



Issue #163 • Dec. 25, 2014

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ALLOY POINT

by Sam J. Miller

Every ten minutes she took off her gloves and touched her fingers to the rails, and it was still there, every time, sometimes a mile back through the forest and sometimes five, sometimes running and sometimes walking and sometimes—worst of all—stopped, like it was sensing her through the metal just like she sensed it; as though it could tell all at once how cold and tired and terrified she was, how little she had left inside.

Once, squatting to touch the cold steel, exhaustion overtook her, a tiny blink-sleep that caused her fingers to rest on the metal for long enough that it could speak to her, like they were sitting in the same room together, its voice metallic and echoing—

Why do you run, Ashley? You know you can't outlast me—

—and she had snatched her fingers back like she had touched the Furnace; wide awake again, fatigue momentarily pushed out of her body by the gurgle-croak of that horrible voice, distorted by the rails, sounding even less human than it had a day and a half ago, when it had sniffed her out in the

middle of her crime and screeched her death sentence across the tiny workman's tenement.

Yellow eyes watched her from the woods, the full moon lighting her up for every predator in the Northern Forest, yet when she thought of wolves all she could think about was the heat they gave off, the shaggy warmth of their pelts, and that's when she knew she was in trouble, that the cold and her hunger were becoming dangerous, that she was more likely to make deadly decisions. It was the same in every adventure tale in her father's library—when the body became stronger than the mind, you made mistakes. Mistakes like the one that had gotten her here.

Gabriel. She said his name to the wind and felt a flush of warmth, so she shut her eyes and walked faster, concentrating on the memory of his mouth, in the darkness, on her ear, and the feel of his rough hands, as they paused to caress even the most unremarkable parts of her body, and the sound of her name on his tongue—*Ash!*—in that last terrible moment before the door splintered off of its hinges and the dark came in.

From far away, she could feel it click its claws against the rails, an unrelenting *chk-chk-chk-chk* of steel on steel. The rails were Base Metal, of course, but by law a thin ribbon of Lustrous Metal had to run through every length of functional Metal—so cops and spies could keep an eye on Base activities.

It was this Lustrous Metal that she read; this that connected her back to the metalman, and past it, to the City, to its sprawl of rusted pig iron, to Gabriel's iron bedframe.

Gabriel: dark and beautiful, solid with the strength of all Base Metallics, whose bodies and souls reflected the coarse and unbreakable metals they could commune with. Gabriel, crowned with black curls, his face all dark stubble and blade-sharp eyebrows against pale firm skin. Gabriel was iron girders and lead pipes; the nickel jugs of water and the wild zinc ore that his miner father's fingertips could follow deep into the earth. So unlike the boys in the City's Upper Circle, Lustrous Metallics like her, whose hair was as bright and weak as the gold they worked. Ash was proud of her own ability to read gold and silver, to see the patterns it hid, to shape it with her mind, but Gabriel had swept aside all the lies she'd been told about the innate inferiority of Base Metal and the people who worked it. Gabriel's work was as artful as her own, and her father's. Gabriel's fingers were sturdy but delicate, and when they probed her bare sides she felt as exposed as the metal he manipulated.

But strong as he was, Gabriel was weak. Blind, in an unyielding City where the blind and the deaf and the otherwise impaired rarely lived to adulthood. The City Fathers found few uses for someone broken. Even with his weight balanced

expertly above her, even as his implacable hands pinned her down and the rhythm of his mighty hips became the only thing worth living for, she knew that she was the strong one. Which was why she'd done what she had done. Why she'd run. To save him.

Back there, in the dark, in Gabriel's room, in the heap of ramshackle hovels built around the City's central Furnaces, she had pressed her face into the heat of his neck and told herself that she would give it all up, for this, for him—her apprenticeship, her father's support, the sweet comfortable life that was hers by Lustrous birthright—and now she had. The metalman had found them, somehow, maybe by smelling the forbidden intermingling of Base and Lustre; maybe because one of Gabriel's nosy neighbors had snitched.

When it kicked down the flimsy door of Gabriel's tenement and shambled forward to pronounce her sentence, she had seized a burning log from the fireplace and swung at it—only instead of it shrinking and screaming like in the stories, it had snatched the torch away in one filthy rust-and-iron studded hand and stabbed her in the shoulder with a Base Metal blade.

“Here!” she had cried when it turned toward Gabriel, when she caught one last look at his fragile perfect nakedness, damp with sweat and sudden fear above the sheets, and her heart was weak and begged her to stay so they could die together, but her

body was strong and seized a second burning log and struck the metalman this time, and then dropped it and ran and heard the monster clattering after her, and she knew then that Gabriel would be all right. His father was strong and well-connected. He would get to his father's, and his father would get him to safety.

All night long she had been telling herself that as it chased her north, never slowing, never letting *her* slow, until she at times found herself walking while asleep.

She wondered if she had ever been truly cold before. Cold was different in the City. Not like this. The Furnaces were never far. Out here, every breath hurt. The track formed a tunnel in the trees, and the wind churned through like molten gold down a sluice. In the beginning her face had hurt, the only spot where her skin was exposed. Now her face no longer hurt, but her fingers burned inside her gloves and her neck clenched like cold hands were choking it. The rails looped lazily back and forth, a slow zigzag climb up the plateau that from her City window had always been a distant blue tumescence. The wind got worse as she went, and her thighs ached with the uphill slog.

The wound in her shoulder hurt worse as she went on; Base Metallic poisoning, in its early stages, was not so different from the pain of initiation, the ceremony that accompanied

every birthday from twelve to sixteen, when she had been branded with one of the five Lustrous Metals. But unlike her native Lustrous Metals to which her blood and her body would swiftly adapt, leaving her with the ability to work that new metal, Base Metal would corrode her whole body and kill her, just as sure as the metalman would.

So what's the point of running? Even if you manage to double back, and elude the metalman, and make it home, the healers will see how your wound was made, and they will not help you.

She had no answer for the nagging voice in her head, so she tried her best to ignore it. She ran because she couldn't not run. She had been running her whole life, it seemed, now; the metalman had always been behind her, its steel hooks eager to split her open, for as far back as she could remember. That was life, in the City. They were always watching. Every decision she had ever made, she made because of what might happen to her if she didn't.

Until: Gabriel.

Every five minutes, she reached into one pocket and held the rag to her nose. Gabriel's flimsy undershirt; snatched on wild idiot impulse as she grabbed her clothes and fled, as if she knew, even then, that her old life was gone, that she had fallen

so low that the sweat-smell of his clothing would be her only possible comfort.

They had talked about running away together; planned their journey along the rails, their flight from a society that punished intermingling such as theirs with death. Dumb young dreams: packs on shoulders full of dried meat and hard biscuits; moving south away from the high frozen plateau or climbing over it to the Autumn Valley; building fires beside the rails; making love by warm midnight seas. Looking back she could see it for the fantasy that it was. And Gabriel, who was no older than Ash but who she had always imagined to be so much wiser, was as naïve and dumb as she was.

Gabriel. She said it out loud again, but this time the name stung, a flash of warmth that only made the cold sharper. His body; its heat; the raw olive ridges of his shoulders; the tight black curls she loved to tangle her fingers in. Blind eyes opening wide in ecstasy. Memories flickered in and out of her nightmares, imagining what his body would have looked like if she hadn't lured the metalman away. Skinned and broken, no longer a bronze statue; useless as a lump of inert ore. Every morning there were bodies in the streets, looking like something belched up out of a sausage grinder; poor fools caught by the metalmen in the middle of some transgressive act—alloying silver with nickel, or selling gold jewelry to the

Base Metallics who craved the shiny stuff even though they could not work it. There were no written laws, no authorities to appeal to. Only the metalmen, who lived no-one-knew-where and who carried out the bidding of City Fathers, who were likewise inaccessible. Even the most upstanding Lustrous citizen might vanish in the middle of the night for a crime he hadn't even known was a crime.

She stopped. She stopped whenever fear threatened to overwhelm her, as if to stand her ground and prove that fear would not be her master. She held his shirt to her nose, and breathed deep, and remembered his grin as he had peeled it off. Remembered the taste of him, the forbidden salt-and-metal musk of his most secret part. She took off her glove and touched her fingers to the cold metal rail.

Coming, came the scrape of its voice.

Coming for your head.

Ashley pulled her fingers away, stood up, kept walking. Anger dumped heat into her veins. *Maybe you will catch up to me*, she thought, *and maybe I will kill you. Maybe you're still a man, under all that.* But metalmen weren't men anymore, if they ever had been—jammed full of hooks and beams and chains and blades over time until they were clanking vicious monstrosities.

She looked at her fingers but could not tell, in the dark, in her ignorance, what frostbite looked like. She knew nothing. She didn't know the landscape; whether she stood a chance if she stepped away from the rails and ran through the woods. The metalman would be unable to follow her there—she hoped—but the forest meant certain death, whereas she knew the rails would take her someplace warm. She just didn't know if she'd live that long.

Without putting her glove back on, she reached into her pocket. Her fingers closed on the flint that Gabriel had given her, at their first clandestine rendezvous, the meeting; that simple gift that had made her blush with excitement and fear and guilt. A butterfly: gold wings and a steel body that clasped the flint itself. Press its wings together and metal rasped against metal, spraying sparks. She ran her finger along the alloy point where forbidden metals melted together, and she felt the same warmth from when he touched her. She had never dared to use it; had only held it in her hand. But it was useless now, when she needed it, for she had nothing to burn. She was not skilled enough to make a fire on bare wood, and she had no tinder or fuel to help kindle one. So she held the flint tighter, walking faster, feeling it warm in her bare hand.

A mound of snow shaped like a man caught her eye, stark as an omen. Kicking it did, in fact, reveal a foot. She dropped to

her knees and swept snow away with both arms, certain she could wrap his clothing around a sturdy stick and set it on fire and make a torch—keep herself warm—have *something* in her hand when the metalman found her.

But the man was naked, and partially eaten by something that might not have been animals. A stick was still clenched in one frozen hand; a book lay beside the body. Sadness flooded her, wondering what had happened to him—if he too had fled the City and its hundred secret rules punishable by death, or if he had been stripped and thrown from an ore train, or if he was part of an itinerant gang of dispossessed Base peasants, or had fallen afoul of one. Ash could not tell if he was Base or Lustrous. She wondered if, in death, it mattered.

Had there ever been real butterflies? Had there ever been anything other than this? Cold and fear had wiped her mind clean, shattered every memory of warmth and love. How they had met, how they'd fallen in love, but further back, too: her mother's cooking, her father's cologne when he picked her up and spun her around when she was small enough to be spun.

From each pocket, she pulled what was left of Gabriel. His flint and his shirt.

This man would not give up his stick easily. She fought for several minutes but could not pry open his fist without thawing it out. So she broke the stick off above his hand and was left

with a respectable three feet. And then, as if from guilt, she took the book as well.

No! she thought, as she tied Gabriel's shirt around the edge of the stick. *If you burn that, you'll have nothing.*

She chuckled, to find herself arguing with herself. Loneliness and exhaustion had driven her mad.

If I don't burn it, I'll die.

What kind of life would it be, without him?

Ash had no answer for herself, so she squatted away from the rails and flexed the butterfly wings together. Metal struck metal; sparks fell, then died before reaching the coarse cold cotton. She stooped lower, and the sparks lived long enough to touch the fabric before flickering out in the cold. So she struck it again and again and again. The shirt resisted burning, but she used a crumpled page from the book.

It's catching up to you. Every minute you spend here is a minute less between you and death.

Minutes or hours later, her arms aching but warmed slightly from the effort, a burning page kindled the shirt into flames. She hurried on without touching the rail to feel how much ground the metalman had gained.

At first, the torch made the going easier. Its heat let her focus on things other than the cold, such as her own hunger and exhaustion.

Once I had this fire I should have stayed and cooked and eaten that man.

You see? You burn his shirt and everything good in you immediately dies and you become a savage cannibal.

Ash laughed out loud.

Laughter answered, from the darkness behind her. Harsh, metallic laughter, distorted by wind and distance; impossible to tell how far away.

She froze, then tensed to run. Before she had gone five steps she saw that running threatened to blow out the torch, and she slowed.

How close is it? How good are its eyes? Can it see in the dark? Can it see me? Can it smell me?

Another hour passed, maybe more, walking as fast as she could without risking losing her fire, and there was no further sign of it. She fed the torch at regular intervals, feeding pages into the flame until the book was two empty covers.

The trees fell away slowly, growing thinner and farther between; she must have crested the plateau at some point and begun the descent back down its other side. Soon she was definitely moving downhill, the incline sloping down into open prairie stretching in all directions away. *The Autumn Valley*, Ash thought, feeling its wind. The air was warmer here, and

drier, above freezing but not by much. Grey light had begun to tint the sky the color of ashes.

Her heart sank at what she saw. The rails continued on, winding slightly to accommodate the steepness of the grade and then flattening out at the bottom, falling into step alongside a frozen river and following it off into interminable distance. While the rails were hidden in spots by small hillocks, she could see at once that the landscape would offer her nothing. No lights of human settlement, no fire or promise of heat in that whole wide wild expanse. It would take her at least a full day to walk that far, and she did not think she had a day left in her.

Hope fell away, then, the thin thread of it that she had been clutching to, that had pulled her so far. The brutal reality of her situation finally hit. She was going to die, out there.

You don't know that. Anything could happen. A merchant caravan on ice sledges could come down the river five minutes from now, bringing you food and fire. You have to keep going. There is no alternative.

And it doesn't matter what happens to you. Gabriel will live. Because of you.

Ash could no longer tell which of her inner voices was the crazy one. A wash of agony swept over her, originating in her shoulder wound, and a series of violent retches dropped her to

her knees. She spent a long time there, producing nothing but a small delicate handful of golden bile.

But when she stood—the pain was gone. Like a curtain lifted. How could this be? Touching the skin near the wound, she felt none of the heat or redness of infection. Her cold and her hunger and her fear were all still there, but she saw now how easy it was to set them aside. Her exhausted body, giving up the fight.

Turning in a slow circle, she took stock of her position. She would go no further. She would wait here, for the monster that was coming behind her. Hiding herself in tall dead prairie grass, she would watch it emerge from the forest and follow the rails down. It would assume she was still there, still going, hidden now by one of the hillocks below. She would sprint down from behind, using the torch as a weapon. Having the high ground on the hill slope would give her a slight advantage.

But it will smell the smoke of your torch; it will know you have left the rails behind and it will come to you.

“Good point,” she said, out loud, to herself.

So give it more smoke to smell. Confuse it.

Ash picked up a handful of dead leaves and let them fall, to assess which way the wind was blowing. The dry and slightly warmer air would help. Then she ran a few hundred yards down the hill and turned to the left, the direction the wind was

coming from. Halfway to the treeline she touched the torch to the dead grass in slow circles. Black smoke rose. No way to control the burn; she had to hope the metalman would come before she had a full-fledged forest fire on her hands. Returning to the rails she ran back up the hill and hid herself on the opposite side of the track from her burgeoning bushfire.

You can't kill it. It's too big, too strong. It's made of Base Metal.

I'd rather have it kill me quick than freeze or starve to death out here.

She held her hands to the torch. If any of the shirt was left, she could not recognize it.

Gabriel. I will come back to you. I—

She touched one finger to the fire, to punish herself. If she was going to survive this, she would have to set him aside with the cold and the hunger. Love or lust or anger or sadness could only slow her down, make her make a mistake. Shocking, how easy it was.

Come on then.

The grey sky brightened while she watched the mouth of the forest. Geese flew by overhead. A deer moved mournfully through the tall dry grass. So much meat that she had no way of eating.

And then: it came.

Sunlight made the metalman more frightening, not less. She could see how it had been assembled; could trace the human form inside that blasphemy of metal bristles and blades. It was naked—no human clothing could ever fit such a jagged and monstrous silhouette, although shreds of filthy rags still shivered in the wind at the base of some spikes. She saw the iron rods added over time to stretch bone and muscle, giving it longer arms and an extended spine that formed an impressive hunchback and would surely have had it standing well over seven feet tall if it ever stood up straight. The legs were shorter and resembled tree trunks in their sturdiness, solid muscle to carry the weight of so much metal. Straps of leather crisscrossed its body, some of them holding additional blades and leather bags. What she had initially thought was fur was actually chestnut hair, cascading down from its head and knotted into every dark place where metal met flesh.

It stopped at the sight of the smoke and sniffed the air. Her clumsy approximation had been close enough: the wind blew the smoke right over her, and the day was already bright enough that it could not see the light of her torch. The metalman laughed and dropped to all fours to follow the rails down.

“You gave up?” it called, in the direction where it thought she was. “The cold became too much for you?”

Ash moved too, slowly and carefully coming closer to the rails.

Suddenly, it stopped. She was close enough to know that it could see the bushfire, raging out of control, too big and wild to be a campfire. She was close enough to see the muscles in its legs twitch as it realized something was wrong; as it wondered what to do, what direction the attack would come from, how to defend itself.

She was close enough to leap straight at it, as it whirled around in surprise at the sound of her, and jammed the torch into its underbelly. It swung one enormous arm, so hard it would have bent steel and broken every bone in a mere human's body, but it was off-guard and bewildered and she was able to duck, step to the side, stab the torch into its neck.

The metalman howled. She had not reckoned on that; had not been able to imagine how a mere sound could hurt her. It *did* hurt her, to her soul, how much pain was packed into that wail: the screech of steel on steel, of lovers ripped apart, of a lifetime in shadow, of destroying beautiful things.

She saw its face for the first time, the dense nest of piercings and studs, the sharp triangular set of shiny metal plates—*silver?*—around the eyes that magnified poor light and helped it see in the dark. Steel fangs shone in its mouth. It

stumbled back, and she stepped forward, grabbing for one of the many weapons that protruded from its body—

Maybe I can break it off, maybe I can hurt it, maybe I can use it against—

Her hand closed on a rusted steel blade that jutted out of its shoulder.

And Ash saw.

She worked the steel as effortlessly as gold. She saw the twisted blackened tunnels where the metalmen lived, and the cruel tortures the City Fathers inflicted on them to keep them obedient. She saw this one, following her from her father's house to Gabriel's every day for a week. Saw it watching them—saw herself, saw Gabriel, his hairy legs lit by firelight; felt all over again the hot rush of desire and despair.

How can I read Base Metal?

She thought of the healed infection from the steel blade, her deepening ability to work the steel rails... and the bliss when she and Gabriel embraced, the heat of him, how natural it felt. And then she understood.

People who can work both Base and Lustrous metals become metalmen.

The metalman didn't move. Barely human eyes widened, and she thought maybe it was smiling. Or nodding. For the first

time she could see its pain, under wounds healed over after decades of torture. How much every motion hurt.

People like me.

Fear spread through her like nausea, harsher and colder than the steel infection had been.

Only we can survive the horrific process of making a metalmans. Only we can see everything, know everything, work every piece of metal in the City.

Ash's grip tightened. The metalmans lowered its head, as if yielding. She tugged, and it groaned, and she tugged harder. She felt the steel obey her, shifting beneath her fingers and yielding up its secrets. And then the blade was in her hand, long and cruel and dripping black blood. But she felt only pity for it now, this twisted monster that was once a man, or a woman.

It scanned her face, saw her pity, and frowned.

Still staring her down, it unbuckled one of its leather straps; let two heavy leather pouches drop to the ground. It picked one up with one foot and tossed it at her feet.

Ash squatted and untied it and opened it and turned it upside down, so Gabriel's head could fall to the earth.

No.

Tears fogged her eyes, so swiftly they surprised her.

No.

The voice was small and weak now. She had none of the rage and furious anguish she needed. Only exhaustion. The true deep-down full-body fatigue she had been fighting for so long.

For as long as I thought I was keeping him alive.

“Why?” she said.

“Ask the steel,” it gurgled.

Ash gripped the blade and read it deeper, continued past where the sight of Gabriel had stopped her before. Saw her own fight with it, saw it follow her out into the street, saw it turn back, saw it pause in the doorway and watch Gabriel fumble for his clothes. Saw it wrestle with itself. Saw what it was afraid of, what the City Fathers were afraid of: a resistance, back in the City. Full of brave strong boys and girls who knew the truth. Who it was obliged to kill.

Ash saw its weariness, but also its fear. Of what would happen if it ever failed.

How they would hurt it: the Fathers.

Her pity deepened, then, seeing it scream and writhe across decades of torture, even as her hate for it swelled. She saw it step forward, close gnarled metal talons over Gabriel’s head and lift him up by it, saw the squirming frailty of his naked body. Saw the blade whoosh out and sever his head. Saw his body fall.

The thing did not step aside when she lunged forward; did not try to stop her from thrusting the same blade up into the narrow exposed spot where no metal protected its neck. It welcomed death. Because it hated what it was? No, she saw, behind the weariness in its eyes. It welcomed death not because it was tired of being a tool for hurting, but because it was weary of suffering. It didn't hate the City Fathers for what they had done to it. It didn't dare dream of running away.

She and it were not the same.

When it was dead, Ash sat down on the wooden rail ties and opened up the other pouch. Tear-blind, she fumbled through its contents barely seeing a thing. Food, water, furs. Money. Then she sat back and gripped the freezing rail with two bare hands. Felt herself transported back, back, back, all the way to the City, her vision so much clearer and broader now that she allowed herself to see through Base steel.

Her mind balked at the volume of unknowns. Could she return to the City? Keep moving away from it, hoping to come to some other, better place, that might not even exist? Live in a world without Gabriel? Deep into her pocket, her hand tightened on the butterfly flint. Felt how strong it was where the metals alloyed. Felt where she too was alloyed, now; where his strength bonded with hers.

Ash took the furs and built herself a cocoon. Inside, she touched her lips to Gabriel's butterfly. She fell asleep with her mouth still full of the warm sweet gone metal taste of him.

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UNTIL THE MOSS HAS REACHED OUR LIPS

by Matt Jones

We dig up the graves during the nasty part of night, when the air turns to thick ooze coating the backs of our throats, builds like gunk in our chests until we cough up handfuls of it, wipe it off on pant legs where it crusts over and flakes off into the wind, back into the pool, another drop to swim through. Gusts from the coming storm blow up from the beach, push the fog from the trees and call the fires to go yowling higher into the sky, screaming until the dawn eclipses their light into shadows of smoke.

The littlest ones do not help us dig. They are too young. They smear each other with different shades of earth and pretend that they are creatures of the jungle, the moonlight just a wet sheen over their eyeballs.

Pirro tells me that we must have all of the coffins unearthed before the storm hits. He says, *This is our only chance, Bijou. If we do not leave on the sea, we will leave through the earth.* I know what he means when he says this. It seems a strange thing, to escape with the dead in hopes that we may all live.

When the rain makes landfall, we know it is time to go. Anya holds her dog Chipo tight to her chest so his lower half hangs lopsided toward the ground and I kneel down so she can see my eyes. *Little Anya, I say, it can only be us who goes. There is no room with you for a dog and he will grow miserable out on the water. He will leap in the ocean and draw in the sharks. He will go mad with the salt and try to gnaw us to our bones while we sleep. He will piss where he stands and grow sick in the heat. Surely you do not want to see this happen, Little Anya.*

The rain batters her face, bruises her insides and I can not tell if she cries for Chipo, but she whispers in his ears and they flicker back and forth to acknowledge her message. When she sets him down, he runs off through the jungle toward the beach. We hear him howl. Thunder groans like twisted metal up in the sky. Pirro runs up beside us and yells, but his voice is not so loud under the cloak of rain. *Bijou! Now! We must go now.* His words crash up against my ears like swollen driftwood.

I help Little Anya into her coffin. I tell her to lie on her back so she does not have to look at the body beneath her. The littlest ones ask why we could not empty the coffins first. Pirro tells them, *They will guide us out. These shrunken forms of*

our ancestors, our mothers and fathers, uncles and aunties. Their spirits will keep us safe once we make it out to sea.

After everyone is sealed up, Pirro comes and kisses my forehead. *Do not open it until all is calm*, he says. We each climb into our own coffin and shut the lid. In the darkness in between the wood and the stench of the soft body lying beneath me, it feels like I am already halfway there. To death. To life. Already floating. Gusts of wind scrape the outside of the wood like claws. The rain beats down like fists trying to get in. I close my eyes and open them to reveal the same amount of light. I dig around for a hand and clutch it with all my might until I feel the fingers crack and break off, the skin wiped away clean like mud against the palms of my hands.

I do not know how long we wait, but I can tell when the water comes, when the flooding starts. I feel the waves crash up against the coffins and then we are all moving. I imagine us a fleet of varnished wood carving over the tree tops and over the sand until we are cresting toward the sky, scraping at dark clouds, pushed up higher and higher into the echo and crack of thunder, the splintering of wood. I feel as if the waves we are riding might carry us above the storm, like we might wash ashore on some airy beach and struggle across fine-grained sand only to find the very bodies once beneath us singing and

dancing under the shade of trees, welcoming us home back into the light.

* * *

The Kaperan invaded slow like a poison. They paddled their boats up to our shores from a not so distant island and brought them up through the inlets, the finger-deep trickling streams that filtered the ocean salt out through the roots and reed grass. In a slow drip, they floated silently toward the heart of our island. On rafts of leather skins pulled tight over polished and lashed-together boards, knelt down so the grasses covered them. Their combined exhalation of breath we confused for gentle sea breezes, and down to the second knuckle they drug their palms through the water never even stirring the sediment.

It took the Kaperan days to reach our village but months to strike. They took their time and learned our land. They doused themselves in deep shades of mud and dirt and slept in the ground we tread upon. They drank up our footsteps and learned our movements. They fed themselves on tree frogs and grub worms and hard-backed bugs that flittered to close to their hands. But before they fed, they observed. They listened closely to the croak of the tree frogs and imitated it with their own throats. They hid beneath the earth and shifted the soil grain by grain so we would not notice how still the ground had

grown. For every hard-backed bug turned to mush between their yellowed teeth, they kept one hundred larvae warm and slick on the beds of their tongues until they hatched and slid back down their throats into muscle-hardened bellies, ate of them, buzzed in the heat of their chests until emerging back into life as their miniature spies.

They tiptoed between our houses and sipped of the warm air that escaped our mouths as we dreamt. Sometimes, I thought I could feel them, their faces hovering above my own, but whenever I opened my eyes, there was only air that I could see. Nothing.

The Kaperan imbibed the red-frilled leaves of the poisonous plants that grew around the edges of the island, mashed up the burning in their mouths into cud they hid stinging behind their lips. They developed a measured sickness that lingered in the joints of their arms and legs that eventually swelled their bones to thriving, until the poison affected them no more. They disguised themselves with the skins of the trees and grew up tall from ankles and feet. I could swear there were days when Pirro and I climbed to gaze out at the horizon from the canopy that I felt noses under my heel, probing tongues across my skin as I climbed higher. *Don't be silly*, Pirro said, bringing his machete down across a lone branch, *what you feel moving across you are knobs of twisted bark, coils of*

slithering snake. Their limbs became the trees' limbs and when one was cut off, they bled. They bit their tongues and bled in silence.

Our Mami noticed them, not in their true form but in the way the land started to reject us. In the coffee she sipped, she tasted the difference, how bitter it was, how sleepy it made her. Our Papi felt their presence in the fish he caught and served at dinner. With every bite he took, soft bones like wasp stings fell down the back of his throat until he could no longer eat. Pirro snared birds in the jungle that sang so beautifully for their freedom that he could not twist their necks. Homero hunted down and took the heads of snakes that bled only venom, which shriveled and burned into scalding poofs of air.

They turned the elements against us. They let us waste away.

* * *

I open my eyes and the darkness around me glows red at the seams. I can hear a dog barking. My body sloshes up and down. When I lift open the lid of the coffin, the sun sears my eyeballs a delicate shade of white and all that is around me appears clean and new, endless and still unformed in only the way the center of the ocean can. The dog is barking and my vision comes back in waves until I can see Chipó held tightly in

the arms of Little Anya. I feel sick and spill my insides over the side of the coffin.

The hand on my back belongs to Pirro, reaching to me over the water. He rubs my shoulders and says, *Get it out, Bijou. Get it all out.*

When I look around, everyone is here, all floating alongside me. Pirro. Brigitte. Laurette. Homero. Omario. The littlest ones. Even Little Anya and Chipo. I don't know how we all made it free.

Where are we, I ask.

Lost for now, Pirro says. He cups his hand over his brow to block out the sun and strains his eyes. *It's all ocean and sunlight here.* The only shelter resides under the lid of a closed coffin. And even there, the sun finds its way through the seams of the wood. He calls out, *We should all rest. Shut your lids everyone. Sleep. The storm is passed and we can come out at night again when the sun is not so strong.*

He starts to drift away from me and I call his name, the words tearing up raw from the salt shards at the back of my throat. He paddles back over and leans down so the shade from his head covers my own. *Shhh, Bijou. We will not drift apart. Everyone is safe for now.* But how can he know such a thing? Little Anya drizzles water over her head that turns to steam rising from her brow. Pirro kisses my forehead and shuts my

coffin lid over me. Sealed inside the darkness, I still feel the heat just as strong, hiding itself beneath the surface of my skin.

* * *

Our Granmi told us of the Kaperan when we were littler versions of ourselves, before the littlest ones had come to be. She gathered all of us around a fire at night. She was hunched over and small, but when she paced in front of the flame, her shadow rose up in mischievous flickers on the walls of our houses.

It would be a mistake, she started, to believe that the Kaperan only take, that they are solely bringers of death. The Kaperan are a patient people. They are a kind and fearless tribe. They are guardians of their own knowledge, protectors of what is dearest to them.

And what is that, asked Omario.

Granmi shot him an evil look, reached out her stumpy arm so the shadow of its extended form came down hard on Omario's head. *Life, she said. The Kaperan, more than anything, are the guardians of life. And when they have decided that there is another people that have endangered life, who have drunk too greedily of the earth, who have mined too deeply or wasted too much, the Kaperan come to claim their home, their land.*

I held Little Anya close in my arms and she held Chipo who was just a pup at the time. Granmi gestured to all the darkness around her and said, *This, all that we have, does not belong to us.* She waved a crooked finger at each star. *We live in a world of shared hearts beating. Hovering in front of all of us, huddled in the first layers of our skins, are ghosts of the past trying to stay warm, phantoms of the heaven of their own natures. The Kaperan know this.*

Pirro giggled and spit into the fire so a hot sizzle met the air. He took up a handful of dirt and let it pass through his fingers. *I do not care that the world does not belong to us. I do not want the dirt,* he said. Little Anya sniveled and turned her head to my chest.

Granmi came close and sneered at Pirro. *But the dirt wants you,* she said, *and it will have you some day or another.* She came and rested one creaky hand on Little Anya and I took note of its withering. *Do not fear the Kaperan, child, for they do not mean harm to children. Children are but saplings to them with great potential to grow, to learn new ways. Should you ever meet the Kaperan, they would only hoist you up to the moon and tell you sweet tales of how the earth was made.*

Little Anya showed half her cheek to the light of the fire, wiped the fear from the space below her eyes and asked, *But what about you, Granmi? Do you fear the Kaperan?*

Granmi stared into the sky for a long while as if she were trying to count the stars, her eyes passing back and forth over the swath of blinking black space above us. I did not imagine that Granmi was fearful of anything that life had to offer. Pirro said, *She is lost in that mind of hers. So many years, so many turns it has taken that she is not able to find her way back to what is right in front of her.*

Granmi let out a long sigh and the air from her chest drifted upward in a dim cloud. I watched it take murky shape in the sky. *No*, she said. *I do not fear the Kaperan, but I am afraid of what they will show me. I do not know that I am ready for eternity.*

I too did not know if I was ready for something so endless as eternity.

* * *

I open my eyes and lift the coffin lid and the seams of darkness grow a cool blue. The sound of the waves, the push and pull beneath the water's surface, make me feel as if we are drifting to nowhere. I do not know how long we have been on the water, but it feels between moments and days, waking and dreaming.

Pirro hops from coffin to coffin and the sleep from his eyes falls in drops to the water where small fish come to nibble of it and float in a daze at the surface. He knocks on each lid and

rouses the littlest ones awake. They poke their heads out and yawn. Brigitte and Homero blow one another kisses across the plane of water between where they each float. Chipo opens his snout to howl at the moon and Little Anya pets his flank. His fur comes away in damp clumps and the salt falls from Anya's eyes.

I paddle over to little Anya and my coffin bumps into hers. *Little Anya*, I say, and before I can finish speaking she tells me, *He ran away from the flooding and scratched desperately to come inside, Bijou. I could not let him drown. And when I let him inside, he licked my face and all my tears and made me not so afraid.* She held Chipo close.

I pet Chipo between the ears and say, *That is fine. I'm glad he is with us.* Yet I fear that with enough time on the sea, little Anya will face tears again that Chipo will not be around to lick away.

The stars loom over our heads in such thick sky that I feel capable of swimming upward to meet them. Some of the little ones splash their hands in the water and drink tiny handfuls of the salt. They hang their legs in the surf and hug one another to shivering.

Do not splash about so, says Omario. *You will call up the whales and they will swallow us whole.*

Do not drink the water, says Laurette, it will make you mad.

The littlest ones quiver and hold one another. Each of them speaks in fragments of ideas that connect them as whole.

We are scared of this man

that lies still beneath us.

He does not blink

or breathe

or snore in the night.

That is because he is dead, says Pirro. He does not need to blink or breathe or snore anymore.

The littlest ones say, *He frightens us.*

We do not know anything of who he is,

or was.

Will someone please tell us something about him

so that if his spirit should rise

it will not toss us to the fish?

I paddle my coffin close to theirs and peer inside. The three littlest ones are huddled together atop the legs of the still corpse, averting their gaze from his face. I squint my eyes and look closely at him and smile. *This is just Uncle Bajo, little ones. Do not be afraid.*

But who is this Uncle Bajo?

I do not recognize his warmth

Or his skin?

I tell them, He was a fat man with the sheen of sweat smeared heavy and pulled tight across his stomach. He took no wife and had no children of his own. He spent many of his nights sucking the Willa Trees dry of their sap until he was drunk and smelled of their oily leaves. And when he had his fill, he tumbled home in the darkness and collapsed on my bed where I lay smooshed and barely breathing until first light. He broke wind that made my eyes burn. He snored so loudly that the bed shook. His naked form was like that of a crumbling mountain and my Mami always said, Bajo, you should find yourself a woman or a healthy sow and move out of our house.

Bajo held many of you in his arms by the fire at night. He fed you thumbfuls of Willa sap, rubbed it across your gums until you fell asleep on his colossal tummy. He was a loud and foolish man and when the Kaperan came, he shrunk slowly from lack of food. His skin shriveled and hung loose off his body and when he was too weak to stand anymore, the Kaperan hoisted his tiny body over their large shoulders. They brought him to the cemetery and dug him a grave. They whittled from a Willa tree a coffin to hold his body and spirit and they laid him to rest inside of it. I am so very hungry, he said, so very hungry and tired. The Kaperan laid one large

palm across his face and whispered the sound of the wind which spoke, sleep now and feast later, dear Bajo. Many heavenly delights await you.

The little ones crawl over his once large body and examine his face. They pull at his ears and part his lips but their hands retreat when the once plum color of Bajo's lips falls away in flecks to reveal his stained teeth. The little ones scatter to his legs and curl up together. Even in death, Bajo looks like a hungry man. I ease their coffin lid shut and paddle myself away to Pirro.

The sun will come up soon, he says.

The sky sears itself a nery shade of orange where the horizon meets the water. It looks like a great fire will burn toward us. I think about our island and where it is in the distance, a smoldering mass of land floating in the middle of the ocean, smoke turned into clouds that follows us as we drift.

You should try and sleep more, Bijou, he says.

I am tired, but I feel as if I cannot shut my eyes, I tell him. Pirro nods and says, *Perhaps I will try then,* and he lays down atop the body inside his coffin and shuts the lid. I hear him mumbling inside of it. I press my ear to the wood and can only listen to the water around us. I watch the morning sun cook the stars white before they fade away into the day.

* * *

When the Kaperan came into our village, when they finally showed themselves, they were not what I expected. The Kaperan were gentle, their teeth far too white and shallowly set in mouths made up of dark lips and even darker skin. They were so large that all of the adults fit like children in the crooks of their long arms.

Our men struggled to fight them. Our Papi loosed poison-tipped darts that struck the flesh of the Kaperan and each dart that pierced their skin only seemed to strengthen their stride. No blood was drawn, no bones broken or crushed. The Kaperan simply rested their large palms down upon our shoulders and we collapsed under the weight of each set finger. We were all too weak.

I awoke with the other children wrapped in the leaves and fronds of the trees near the beach. I thought they might cook us, bury us beneath the ashes of a fresh fire and pick our bones clean like we were fish. Instead, one of the Kaperan let drip large handfuls of clean water into our mouths, from which our stomachs did not heave or swell or throb. They pushed small bits of fish behind our cheeks and let the flesh dissolve slow on our tongues. They peeled the leaves from our bodies and I saw that I appeared normal, my flesh and muscle having grown back. They washed our skins with their hardened palms. Pirro hissed to me, *They are preparing us for the afterlife*, and one

of the Kaperan pinched his tongue as it moved in his mouth and motioned for him to be still.

They carried us on their backs, two of us hung from each shoulder, to the cemetery where we saw the many empty holes in the ground. Coffins whittled and carved from trees, adorned with leaves and padded by beds of fallen flower petals. *I told you*, Pirro hissed in my ear.

Our eldest, our mamis and papis, aunties and uncles, were laid out next to each coffin, each vessel. I cried. Omario cried. The littlest ones wailed and moaned and Pirro looked on brooding. I saw our Mami with her arms crossed resting on her chest. I crawled over to her and shook her shoulders, but her eyelids only floated up.

The Kaperan knelt down next to each body and spoke in the hums of winged bugs, the breezes moving through the trees, the sound of waves crashing and retreating from the shore.

Close your eyes and fix your gaze upon the nearest star. Go into the light and let it fill you so you are not blind in dark spaces. Let the heat turn you to ash so the soil can take you in, so the wind can raise you up and carry you, so the roots can drink you up and turn you into shade to block out the sun on the hottest days. Let the dust of your bones find itself into the mud on the banks of your streams, into the water that your

children drink. Let yourself become a part of life that suffers no end. Give back before taking any more. Go at peace. Go home.

The Kaperan lifted up the bodies of our mamis, papis, aunties, and uncles, and rested them in their coffins. They lowered each coffin into the earth and began to scoop mounds of dirt to fill in the holes. I cried out for them, but they made no sounds. By the time night had fallen, our eldest belonged to the earth and we belonged to the Kaperan.

* * *

I wake up to the sounds of Chipo howling and I feel Pirro throw the lid of his coffin open throwing me into the water.

In the salt, the movement of the water speaks like constant whispering, but I am not able to make out any of the words. The hands around my wrist belong to Pirro and he pulls me above the surface and back into my coffin.

He says, *Bijou! I'm sorry. Had you fallen asleep up there?* Chipo howls again and Pirro yells, *Little Anya, you must keep that dog quiet.*

Yes, Homero echoes, *he is going to call all the sharks in the ocean to this very spot and we are going to toss him overboard to satisfy their appetites.*

I sit up and wipe the water from my forehead. My skin is hot. It feels like it is glowing. Little Anya clutches Chipo to her

chest and says, *He is hungry and we have nothing to eat. I cannot stop him from whining.*

She is right, Laurette says. We are all hungry with only mouthfuls of briny air and heat to sustain us. We cannot last like this.

Do we have no nets to cast, asks Brigitte.

No spears?

No hooks?

No bait to fish with, ask the littlest ones.

Quiet, Pirro shouts, or I will cut you loose when you are asleep and you will wake up all alone. He stands in his coffin, catches his balance, and then leaps across to mine.

What are we going to do, Bijou.

I tell him, *I do not know.*

Was it so wrong to leave, he asks. *Have I doomed us all?*

No, I say. *All life ends in death.* I am certain that what I say is true, but it gives me no comfort.

Clouds block out the night sky, but I can hear the littlest ones slurping up handfuls of the ocean drink. I shout for them to stop, but I still notice the sounds of it washing from their cheeks, rushing down their throats, filling their small tummies. *You will go mad,* I shout.

* * *

I cried for weeks after our eldest died. The Kaperan came to my bedside at night and spoke in the hush of flickering flame. *You do not need to be sad for your people, Bijou. They are a part of your home. The earth will accept them for the earth rejects no one. It will turn them into new life that surrounds you everyday.* Their words did not comfort me either. I missed our Mami and Papi.

Pirro detested the Kaperan. When they tried to show him how to coax fish into his net, when they attempted to demonstrate how he should coo in his hand to call the birds to land down on his arm, he rejected their teachings. He stole off into the forest and climbed the trunks of the highest trees. He darted off to the inlets that came up from the shores and he buried himself in the earth. Still, the Kaperan always found him. They reached great hands like steady spiders from the leaves and hauled him down by his ankles. They plunged their great hands into the earth and dug him free.

I heard them down there, Pirro told me, *whispering in the dirt.*

What were they saying, I asked.

I do not know. They all spoke at once.

Pirro, Homero, Brigitte, Laurette, Omario, me, we all stole off to distant corners of the island to try and escape the Kaperan. Sometimes Brigitte said she did not understand why

we resisted the Kaperan. Sometimes I did not either, but I never told Pirro, for he always said, *This is our home. These are our lives and we cannot be told how to live.*

The littlest ones adapted to the Kaperan easily. They imitated their ways and the Kaperan treated them with sweet tales of how the earth was made, just as our Granmi had suggested they would.

Each star is a gaseous spirit, a phantom of a breath once breathed by those that have come before you. All of that life up there heaves and heaves in the chest of the sky.

*But what about the stars,
yes, what came before the stars,
before the sky, asked the littlest ones.*

The Kaperan said, *Life. And death. The last breaths of those dying things, those last wishes and desires for the world not yet come.*

*But what about before those things,
the dying things and death
and last wishes, asked the littlest ones.*

The Kaperan said, *All life ends in death.* The Kaperan inhaled deeply and exhaled in one long fluid breath that lifted the hair from our heads. *We are always living, always dying. That much closer to death, that much closer to life.*

But what about before the stars and the skies and the water and the land and the trees and all of it, before even you, asked Pirro defiantly. *You cannot sit here and tell us about the beginning of the world, the beginning of time, for not even you were alive.*

That is true, the Kaperan said smiling, *but being alive is not so different from being dead. You are always that much closer to living, to dying.*

Pirro kicked dirt over the fire around which we sat and stormed off into the trees. I sat there long until the flames faded to ash and the ash found flight in the wind. I did not understand the words of the Kaperan. Sometimes, when they spoke, I only heard ocean breezes, soft rain, the treading of footsteps. They were not so easy to understand, but the littlest ones seemed to pay them close attention, to heed their many words.

* * *

I feel weary from the heat and thick air built up in my coffin. I blink my eyes awake and the darkness ripples in front of me. Chipó is howling and I open my lid to the strangest of sights.

Our coffins are tied together in a line with no space between us. We crest the waves as one vessel and Unlce Bajo stands tall against the wind like a mast on the outermost edge.

His shirt balloons in front of him like a sail with the wind at his back and his laughter carries through the air. His belly is full once again.

The littlest ones climb atop his head and shout,
*We are sailing,
we are flying,
to go home.*

Uncle Bajo laughs hardily and the sail of his shirt expands like his chest.

I blink my eyes open and closed until the muscles feel weak. Pirro sits with his legs dangling in the water on the outermost edge and I walk across to meet him, stepping gingerly over Brigitte and Homero, no longer blowing kisses, but planting them gently on each other's lips.

Do you see what I see, or have we all gone mad, I ask.

Pirro turns his head over his shoulder, *Perhaps we have all had too much of the salt water. Perhaps we have all gone crazy.* Chipo howls to the sound of Uncle Bajo's laughter.

I am so tired, Pirro. I cannot seem to wake up. Pirro puts his hand on my shoulder and nods. *Rest, Bijou. There is nothing to see out here. Just water and waves for endless miles.*

My eyes sting. I close them and feel a thrumming behind them, a pulsing that makes my head swell.

* * *

Pirro devised our plan for retaliation against the Kaperan. We met in secrecy in the trees under the light of the moon.

I will burn this place down to embers of brittle twinkling and it will belong to no one, he said.

Laurette protested and said, *But where will we go if not here? If not our home?*

And the Kaperan spoke from the darkness, for they were always listening. *Pirro, do not be foolish, they said. Burning your home will leave a mark upon the world.*

Pirro screamed back into the night, *Good, a scar on your skin I hope. This is our home and it is for us to decide how we live in it.*

Yes, the Kaperan said, but we will not let your destroy it, for it has been and still is the home to many lives other than yours. We cannot let you burn this place, and if you try, we will call forth a great storm to wash over your island and extinguish the flames. The waves will carry all of you out to sea and your last breath will become a bubble that bursts underneath the water, never to reach the air, never to drift up toward the sky, never to light the darkness.

But Pirro did not care. He lit staffs and branches to flame. He handed one to each of us and all of us except Laurette and the littlest ones ran through the trees setting bark to sparks and

grass to blazes that cooked the jungle into a haze of smoke and fog. And the once blue skies darkened themselves to gray and the wind battered the beach into funnels of spiraling sand as sharp as glass. The Kaperan called forth the storm.

We gathered in the cemetery and Pirro told us to dig. So we dug. I scooped out mud and dirt with my hands until my arms ached with such tension that they might never bend or curl ever again.

I sealed myself up in my coffin, I heard Chipo howling and the thunder from the sky. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the stars until every breath I took filled the small wooden space around me and there was just glowing.

* * *

At the hottest point of the day, I ladle water over my skin and watch it sizzle away into small specs of salt on my skin. I feel tired and weak. I think the bodies in their coffins by now should be cooked to goop and stench by the sun, but none of this happens.

Chipo gnaws on a slender wrist, his teeth biting down on the length of it, his tail wagging back and forth. Our auntie sits up next to Little Anya in her coffin and pets Chipo down his back, part of her arm missing just below the elbow.

Does that not hurt you, I call out to our auntie. She plucks her bone from Chipo's mouth and laughs, *No, Bijou. It does*

not hurt me and it keeps this mutt quiet. She tosses her bone out into the water and Chipo jumps off the side of the coffin, swims, and retrieves it before being hauled back in, his fur sopping wet.

By the time the sun is low in the sky, Laurette and Omario have gorged themselves on fish. Their mamis and papis sit up in their coffins dangling their hands in the water, fingers twitching, and when the fish bite, they yank their limbs back into the boat. Fish scales cling to the lips of Laurette and Omario as they sink their teeth through silvery skin.

I crawl across the coffins over to Pirro and say, *I think I have gone crazy. I see our auntie bouncing Little Anya on her knee. Chipo gnaws on her bones like they are sticks. She laughs. Laurette's Mami fishes in the water with her bait as fingers. Bajo's shirt blows in the wind like a sail. Tell me, Pirro, do you see these things?*

Pirro sits in his coffin with his knees pulled to his chest, atop the body of our Papi. He stares into the stillness of our Papi's face and says, *Yes, I see them.*

What is happening, I ask.

Pirro shrugs and beats his fist once on the chest of our Papi. *I do not know.*

I crawl back to my coffin and shut the lid to block out the sun. I hear the giggling of the littlest ones, the splashing of

water as Chipo dives in and out. The trapped steam inside the coffin makes my eyes run in streams down my cheeks and I grasp for the bent and broken hand beneath me. The fingers wrap around my own in the heat-tinged darkness and I hear the water and churning beneath me turned to tide and current and words around me. *Why do we lay holed up in this tiny box. Bijou? Why do we stay trapped inside this wretched sweltering when there is such a beautiful day outside?*

I turn my head to look into the open eyes of our Mami, to feel her warm breath on my cheek. *We are almost there, Sweet Bijou. You must look. You must see it.*

When I open the lid of the coffin again, night has fallen and the stars run like liquid from the sky. Drops of runny dark land on my skin. There is land. The littlest ones cry for joy and Uncle Bajo blows deep breaths into this shirt that carry us closer to the sand that glows in the same pale shade of the moon.

Chipo leaps into the water first and swims to shore. Little Anya struggles after him until our auntie carries her inward, the waves gently pushing at their backs. It looks so close to home. Homero and Brigitte leap into the surf and dance. Their mamis and papis wade over to the sand and collapse on the beach where they let the water rush up underneath them.

Omario and Laurette dive gloriously from the sides of their coffins and sidestroke their way to standing.

Our Mami raises herself up beside me and swings her legs over the edge, swipes her toes across the surface and says, *Perfect*, before jumping in. She glides through the water and calls back to me, *Are you coming Bijou?*

I feel the urge to follow her, but I see that Pirro's coffin is shut, so I walk across our floating vessel and knock on his lid. The echo in the wood is dampened by the hollows of what lies inside. I pry it open and see Pirro huddled up on top of the body of our Papi.

Pirro, I say, *you should look. We have found land.*

Pirro clenches his eyes shut and grips the fabric of our Papi's shirt.

I hear the others shouting to me from the shore, calling up to the sky.

Pirro, I say, and I rest one hand on his shoulder. His skin seizes and his body shakes. *We are home. We have made it*, but he does not move. His skin sweats and his muscles tense.

I kiss his forehead and whisper into his ear. I shut the lid to his coffin and hear his mumbling, stare at the land floating in front of me, watch the littlest ones scurry off into the trees hoisted high on Uncle Bajo's shoulders, see Brigitte and Homero walk hand in hand to the jungle so familiar. I put one

foot in the water and it really does feel perfect. I jump all the way in and feel the tide ushering me toward the sand. Our Mami waits for me and I join her on the sand. Her fingers wrap around mine and I turn to look at our vessel drifting out from the shore, the wood blistered by the sun, stripped of its shine by the constant salt. It looks close to sinking.

Pirro, I yell once more, the sound of my voice sailing over top the water, skimming the waves like a smooth stone. *Pirro!* I run to the water's edge and the breeze repeats itself all around me. The hand on my back belongs to Granmi and she says, *Always so stubborn, that boy*. She drags one crooked toe through the sand where the water washes up, samples its warmth with the bed of her nail, and leads me away from the beach *Just give him time, Bijou. He cannot wait forever*.

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Matt Jones is a graduate candidate in The University of Alabama MFA program. His previous work has appeared or is forthcoming in apt, Paper Darts, The Citron Review, Whitefish Review, and more.

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COVER ART

“Ancient Threshold,” by Sam Burley



Sam Burley is a matte painter turned illustrator and is believed to currently reside on the continent of North America. Eye-witness reports describe him as a tall, stick-like, camera-wielding figure staring at the sky or driving around aimlessly with his dog named Rygel. On rare occasions he has been glimpsed careening through the air by any of several flimsy and horribly unnatural means of flight, apparently laughing. If seen, approach with caution... and preferably root beer. View more of his work online at samburleystudio.com.

Beneath Ceaseless Skies

ISSN: 1946-1076

Published by Firkin Press,
a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Literary Organization

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