lose their way here, where the debris rearranges itself in a slowly turning kaleidoscope, the garbage mountains always changing shape. The glare of the sun is intense at six o'clock, splintering around the concrete grottoes. We enter the shade of a domed ceiling, poling around the brass-and-silver letters: *MI I PL ET RIUM*. Former home of the phony night sky, where hundreds of translucent fish now sway, nibbling at the algae on the auditorium walls. Rows of spongy seats glide just below us, a reef of huge brown scallops. Staircases that move like our singing does, lunging in two directions at once.

"OOOoooOOOooo—"

Middle C to E minor. Orange to pink to blue. The song sweeps in front of the bow. I crutch around the drowned beams that fill the planetarium's lobby, singing at the top of my register. Echoes shower into me. My spine feels ignited by them.

New Florida is composed of grassy water, the bleached

space. Now reddish blooms of a fish-killing algae cover the entire bay. Bahía Rosa gets blamed for everything from cancer to bad dreams. A desire to go there suggests a highly contaminated assessment of risk, reward. Smugglers supposedly meet at the seawall, a rumor I did not much credit until this moment.

"Please, miss. I am falling behind schedule."

He offers me a stupendous sum of money. More than I make in a month as a gondolier on Bahía del Oro.

"Double that," I tell him.

As we pole away from the jetty, I hear a faint, awful rumbling, but I can't decide if this is the true echo of some future disaster or only my guilt. This man is sick, and he has no supplies, no food. But if my last fare wants me to leave him in the middle of the sea, that's his business; my business is transportation. He didn't hire me to ask questions.

Only a lunatic or a criminal goes to the seawall—that's what Viola would say. Viola is my oldest sister, the most responsible of us and in some ways the most guileless; she wouldn't understand the humming in my body that begins when I hear the words "Bahía Rosa." I have been wanting to make this trip myself, and I'm grateful to have the stranger's money as my alibi. Once I deliver him to the seawall, I'll have hours to myself in the unmappable dark. A part of me is already flying into the future, where I am rid of this person, free and alone, and swimming under the blind moon of Bahía Rosa.

His coughing jolts me back into the boat, and I feel sick myself for a miserable moment, wondering if I should turn back. It's a relief to pull clear of the mangroves and join up

"Lean back," I tell my passenger, and he folds himself into the gondola as if it's a casket, crossing his arms against the crinkling slicker. It ripples across him, and it's easy to pretend that I am transporting the sea itself, the wind made flesh. We enter the archway to a vanished city park, now a deep green pool. Smells change as we travel: rotting wood, salt-eaten aluminum. The song boomerangs around a flooded parking garage, once large enough to stable hundreds of cars. I close my eyes as we spin around a stone nautilus. Hiding just ahead of us is the decaying, waterlogged hulk of a poinciana tree blocking the exit. Echoes push its branching shape into my skull, and into the skulls of my sisters in the distant, adjacent hangar. Always, we are this close and this remote. Vibrations unite us. We can hear the golden algae that glows the underwater city and the long bald stretches of sunlit wall. Spongy sounds and waffled ones. But tonight the map is my own creation, the product of a single looping input. C stroke. J stroke. I brace the pole against my chest. The song hunts for an opening, and water spits us into unbroken sky.

When I open my eyes, the man is staring up at me.

"Ah. I've heard about you." He smiles uncertainly. "You're one of those bat girls. The echolocators."

"What luck." I smile back at him. "I am."

We call ourselves the Gondoliers. Four singing sisters, poling the canals of New Florida. There are other boats on the water, but only my sisters and I take passengers through Old City. According to Vi, when our mother was alive, people

reefs of submerged and abandoned cities, and dozens of floating villages. It's illegal to live here, although thousands of us do. Holdouts and the spawn of holdouts. Old Florida is a glassy figment in the minds of the soon to be deceased. If you think our song is monotonous, you should hear our neighbors reminiscing: *Oh, the highways, the indoor mall! Soil as far as a man could travel. Funerals, remember those? The coffins we planted like seeds in the ground.* That Florida, if it ever existed, has no reality for me.

We go mazing between the toppled condominiums, which loom like dark wheelks lying on their sides. Golden awnings bloom on the former city's northern border; the tenanted ruins rise in the west. Generator lights glow in several of the third- and fourth-story windows. My passenger turns on the bow seat and shouts over my singing, "Miss, didn't we just come from that tunnel? Are we going in circles?"

"Yes," I call down, enjoying my height. "It's the only way out."

Satellites have been down for half a century. Even those who navigate with salvaged equipment fail to detect the dangers hidden under the water. Perhaps these vintage technologies work on sleeper seas; I have only ever lived here. My sisters and I navigate these margins with breath and bones. We sing, and we absorb the echoes into our skeletons. A map draws itself inside us, revises us.

Three hard strokes, brake. Sit and paddle around a forest of streetlights. Launching my voice against a wall, I can hear the sunken pylons that mean to kill me, and I swerve, changing the future. This happens hundreds of times a day in New Florida.

would count four girls seated behind her on the long skiff and reliably say, "Trying for the boy?" "As a matter of fact," she'd snap, "God has blessed me with daughters. If I could, I'd make a hundred more."

My sisters tell this story all the goddamn time. So often that it *feels* like my memory. She drowned when I was three years old, before the cameras in my mind turned on.

Our regulars suspect there's more to our nasally singing than we let on. For sure they know it's not Italian. "Lady, can I please pay you to shut up?" tourists have begged me. I used to think that we were very special, the best boatwomen in the world, but Viola says no, we are only vessels ourselves: something wants to be born. Perhaps there are many others like us around the bays of New Florida and elsewhere. Women who know enough to be silent about what is developing inside their bodies.

This sensitivity grew in us softly, softly. I can only compare it to seeing in the dark. We sing, and shapes tighten out of an interior darkness. Edges and densities. Objects sing back at us: *Turn hard left to avoid the fallen tree. Pole southwest to miss the gluey hill offloating garbage.* Pillars thin as lampposts push fuzzily into our minds; a heartbeat later they rear out of the bay, fatally real.

Our mother could not echolocate, according to my sisters. When I was a child, I found this frightening and sad. Imagine seeing a thousand colors streaking the sky and realizing that your mother saw only one unbroken gray. But Viola says our mother could hear us crying from impressive distances, and now I wonder if she had some precursor of this ability.

Our gift is not a true clairvoyance, or what I imagine that

to be. There's no time for anything like that. It's more like a muscular intuition of what the water is going to do next. And with our poles flying, rattling the oarlocks, we move to accommodate the future of the river.

"You could be my age," I tell my new last fare, "in the right lighting."

"Yes." He doesn't turn, but I hear his smile. "Darkness is a real fountain of youth, isn't it."

We slice under the mangroves, riding high with the outgoing tide. His narrow face looks even leaner inside the slicker, like a spadeful of white clay. Nobody I know is so pale. We live on sunshine here, where the canals are inkwells of blinding light. Leaf freckles cover him and disappear again as we bob into the sun. I like knowing that my arms are the engine of this transformation. Masking and unmasking him.

But then I glimpse the real sea rolling beyond the bay, and I remember with a start: *No, you really don't know anything about him. Only surfaces and angles.*

In this neighborhood of Bahía del Oro, pollution tints everything with phosphor. Mosses drop in shimmering clumps from the floating oar. I pole from starboard, my bare feet planted against the cypress boards. Orange plants with soft drunken voices slide around the hull, drawing a beautiful lace behind my eyelids.

"I like your boat. Very pretty."

The man's deep voice startles me and causes the shy plants to fall silent. He raps a fist against the hull. I can hear the solidity of my gondola behind the hollowness of his compliment. "Such an unusual design . . ."

Suck my dick.

You can't say that to a paying customer; chides Viola in my mind.

"Suck my cock," I say instead.

He slams a laugh into my chest.

"I haven't heard that one in decades."

I read it on the wall of the flooded school, which is covered in the vanished teenagers' hieroglyphs. SUCK MY DICK. RIDE MY DICK. LICK MY JUICY PUSSY. Names that are still legible at low tide: PAOLA WAS HERE. GABRIEL WAS HERE. SAY MY NAME. HURT LIKE I DO. KISS ME, SOMEONE. Writing that survives the bodies that produced it is always haunted, I guess. But the underwater graffiti of the lost world feels especially so.

"I don't like false praise," I tell him. "And I see that you have eyes."

My gondola is decorated with crude stars that I knifed into the wood. The end result was less like artwork than an attack my boat survived. My boat looks nothing like my sisters' perfectly lovely gondolas, and that is how I wanted it.

After that, there is a long silence. The sun seems to tarry behind the trees, extending our opportunity to beg it to stay. Bright water ripples around either side of us, and the black mangroves slant off into the distance.

"Do you live on Bahía del Oro, sir? I've never seen you out here."

"No, you haven't. That is certainly by design."

"What a feat. A recluse among recluses."

"You don't like false praise. I don't like false people. I choose my company carefully."

Undeterred, the man taps at the steel ornament fixed to the bow, my birthday bird, welded for me by Luna as a counter-balance to my weight in the stern.

"Your work?"

"My sister Luna made it for me. She's the family artist."

The heron is painted a somber Madonna blue, my only criticism of it. Turquoise would have been my choice, I tell him. "Turquoise is what that blue would look like if she divorced the night and went on a fabulous vacation."

He laughs again, a laugh which I bounce back to him at the same low frequency. Warmth stirs in my belly.

"Do you gondoliers ever take a vacation?"

"Oh, never. I feel like I'm always working, even when I'm sleeping. Our beds are practically floating. Our home sits half in water."

"Home." It sounds like a foreign word, the way he intones it. "Where is home?"

It's taboo to ask this question of a stranger in New Florida, but perhaps he does not know our etiquette. I have a bad thought, staring at his bony face—that I can answer him without fear, because he is very close to the end of his life.

"We live in an old seaplane hangar."

"Almost like a cave. Perfect for a bat girl."

"Water laps inside it. You should see the four of us, rowing home at night. Like horses swimming into a barn stall."

He smiles at me strangely, his eyes crossing a little.

"Horses. Have you ever seen a horse?"

I shake my head, embarrassed. Only in books, with water-logged pictures. Stories fly out of the mouths of my oldest neighbors. But I have never seen a swimming horse myself, it's true.

"Tell me, when were you born?"

I whisper the year to him, and something like awe crosses his face.

"How lucky! So you remember nothing, then—none of the evacuations, none of the flooding. None of the floating bodies . . ."

His face puckers and relaxes, a quick civil war.

"You don't remember any of that."

"I know what my older sisters tell me," I say. "It's almost like a memory."

"And what do they tell you?"

"Very little."

We skirt the cathedral, half hidden behind the shivering leaves of the mangroves. A brass steeple soars over the trees, a canted X on which several aningas dry their wings. Framed by the sun, their glossy feathers look emerald. Hundreds more roost around the ruins. Snakebirds, the ocean swans. Egrets, pelicans, herons. Someone lives here now, it seems. Rope ladders tumble down the walls. As we glide under the cathedral window, a dog begins to bark.

We are only allowed to stay here, says Viola, because officially, we don't exist. Most mainlanders have forgotten us. New Florida has been declared a "wasteland," which is a hilariously inaccurate term, in my opinion, when the southern marshes are brimming with fish and reptiles and birds.

"A resurrection," say the old-timers. But for me, it's the world as it always has been.

"We're almost there," I keep promising the man. I don't like the way the eastern clouds are rumbling. "Twenty minutes," I say. The standard lie. Like a cracker you can hand people to put off their appetite. Every twenty minutes, you repeat this increment. But his impatience seems to burn off him as soon as we pull away from Old City. He begins to hum along with my singing, a beautiful surprise, like someone walking beside me, taking my hand.

"Look," he says dreamily, and points to where the moon is rising, bright and enormous as the door to another galaxy, on the opposite side of the bay.

OoOoOoOo.

OoOoOoOo.

A whiskery sun flashes between the sunken rooftops, but dark clouds have rolled in from the southeast, a bad surprise. I imagine my sisters pointing up at them, shaking their heads. "Do you feel that?" His frowning face retreats inside the cowl.

Glimmering threads begin to fall. A hissing starts in the back of my brain. Rain is no good. Rain scatters the echoes. I can feel the massing thunderheads like gloved hands at my back, pushing me to go faster and faster. The current is moving us steadily seaward, at a speed of perhaps fifteen knots.

The clouds racing toward us give me a tingling déjà vu, and I realize it's a sky I've seen in dreams, lowering itself

II. THE BRIDGE

One slow afternoon last May, I found myself in the middle of Bahía Rosa. For two hours I'd been tailing a dolphin through the polluted zone, reasoning that if she could breathe here, so could I. When I reached the outermost limits of our territory, where the black buoys warn boaters to turn back, I pushed onward. By this point, the dolphin had disappeared, but I'd already traveled so far from home that it seemed obligatory to continue exploring. My sisters could feel the growing distance between us, but there was nothing they could do about it; they were working in Old City, two hours behind me.

Long before I saw the seawall, I heard it lifting out of the ocean. At last it appeared, a thick hallucination striping the ruddy bay. I knew the stories, but I'd never seen this fossil for myself. Here it was, rising out of the ocean, a monument to its own failure. This mile-long section was largely intact, with bright moving gaps where the maroon water had eaten through the crumbling stone. First I heard, and then saw, what must have been the seawall's former landside edge. It curled toward me, as if uninformed that the land had pulled away, and it was easy to imagine the whole peninsula slipping out of this relaxed embrace and sinking.

What must have once been solid, unbroken coastline, in our mother's youth, was now a pointillist landscape of small tree islands. Many were less than one acre wide, knuckles of limestone covered in flowering vegetation. I had been hugging their muddy shorelines for the past hour. Now I let the springy echoes from the seawall choreograph my passage into

into my home. I wasn't yet born when the ocean rode across the peninsula. The great floods happened before Bahía Rosa was Bahía Rosa, back when everything had a different name. But I can hear the waves rearing back, slamming forward, causing the walls to buckle. The cries of the abandoned families, the ambulance boats with their droning sirens. My older sisters become quite agitated when I describe these dreams. "You have no idea what it was like then," Vi told me. "You never lived a day on land. Quit stealing our stories."

Perhaps the memories filtered into me through our mother's blood? I once suggested to my sisters. Viola, in her most condescending voice, then told me to "leave the grieving to the grown-ups." She still thinks of me as her three-year-old ward. It will shock her, someday, to look up and discover that I am an adult now, with secrets of my own.

"The algae." I hold up the flat of my oar. "You see? It's changing color." Brownish gold to reddish pink. Which means we are drawing very near to the seawall. The worst pollution seems to be concentrated under the blooms.

"Do you ever see mutants out this way?" the man asks me, turtled in his hood. He keeps his voice nonchalant, but I watch him peering into the darkening water.

You hear tales of goliath groupers with multicolored eyes, two-headed manatee calves.

"Never once. Does that disappoint you?"

In fact, when I first entered Bahía Rosa, I found something even stranger. But I don't tell the man this; why burden him with a new fear, when we are finally sitting level on the water?

deeper water. As smoothly as a happy thought turns black, I found myself in the middle of Bahía Rosa, where the algae waved in every direction. The absence of birdsong made the sky feel empty and tall. A stinging odor lifted off the water. Almost immediately, I developed a terrible headache.

I found the deadspot, or it found me, just as I poled up to the huge, broken molars of the seawall's northern end. Three hundred yards behind me, the bald mangroves lifted onto their tiptoes, as if they, too, were surprised to find this barrier still standing. I could hear its secret skeleton, the weep holes and the reinforcement rods. I heard, as well, the gargling cracks where the wall had failed at the waterline. Pointy barnacles covered the eroded stone, dissipating my song; it seemed possible that in another hundred years they might fuse together into a single speckled shell. I was poling through a pocket of dense red algae that had collected around the wall's concave edge when something astonishing happened to me. The echoes ceased entirely. My sisters' singing fell away, and I was alone. The suddenness of this silence shocked me more than any detonation could have done. The deep sonority of our chorus vanished, and all I could hear was a single, flattened cry. This, I realized, was my voice—separated from the others. Fear spun me around: What had happened to my sisters? Somehow, it seemed, I had poled out of range; I was floating in a kind of *deadspot*.

I watched the waves collapsing into the limestone wall for miles and miles, a birdless sky stretching above me. Nothing sang back to me. The present seemed to spill eternally around me, and no echoes reached my ears. I removed my clothes and slid into the toxic water. I don't know what possessed me to

do this, but it was no accident: I pushed my head below the surface, through the slippery blooms, kicking down.

I'd never felt this far removed from my sisters. Under the water, I stopped hearing even the whoosh of my blood. What happened next, I'll never know, because I sank out of earshot of my thoughts.

I surfaced to a grogginess that exceeded anything I'd ever felt in my waking life. A ruff of pearly-blue sea scum encircled me. The plants floating here seemed to emit their own red glow. A light independent of any moon. The raw throats of cypress trunks scraped the sky. I didn't know who I was, what I was. The face floating on the water was not mine, not yet. It wrinkled and smoothed with a foreign serenity. Nothing remembered me.

The seawater I spit out tasted poisonous. Creaturelike, I watched my limbs moving through it. I could name the colors of the bay before I knew what sort of animal I was. An acrid smell lifted off the water, impossible to ignore at low tide, bringing with it visions of putrefying flesh. A smell that should have been incompatible with my bliss, but somehow was not. *How interesting*, I thought from a great distance, rolling my arms through the rosy water, turning onto my back.

"Sensation returned" conveys none of the extraordinary pain I felt, coming to consciousness. My joints began to pulse. A bad sunburn crackled across the mask of my face. When I heard the waves slapping against my gondola, memories swept through me: I was Janelle Picarro again, one of four gondoliers, afloat in the forbidden waters of Bahía Rosa.

My sisters. Queasily I swam for my gondola. The seawall loomed on the horizon, and once I poled out of the dense

interference from the scattered raindrops. We embraced. My relief could not have been more sincere.

That night, I lay awake for hours in an itchy reverie, curling my toes on the bed railing. We sleep in cots stanchioned to the walls. Luna's body was a lump in the cot above mine; Mila was snoring down below. Waves lapped into the hangar. *Never again*, I promised my sleeping sisters. I could always return to the deadspot in my memory—it was enough to know that kind of quiet existed. I went to sleep feeling warm and lucky. Grateful for the strange experience, and snug in my conviction that I would never repeat it.

Seven hours later, I was poling back toward the deadspot.

III. THE DEADSPOT

We vowel down the channels. Darkness reaches around the eastern skyscrapers, and then those stalagmites are behind us. A pink line stitches day to night. A few early stars have appeared, but that light tells me nothing about our position. Unless I am singing, I really can't tell south from north after dark. Barking seagulls scatter the echoes, and I get caught in a swirling cul-de-sac of water on the outskirts of Old City.

Crackling into my body, I hear my sisters' voices combing the darkening bay like searchlights:

"AAAAAAA—"

"UuuUuuUuu—"

Disappearing can make you feel like your own biographer. You hear the absence of your voice, and the notes you are failing to hit make their own shadow melody. You unlid the spaces ordinarily hidden by your body: a new song comes

algae I could hear them again. Viola. Mila. Luna. Seeping back into my skull, a wailing harmony. Only then did I take the measure of what I had done.

Just this once, I thought. *Once, and never again*. This magic phrase inoculated me against my guilt. I pulled the red weeds from my hair and bailed water from the boat. I didn't know that I was setting a precedent. It felt like coming back from the dead that night, rowing into the scaplane hangar under a full moon. My sisters were very angry with me. They wanted to know where I'd been. Those heavy tones fell into me like lead weights after the freedom of the afternoon.

The lie was spontaneous.

Ordinarily it is very difficult to lie to my sisters. But the deadspot had inspired me. Without thinking, I screamed back at them. Swinging my oar, striking at bedrock. Using tone alone, I changed the night's direction.

"Where were *you*?" I counteraccused. "Why didn't anybody answer me?"

I began to sob. I let them witness the release of so much blackness from my body, recalling the silence that had flooded me while I floated under the wavy ceiling of algae. "I was calling and calling for you. I have never felt so all alone on the water."

The best lies have a fleck of truth folded inside them. All good performers know this. Real gold to bite down on. The ringing truth overrides the hollowness of the lie. I could see from my sisters' horrified expressions that they believed me. The transfer of my guilt into their bodies was a success. I even began to believe myself.

My sisters apologized to me. They blamed the weather,

fluting through them. Whenever I hear my sisters singing without me, I get a flash of my own silhouette.

I bounce back a B-flat at the top of my register. The note quivers there, reassuring them: *I am alive, in Old City*. The songlines connecting us pull tight, relax. I hear a pulsing silence: my sisters listening as I move away from them. When I return, I will pile money on the table. I will give my sisters hundreds of reasons to forgive me. What will Viola say, I wonder, when I tell her I've made more in a night than she makes in a summer month on Bahía del Oro?

My passenger cranes around to stare at me, wearing the oddest look. The slicker lays heavily on top of him, alien as frog skin. It seems to breathe on its own.

"Old MacDonald had a farm. E-I-E-I-O—"

I stare down at him, stirring the gold from the bay.

"You sound like you are calling pigs to the trough," he says, but he is smiling.

I like this man. He fixes me with a lolling curiosity, despite his urgency to reach the seawall. He does not offer to help me to row the gondola, as some of the nervous men do. He does not snap at me when I pause to rest my voice. His eyes are mild. He is turning his palms, catching the fat droplets of rain.

"Were you born with the ability?" he asks. "Or is it something you taught yourself out here?"

I feel the song idling in my belly, changing slyly inside me. "Both, I think."

People talk about heredity as if it's linear and vertical. Dead people passing things "down" to the young. But my sisters and I are evolving together, I tell the man. All day,

we swap notes around. We blur our voices into one song. Something grows in the fast-moving channels between us, and it's changing all the time. It moves with us, this thing we are inheriting.

To our left, ivory columns stand guard over a submerged pavilion.

"That was a bank once," I tell him. "Did you see the vault in the middle of the floor?" Ferns are curling around it now. "Can you believe that? People kept their money at a great distance from their body."

"I believe it," he says. "But I'm quite a bit older than you."

"My oldest sister, Viola, says—"

"You youngsters only know the stories."

His tone is wistful, but I hear the scolding note. My sisters and I are no strangers to this attitude. Older passengers often seem dismayed that they have to cede the Earth to creatures like us. They are aghast that we know so little about their world and bewildered by our happiness in this one. *We know more than you can imagine*, I want to tell him. But not as badly as I want my tip.

"I wish that I remembered the land, for what it's worth," I tell the man, watching his pale eyes swim over my face. "I would have loved to know what my mother's yard looked like."

"*Yaard*." He looks up at me thoughtfully. "What an odd word. I never noticed that before. Don't mind me, miss. You should forget even the stories. Look how lightly you sit on the water, remembering only water . . ."

I picture the healthy eelgrass waving in the limpid shallows of Bahía de las Nubes. "The grass is always greener, I guess."

He laughs at that. "Where did you hear *that* one? I'm surprised that it survived the floods. You know all our corny sayings. You're like a jukebox, miss."

His face reminds me of the wild dogs we see on the tree islands, panting with silent laughter. He speaks in a monotone, so I don't know if I should be complimented or insulted. Perhaps I'm being invited to laugh with him.

"A jukebox—"

"A jukebox. It was a machine that played the same stale songs over and over."

Blood rushes into my face. Does he think that's what I'm doing? Repeating myself? Can't he hear my singing changing on the air?

We crane up at the washed-violet sky behind the rotating ceiling. The bank shrinks into the distance. When the stranger turns, his face is as composed as a poem, its symmetries perfectly mysterious. My fantasies don't run in his direction. But fear prickles my neck, and it feels almost like lust.

"Hey. What's your name?" I ask him. "Who are you going to meet in Bahía Rosa, where nobody lives?"

He gapes up at me, his Adam's apple jumping. I feel the oddest déjà vu.

"Make up a name for me. Any name you'd like. Give me a nickname while you're at it. I am always in the market for a new name."

"Let me think on it," I tell him. "Maybe we can borrow a name from the posters."

I say this to make a joke and wind up frightening myself. The MISSING PERSON posters flap against the walls of Old City, most bleached beyond recognition. Men and women

and children who disappeared in the floods. There is no way to read them as anything but obituaries today.

"Ah, the posters. Yes. I've seen those. A missing person. How perceptive you are. That's me to a T."

He turns back to the light rain fizzing on the water, his hairy knuckles wrapped around the heron's throat. I've retreated into my own thoughts when he calls back, "All of those faces are my face, why not? All of those names can be me. We are fungible sponges, we missing people."

I can't get my bearings in this conversation—is he joking? Is he really a missing person?

"Were you here for the floods?"

He stares at me for a long moment before answering.

"I'm part of a dying breed, bat girl. An *Old Floridian*. I grew up on a street called Coral Way. In a house with a foundation."

"But you stayed."

"No, miss. We fled. I was in the first wave of evacuations. But I wanted to come home before I died. To see my home again." His laugh becomes the phlegmy cough. "I'd need a scuba suit to find it, I guess. I've been here for three weeks, and I can't find a trace of that life."

It does not surprise me that I have a neighbor whose face I've never seen. Millions of people once lived in the coastal cities; thousands of us remain. SQUATTERS RIGHTS, BRO, some-one spray-painted on the tallest standing condominium in Old City. But property disputes are rare on moving, glowing water. You have to live here to discover that the pollution isn't strong enough to kill you.

"Where are you moored?"

"I've been camping at the university. On the roof of the library, I believe. It's a good retirement home. The twilight zone, for my twilight years."

"Come on. You're not *that* old."

We laugh together, a sound I often draw like a tarpaulin over what I do not understand.

"Down here, the world has already ended. It's very peaceful, in its way."

It always surprises me when visitors treat New Florida as if it's a graveyard. Our home is no afterlife, no wasteland. Not an hour earlier, we poled through a rookery that shook with the hungry sobs of fledgling birds. Wood stork chicks and starry white ibis and little green herons wading around the rooftop sloughs. But if my passenger failed to hear them, I doubt my voice can convince him that our world is newborn.

"Do you have a family, sir? Up north?"

"I did. A wife, two sons. Terrestrials, all."

"They must be worried about you. Do they know where you are?"

"They drowned."

"Oh. I'm so sorry."

"I killed them," he elaborates. "I was one of the marine engineers who designed the seawall."

"I don't blame you," I blurt out.

"You should. People my age are criminals. We ruined the world."

Reminiscing about his guilt seems, perversely, to cheer my passenger. His voice brightens as he describes the scale of the failure. "We built the wall to withstand winds of one hundred fifty miles per hour. Does that sound naïve to you?"

I wonder if he can hear the note of pride inside of what he seems to mean as an apology to me. It's a bloated, underwater sound. He's chosen a funny moment to have this conversation, I think, with the wind picking up all around us and rain slanting between our faces.

"You failed." I nod—it seems to be the line he's written for me to say.

"Our imaginations failed us. Our models failed us."

A smile is still playing at the corners of his mouth. I wonder if he knows he's smiling. There is a profoundly unchaperoned quality to his gaze, now that his mind has traveled back in time. I try to listen to the details of his story, but it's his slack, abandoned face that fascinates me. His eyes roll up to the gray clouds, as if something is dragging him skyward by the roots of his hair.

"We all knew the end was coming. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise."

It would be cruel, I decide, to remind him that life is flourishing in New Florida; that it is our world now, not his any longer; that, actually, he is the one who is dying.

"This used to be paradise. I'm sorry, little bat. We ate up the whole horizon. We left you a ghost town. Not even a town. A toxic slough—"

"This is our home," I tell him. "And we are not ghosts."

I stop poling and stare at him. Water rolls along his sicker, capturing the light. As if the green skin is sweating for him. In his voice I hear a longing for release so close to my own that it is almost unbearable.

"There is a place I like to go," I hear myself say. "To fall silent."

As I describe the deadspot to him, he listens in perfect stillness. Even his blinking slows. Several times, I hear him swallowing his coughs. It feels like a betrayal to entrust my secret to this man, when I've told none of my sisters. But almost anything I say to them provokes a terrible reverb. Whereas the stranger is an open field—no buried stalagmites, no love lost between us, no history, and no expectation of a future. These turn out to be the perfect acoustics for confessing a secret on which I do not actually wish to reflect.

"And you don't think the pollution is damaging you?" he asks at last.

Deranging you, I hear.

"No." The skin under my breasts begins to burn. "Not really."

An odd rash has spread silently over my belly, unnoticed by anyone. Even I forget it's there during the daylight hours. My hands remember it, at night.

"You choose to swim here," he says. "In the world's most toxic waters."

"It hasn't affected us."

"Hasn't it, little bat? It's affecting all of us."

He drums his knuckles on his temple, his smile softening like something boiling at the bottom of a pot. His voice curls inward, so that it seems he is talking mostly to himself.

"The gondoliers. The birds of Chernobyl."

"What's that mean?"

"Nothing. A bad joke."

Algae drags behind us like an old-fashioned wedding train. You have to sweep the lantern over it to arouse the red

glow; the unlit bay is entirely black now. Soon I will deposit this person on the seawall, I think with relief. Then I will go night swimming. I imagine the water closing over my head, swallowing me into it. The feeling that this water is gestating me, my secret life. So secret that for whole minutes I know nothing about it.

We drift while I rest my voice. Very gingerly, the man lowers his left arm into the algae. Then he drops his soaking hand into his lap, where it looks like a netted white fish. I watch him frowning down at the hand, as if waiting for it to change before his eyes.

"Tell me something," he asks. "Why do you keep returning to this *deadspot*?"

For some reason, I feel myself blushing. "I'm the youngest in our family. My sister Vi was like a mother to me. At the hour of my death, I'll still be the baby sister to them. It doesn't seem like I can age out of the role . . ."

This is certainly part of why I feel entitled to my lonely hours in the deadspot, I explain to the man. Their entire life before my birth is a secret from me. Whereas everything I've ever done has been visible to them.

"Out here, I float into my own element. When I am silent, when I am alone, I feel free. I don't have to sing along with anybody. Even my thoughts stop."

Under the water. Far from my sisters. Outside the chaos of our breaths. Only then, when I am nothing to anyone, do I feel the great peace.

It's as if I've released something living into the narrow gondola. I picture the secret floating between our faces, a jellyfish

emitting its soft violet light, blowing open and shut. I wait for the man to turn it into a joke or to shame me for coming here alone.

"Yes," he says quietly. "That's it exactly. What a discovery." The man lifts his eyes to mine with naked surprise, and I feel equally astonished. The longer we stare at each other, the louder a pure tone grows inside the gondola. Audible, I think, to both of us. He pushes back the green hood, smoothing the wet leaves of his hair. Gray or brown, there's no telling in this lighting. His wide smile sends all his wrinkles into hiding.

"Who doesn't dream of it? The silence that blots up thought. The silence that frees one from the burden of being oneself."

This smile is like a portal back to the stranger's childhood. Every prior grin I've seen tonight, I realize, was a counterfeit of this one. Understanding someone can make you feel understood in turn, and I smile back at him, to let him know that we have this thirst in common. It occurs to me that I should thank this white-faced man, the marine engineer, along with everyone from the last century who heard the water coming and failed to stop it. The deadspot is their creation.

We gondoliers operate by the Golden Rule. You do not take any risk you wouldn't want your sister to take. You don't pole into bad weather or shoot the tunnels at low tide. You refuse any passenger who might overpower you. I would kill my sisters, for example, if they risked their lives to take a fare to Bahía Rosa.

My sisters and I all pretend to live by this code. To prize safety over profit. But I have always felt quietly certain that perfect adherence to the Golden Rule would sink our business. We'd never leave the hangar. When I started breaking this rule routinely, it was easy enough to rationalize. I needed a darkness that would have killed the others, and they needed me to keep it a secret from them. This did not feel treacherous, not at first. It felt like a loving choice.

People will tell you that Bahía Rosa is a fatal place, but for months it was my paradise. The black-walled horizons. The silence that let me ripple out of my body, until at last I felt entirely at peace, whole and unfractured. One with the wildest turnings of the universe.

But at the same time I had begun to wonder, poling home from the deadspot, *How true can this sensation of unity really be if you need to leave everyone you care about to get it?*

We float over a school of pompano, dozens of frozen gray faces skipping in front of the bow light. Something has frightened them; I glimpse a long body saucer beneath the transom. The man beckons me down from my platform. When he asks his question, his words quiver like the fishes.

"Do you and your sisters ever hear the voices of the drowned, in this bay?"

"No, sir. That's not . . . we don't have that kind of range."

"I see." He nods, but I don't think he believes me.

The man helps me by bailing water, leaning carefully forward. His green slicker bunches around the stringy muscles

of his shoulders. The humming grows inside me until there is no room for worry. What will it feel like, I wonder, to enter the deadspot with another person? To fall silent with him? He thinks my home is a cemetery, and I want him to hear how wrong he is before we part company. The end of his life is not the end of all life. Something wants to be born.

We pass the line of black buoys. They strain after us on their long tethers, like dogs sniffing at the gondola; just as quickly, they are lost to sight. Their nodding heads push against the back of my mind as I sing.

OoOoOo . . .

OoOoOoOo . . .

For a long time we see nothing at all, only water and more water. But I reassure the man that I can hear the seawall drawing nearer with each boomeranging note of my song. And then we both see it, the bleached wall, looming like a motionless wave on the dark horizon.

I touch my tongue to the inside of my cheek. For hours I've been waiting for this moment, but now that the end is in sight, I don't see how I'm going to manage the pivot. It's impossible to imagine leaving this sick man alone on the seawall with no supplies, no fresh water. Tantamount to pushing him off a roof, on a night like this. The nausea I felt back at the jetty returns with a force that nearly doubles me over.

We shadow the soft shoulders of the tree islands, where I hear the curly voices of laughing-yellow, snarling-green veg-

etation. In twenty minutes, I tell the man, we will reach the former land-side edge of his wall.

But when we are perhaps three hundred yards to the northwest of the seawall's rocky edge, the rain begins to fall in earnest. It pounds into my skull, drawing a caul around the gondola. More water splits the sky; in an instant, the map inside me dissolves. If I were home right now, I'd be listening to this storm drumming on the metal roof. Luna would be snoring above me, Mila below me. I'd be drifting off myself under the blankets, at the beginning of a dream. Can my sisters still hear me? I hear nothing but rain. I swing my light across the chop and feel the stirrings of real panic. By sight alone, in such a punishing crosswind, there is no way I can make this passage.

"Violaaaa?"

"Milaaaaa?"

"Lunaaaaaaa?"

My voice flies off and does not return. Nothing answers me. Nothing steers me here. I place the pole in its mount and climb down from the platform. Perhaps my poker face is not on straight, because the man gives me a wild look and grabs my wrist.

"Why aren't you singing?"

"Forgive me, sir," I say, avoiding his eyes. "I made a mistake. I thought we could beat this storm. But I'm losing my voice. I can't map the channel. If I miscalculate the passage, we'll capsize."

On a slack tide, I explain to him, I'd shortcut across the bay, but the water is alive with eddies, and I don't want to get smashed against the wall or sucked out to the Gulf.

"Girl," he says slowly. "Take me to the goddamn wall."

His voice shakes with a rage I could not have predicted even a heartbeat earlier.

"I can see it. We could *swim* there, practically—"

"No. We can't risk it." His face is almost unrecognizable to me, winched tight with anger. "I won't risk it," I clarify, because it's suddenly clear to me that he is making very different calculations.

"You won't *risk it*. You'll bathe in poison, but this is too dangerous?"

The man tugs me toward him, shouting over the wind.

"Tonight is the anniversary of the storm surge. Do they teach that history in your floating schools?"

I had forgotten the date; it isn't one we celebrate. The night the pumping systems failed. The night the seawall was breached by the towering water. The wailing night that did not kill our mother, who would live for another seven years so that I could be born.

He tightens his grip on my wrist, gazing at the spot beyond the bow light where the angled rain is steadily visible. Horror seeps into me; his or my own, I am no longer certain. Large chunks of darkness lift and fall around my gondola.

"I traveled a thousand miles to die here. I chose this spot, this date. I wanted to walk across my wall on my last night on Earth. That was my wish. To die at home, on the anniversary of my children's deaths."

Beneath the sagging hood, he peers up at my face. Here is a man who has written the last scene of his life, I realize, who is furious that his stage directions are getting eaten by

the wind. His voice lowers, and inside of the anger I can hear a grinding disappointment.

"Don't hold out on me, miss. It's cruel to stop here, within sight of our destination. I didn't come this close to the end to turn around."

Our destination. Rain pounds into the hull, water we should be bailing. His feet are bare, I notice—at some point, he must have removed his boots. The toes waggle up at me, as if their good humor is still intact, even as the rest of him seems bent on destroying us.

"When the rain stops, I'm turning around." I let out a shaky breath. "I cannot, in good conscience, take you to your death."

"But, miss!" He laughs angrily, reaching a wet palm to my cheek. "You already have. Look around you. We've arrived." The scolding note reenters his voice. "Now, be honest. You knew where you were taking me. The *deadspot*, you called it." Raindrops go jumping off the green slicker, outlining him in fizzing silver. "Get your pole. Finish the job I hired you to do."

"No." I climb back onto the platform and begin to turn us toward the lee side of the nearest tree island, which I can just make out through the rain. When I look again, the man is standing in the stern. We ride up one swell and down into a deep trough, and I have time to feel amazed that we did not capsize just before the man lunges at me. He must be a better echolocator than I am: when my arms lift, his arms shadow them, a rhyming motion. Quite easily, he wrestles the pole away from me. He gives me a terrible grin, grip-

ping my pole to his chest. *Sisters, I was wrong about my last fare. He is stronger than I am, and he is so much sicker than I imagined.*

"Since you refuse to continue, I'm taking command of this vessel . . ."

Warm liquid seeps through my trousers and I am crying now, I want to go home. OoOoOoOo, I scream. The man releases my arm. For a moment, his eyes shine with some trace of our earlier understanding.

"Poor little bat. You just wanted to disappear for a little while, didn't you? You don't actually want to die."

I don't. I don't, but I had to come a great distance to learn that, Sisters.

"You should stop swimming out here, then." Again I hear the scolding note, but it's much fainter now. He is trying, clumsily, to push off the rocky bottom and turn the gondola toward the seawall. I watch him struggling with the push-pole, its foot now choked with mud. "This whole bay is a stomachful of bile."

Then comes a rippling instant where the scene I am imagining becomes the action I am taking. I watch my hands reach out to grab the pole back, my fingers closing just above his knuckles; he doesn't let go but twists around with a cry. I crawl forward and bite at his hands, missing but causing him to howl. He is still clutching my pole when a strong wave washes over the stern, unbalancing us both; I let go to brace myself, and the man falls backward into the rainy water.

I scream with him as he falls, and I go on screaming after

he splashes into the bay. But I don't jump into the churning water after him, terrified that he will drag me down. I don't reach my pole out to him, because I don't have a pole now; it went overboard with the stranger. I croak at the water: "Sir?" My voice is almost gone. It occurs to me that I don't even know what name to call. It's so dark that I can't see where the man surfaces, but I hear his arms crashing heavily through the algal mats. He is swimming away from me, I realize with relief. He is trying to make the wall. If I were to swivel the lantern, perhaps I would find him bobbing mere feet from the boat: his pale face staring up at me, wreathed in glowing algae. Perhaps I could save him. *Save him*, I command myself. But I don't move from the floor of the gondola. Instead I cover my light, and I wish only for the slapping sounds to stop.

Eventually, my wish is granted: the splashing ceases. Either the man has drowned, or he's swum out of earshot. The new silence is soaked through with his absence. I lie flat on the wet boards, pushing my fists against my stomach. My pole, I imagine, must be riding these same waves into the Gulf or sinking to some depth I cannot hear. And my passenger? He is a true missing person now, I think. A special amphibian. Dead and alive, to anyone who knows him. The last splash he made is a sound that will not leave me. *You killed him*, I try not to think. The moon shines into my eyes; very slowly it occurs to me that the rain has stopped. I have a peculiar, nerveless awareness of the water's trembling surface. Where am I? My mind is like the sky between the stars, void of shapes names facts. But I don't need to sing to guess.

IV. THE CHORUS

I stare up at a busy construction pit. Tiny white spades are tossing huge quantities of darkness around. Stars—these are the stars.

I'm not sure how long I drift like this, trying not to think about the terrible splashing. Without my pole, I'm in bad trouble, but I screamed for so long that I must have blasted all feeling from my body, and it hardly seems to matter that no boats will find me in this distant bay. My bow light plucks at the stringy algae. Perhaps I sailed right through a break in the seawall without realizing it. My song is a pitiful hissing, and it returns no depths or distances to me. When I hear a woman's voice rising out of the darkness, I think it must be my imagination. My light swings in the direction of the singing.

A gondola is arrowing toward me, flat-bottomed and opal white in the powerful beam of my lantern. My good feeling immediately flips into horror. A gondolier stands on the poling platform, her hair blowing loose. The pitch of her singing rises. *God, please, no. God, please, keep us separate. No, no, no. I am not ready to meet her.* OoOoOoO, she sings at me. Can this be possible—am I about to run into my doppelgänger? My double, poling out of the past or the future? Perhaps the man will be seated in her bow, smiling out of his green slicker. Will he be dead, I wonder, or alive?

But it's not my double that draws into view; it's my sister.

Viola glides silently past me, wearing a blindfold with trailing ribbons, her slack face illuminated by the gray orb of her bow light. Her droning song floods into me. I hear the

same sound that pours from my throat in the deadspot—an emptying hiss, like grain spilling from a sack.

Her gondola moves much faster than my mind does. Lethargic thoughts chase each other in slow, widening circles: She's come out here to find me. She's put herself in terrible danger, all to find me.

But soon I realize that Vi has no idea that I'm near her. The blindfold is a trick of last resort; tight pressure across the temples can sometimes help us to hear better in bad weather. It doesn't seem to be working. Her hair flies raggedly out behind her. Her singing has the strange, flayed quality of all sounds in the deadspot, shadowless and flat. Now I hear, with excruciating clarity, how much trouble we're in for. Vi didn't come out here to save me. She's lost herself.

"Vi!" I scream. Too hoarse, I'm sure, to be heard.

But Viola unties the red bandage around her eyes, using the blindfold to wipe at her face. Had all the drowned risen up to address me tonight, I could not have been more astonished. Shaking her hair out, she turns and looks right at me: "Blister!"

Fury wheels around our boats, shrieking at such an ear-splitting volume that it's impossible to pinpoint the origin of the feeling.

She poles up to me, our pupils shrinking in the doubled glare of the bow lights. Two voices swing out like hooks, each catching at the other:

"What are you *doing* here?"

The answer floats between us, mocking us. Vi has always seemed to be light-years ahead of me. Perhaps she is as surprised as I am to discover how we overlap.

"Did you come here to find me?" Vi asks me in a stricken voice.

Her face seems to float, unanchored, isolated by the light. I think about lying, then shake my head.

"No. I wanted to come out here, to swim."

"So did I," says my sister, with the ghost of a smile.

Our calamity strikes me, suddenly, as terribly funny. No less astonishing a coincidence, in its way, than being born into the same family.

"How long have you been swimming here?"

"Oh," Vi says pensively, chewing on her thumb pad. "Years."

Years!

One of us asks: "Why didn't you tell me?"

One of us says to the other: "It is *so selfish* to come here."

One of us is burning with shame—is it hers or my own?

One of us shouts: "Who am I hurting?"

And we scream at each other: "Me!"

Silence rips apart down the middle. Silence reveals its tiny serrated fangs. Have we loved each other well? Could we love each other better? I realize that there is so much we have never told one another, and likely never will. Secrets multiply throughout our hangar. A hundred doors that we refuse to test with speech. A hundred others that we pretend are walls. If I were braver, I would fling my voice against them, at the exact pitch to pick the locks. If I were braver, and if I were a better singer.

In a whisper, I tell Viola about my last fare. How I listened, paralyzed, while the moment when I might have saved him flipped into the moment of his death.

To my great surprise, she does not pull away from me. I watch the story fall into her open pupils and prepare myself for Vi's disgust, her anger. But it's love, uninjured, that floats to the surface.

"It's a shame we weren't alive then," Vi murmurs. "We could have told them how to build the seawall. We could have listened for the weak spots."

Over her shoulder, I see a rolling darkness. I have the nauseating thought that the man's green slicker might come floating our way, carrying the glowing algae.

"Can you hear anything out there, Vi?"

"Just you, talking. But let's keep trying."

I crawl into Vi's gondola and hitch my boat to her stern. We try and fail to find a signal. The rain returns, lashing the black water between our boats. Soon she, too, loses her voice. This rain stings wherever it touches our skin. Vi gives up on poling and sits in the stern behind me; I feel the weight of her chin on my left shoulder. She runs the flats of her palms down my curved spine, pressing at the bony knobs. "This is how sisters tune one another," she used to tell me when I was small, to spare my pride when I woke up afraid from a dream and needed her to hold me.

I wonder if we will ever reach the end of the deadspot. It seems to keep spinning us back into it, a hungry red mouth. "Blister," Vi says, in her flattened voice. "Do you remember the mice?"

We had a single children's book when I was growing up, with a superficially cheerful, apocalyptic plotline. One mouse after another tumbles into a muddy hole, each trying to rescue the others. A family of mice doomed by their

clumsiness and by their love, perhaps by a secret wish to save themselves. And saved they must have been, by some tractor pull of grace, because no children's book ends with the death of every protagonist.

But my mind cannot conceive of a way out of our predicament; in fact, my mind has become the hole.

"Are we going to die now?" Vi asks me.

I shake my head, touched that she's sought out my opinion. Another milestone.

"We should never have come here." Vi shudders. "I am sure they are out looking for us."

Mila and Luna. Perhaps we'll hear their voices soon, behind the curtain of rain. I think about the storybook mice, steering a teacup on the high seas. In a family of sisters, everybody gets to play all the parts, the brave ones and the cowards, the doomed ones and the saviors.

We toss our raw voices into the wind. We are rowing sightlessly, possibly in circles, as the keening begins. When the first echo reaches me, I mistake it for a symptom of exhaustion. Another echo returns to me, although my lips are sealed.

"Listen," Vi says, tugging at my elbow.

"I hear it, too. You're not crazy. Or we're both crazy."

Behind me I feel Viola tense. The ocean is breaking into pieces. New pairs of eyes shine up at us below the gunwales: fluorescent, enormous disks, orange and purple and salt white, inlaid in the angular faces of some schooling species I have never seen before. I know the old stories about dolphins saving humans, but these are not dolphins, and they seem wholly oblivious of us, even as their keening penetrates our bones. A humming enters my chest and begins to grow—

a deep, marine roar. Vi wraps her arms around me, and I feel grateful for her heartbeat; I'd go mad in a second if I was hearing this alone. This new song is wrenching my mind wider than it wants to open, faster than I am ready to go. "I'm not ready!" I scream hoarsely, because I can feel myself getting spun into something so much larger than I am, vibrating at a frequency that is not human. Echoes leap into us from dimensions that seem impossibly remote—shivering treetops and submerged walls, the tiny bones of unborn animals. We hear the hollows, the where-to-gos. Spaces in the ruins that cry out with the tides: *This is not the end of the world. This is not the end of the world.*

Without turning, I can feel Vi's lips parting, preparing to sing along. *Vi, Vi, I want to beg like a child, please, wait for me.* I had wanted to dissolve on my own terms, and only temporarily; if we go through this door, what will we become? Other singers push into my mind, the gibbering moon and the silver mangroves and the buried coral. I am afraid of the voices lifting out of the dark. I am afraid to join them. But perhaps we will have to, if we want to survive.