

CIRCUS-TURNED

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## Table of Contents

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Introduction.....   | v    |
| I. Circus Traditions.....   | v    |
| II. Fictional Representations of Circuses – Performance and Social Order..... | viii |
| III. Conflicts between “Other” Performers.....                                | xi   |
| IV. Gender and Embodiment.....  | xii  |
| V. Violence.....  | xiv  |
| VI. Setting and Style.....  | xvi  |
| Chapter 1. Circus-Turned.....   | 1    |
| Chapter 2. Opening Night.....   | 3    |
| Chapter 3. Changeling.....  | 4    |
| Chapter 4. Siren.....   | 6    |
| Chapter 5. Interlude.....   | 8    |
| Chapter 6. Pin Woman.....   | 9    |
| Chapter 7. Awakening.....   | 10   |
| Chapter 8. Interlude.....   | 12   |
| Chapter 9. Fire Breather.....   | 13   |
| Chapter 10. Howl.....   | 15   |
| Chapter 11. Us.....   | 19   |
| Chapter 12. Interlude.....  | 22   |
| Chapter 13. Lullaby.....  | 23   |
| Chapter 14. Interlude.....  | 25   |
| Chapter 15. Burnaway.....   | 26   |
| Chapter 16. The Pale.....   | 27   |
| Chapter 17. Interlude.....  | 29   |
| Chapter 18. Crone Meat.....   | 32   |
| Chapter 19. Interlude.....  | 34   |
| Chapter 20. Menagerie.....  | 35   |
| Chapter 21. Runaway.....  | 39   |
| Chapter 22. Interlude.....  | 42   |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Chapter 23. Insect Girl.....             | 43 |
| Chapter 24. Interlude.....               | 44 |
| Chapter 25. Little Bodies.....           | 45 |
| Chapter 26. Reunion.....                 | 47 |
| Chapter 27. Flood.....                   | 49 |
| Chapter 28. Interlude.....               | 50 |
| Chapter 29. Trial.....                   | 51 |
| Chapter 30. Split.....                   | 53 |
| Chapter 31. Interlude.....               | 56 |
| Chapter 32. Disbandment.....             | 58 |
| Chapter 33. Siren's Pool.....            | 59 |
| Chapter 34. Interlude.....               | 60 |
| Chapter 35. Way with Water.....          | 61 |
| Chapter 36. Interlude.....               | 62 |
| Chapter 37. Way with Water (cont.).....  | 63 |
| Chapter 38. Interlude.....               | 64 |
| Chapter 39. Surfacing.....               | 65 |
| Chapter 40. Interlude.....               | 66 |
| Chapter 41. Return to Water.....         | 67 |
| Chapter 42. Silent City.....             | 68 |
| Chapter 43. Down.....                    | 69 |
| Chapter 44. Body Tunnel.....             | 70 |
| Chapter 45. Return to Water (cont.)..... | 72 |
| Chapter 46. Interlude.....               | 73 |
| Chapter 47. Siren Song.....              | 74 |
| Chapter 48. Transformation.....          | 76 |
| Chapter 49. Nail.....                    | 77 |
| Chapter 50. Last Call.....               | 79 |
| Chapter 51. Final Interlude.....         | 81 |
| Bibliography.....                        | 82 |

## Introduction

*Circus-Turned* is the story of Carina, a young woman-turned-siren who encounters a circus of the “other,” a band of grotesques whose penchant for the spectacle questions normative bodily identity. She learns to negotiate her marginalized role in society with the help of fellow performers Rowan, Teren, and Nessa. Against the backdrop of the Purge, a cyclical culling of those seen as “other,” the circus travels through an alternative mediaeval European landscape, acting as a scapegoat for society and a lifeline for grotesques like themselves who are exiled to a wasteland called the Pale. Carina's presence signals a turn of events in the group's history of persecution when her estranged husband Morgen, a siren himself, experiments on the Pale's inhabitants to create a new form of grotesque while the Purge begins.

The concept of *Circus-Turned* was sparked by Cirque du Soleil's *Quidam*, a performance about a young girl who conjures a circus through her imagination. Due to my longstanding interest in the grotesque, I was interested in how spectacle can be used as a medium to explore the identity and physicality of “othered” bodies while also examining the circus as a space in which societal tensions can be released under the guise of entertainment.

### I. Circus Traditions

Throughout its history, the circus—or more specifically, its freakshow— has shifted from a mode of showcasing human deformity as a regulatory construct meant to identify and isolate subjects of “otherness” to, instead, glamorizing the “other.” In following this trend, contemporary live circus companies such as Cirque du Soleil tend to romanticize “otherness” and exclude the longstanding issues associated with representations of the “other.” By creating *Circus-Turned*, I want to foreground issues of bodily identity in regards to the grotesque by using the spectacle of the circus as a means to examine “otherness” in a publicly constructed space for the outflow of society's anxieties: in other words, a “sandbox”<sup>1</sup> to realize the potential of a marginalized grotesque figure.

In the world of *Circus-Turned*, the circus has a strained but necessary relationship with the society that marginalizes it. Even though the Circus<sup>2</sup> questions normative identity by

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<sup>1</sup> “Sandbox” is a term used in video game design to describe a controlled space where players test-drive their avatars to check for “bugs” and explore/develop ideas that could be implemented in a game's final form.

<sup>2</sup> As the circus in *Circus-Turned* has no formal name, I will refer to it as “the Circus” throughout this introduction.

exposing the world's inhabitants to the “other,” its role as a scapegoat allows it to exist albeit under harsh conditions. As it is a liminal space neither fully accepted nor disowned by society,<sup>3</sup> the circus can be seen as a “second world,” similar to medieval carnival.<sup>4</sup> Having no permanent locale, it disappears and reappears in the villages it visits not to provide a means of “escape but to confront, reminding the reveller of his mortality and the citizen that all is not right with the world” (Hyman and Malbert 76).<sup>5</sup>

In creating the performers of the Circus, I drew upon visual representations of human “abnormality” from cabinet cards dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> The framing and style of these photographs informed my work on how marginalized bodies were presented and marketed as such to fulfill the expectations of a normative audience. Similar to the flamboyant advertising posters of freak shows in circuses like that of P. T. Barnum's, the function of these images was to titillate the viewer with a glimpse into the “other” without the risk of any real life involvement with its subject.

Because I chose to use the traditional freak show as a basis for the Circus's acts, the performers of this circus are on display, but not as passive subjects to be mocked by an audience. Rather, they use aspects of their “otherness” to respond to spectators in their own sanctioned space, that is, under the circus tent. Teren, a changeling who manipulates his body by adding and subtracting parts of other humans and beasts, defines the parameters of the circus's show with his opening act, a grotesque “striptease” in which he tears off parts of his hybridized body to throw into the audience. The changeling provides more than what the audience bargains for: a spectacle inclusive of the bodily realities that are integral to his character, aspects that cannot and should not be sanitized for public consumption.

Teren is a counter to the classical Renaissance body as he chooses to maintain a grotesque

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<sup>3</sup> In reference to the camp in Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*: a “no-man's-land” that is “situated—like civil war, insurrection and resistance—in an ambiguous, uncertain, borderline fringe, at the intersection of the legal and the political” (1).

<sup>4</sup> Here, I use the terms “circus” and carnival” interchangeably in view of the original function of both forms of spectacle—carnival as a space where participants are both audience and performer, versus the circus where performers and audience have distinct roles in the creation/reception of the spectacle.

<sup>5</sup> Although Timothy Hyman and Roger Malbert in *Carnavalesque* use this description in context with “Carnavalesque” art, it is a concept I would like to apply in my definition of the circus's function in *Circus-Turned*.

<sup>6</sup> The cabinet cards mentioned here are from the Ronald G. Becker Collection of Charles Eisenmann Photographs in the Syracuse University Digital Library. Other visual references are listed in the bibliography.

form in lieu of a sublime body made possible through his artistic manipulation of flesh. As he does not have a stable appearance, he illustrates what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as *the grotesque body* in *Rabelais and His World* as an “unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming . . . it is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (24, 26). The emphasis is on the grosser aspects of humanity, and as Michelle Li notes in her discussion of Japanese representations of the grotesque in *Ambiguous Bodies*, “[t]he grotesque body bleeds, decays, is penetrated or is absorbed by another body or force, or is consumed” (43). Teren makes himself open to the world through the amputations he inflicts on himself, simultaneously making himself vulnerable and repellent “because he bit[es] off flesh and twist[s] muscle and bone to fling across the stage” and to the spectators themselves (*Circus-Turned* 4).

Nessa the Pin Woman also engages in the bodily absorption of foreign objects though her abilities differ from Teren's organic hybridity. She appears “glisten[ing] with the studs of needles, blades, and bits of glass” she voluntarily inserts into her body (5). Although the Ringmaster titillates the audience by suggesting that “she strips the skin of any man she touches . . . [so] that she has never felt another's embrace,” the objects themselves are aimed inward so that the pain that she is said to inflict upon others is actually inverted unto herself (5). Nessa is a pain-filled character rather than a pain-inflicting one, and the hearsay surrounding the character she embodies on stage belies her position within the circus as a nurturing figure.

However, Rowan the fire breather is not so much grotesque as an “other,” in that his appearance and innate abilities as a performer distinguish him from his peers because he does not repulse his audience. Rather, as “*the man whose veins run liquid fire*,” Rowan encapsulates an innate “otherness,” being fire incarnate as his touch burns the objects and those around him regardless of his intentions (4). Because of his liability to burn indiscriminately, he is also an “other” within the circus itself and must be isolated from the other performers, occupying a permanent space within public view as he must sleep away from the circus camp in the open space of the fields they travel through. His lack of any physical abnormality also marks him as different from his peers, and the ease with which he is able to interact with those outside the circus complicates his identity as a circus “freak.” He is neither truly grotesque enough to be a part of the circus nor “normal” enough to be integrated into society outside the Pale. This dual

identity is similar to, but of a different nature than Carina's, as the siren has lived both outside and within the circus.

Outside the Pale where she was born, Carina “passes” in society as a marginal figure who is able to exist without being branded as a “freak” in the same way that those in the circus are called “freaks.” Although her affinity to water, enchanting voice, and webbed fingers (which her mother cuts away at birth) mark Carina as siren-like, she has lived a supposedly normal life outside the Pale—a privilege the other performers are denied at birth. This experience as a “gawk” gives her the ability to compare her pre-circus life to life within the circus and informs her belief that she is not truly like the circus performers when she first encounters them. She considers herself different, but not “freakish” nor grotesque enough to be labeled as such, because “freakishness” in the world of *Circus-Turned* is generally designated at birth.

Carina officially becomes an “other” when her siren husband Morgen enhances her existing “otherness” so that she physically becomes grotesque via the emergence of her sentient dress. In lieu of working legs, Carina's dress provides the mobility that she needs while using her body as a host to survive. As a sort of parasite, the dress is not quite Carina, as it does not always act according to her will, but it does respond as a grotesque prosthetic when its objective of being in water is fulfilled or in the process of being fulfilled. The nail in Carina's forehead is also a grotesque reminder of her “otherness.” Aside from the fact that Carina does not die, which in itself is bizarre, the nail is an object that lobotomizes, or dulls her emotions. Upon its removal, Carina experiences an emotional flood as well as a physical manifestation of this outflow that she cannot control—at one point she almost decimates a village—and not until the nail is lodged into her forehead again does she return to a stable, or manageable state. Yet Carina treats these physical abnormalities as an affliction rather than extension of her body, and because she sees herself as a victim, she continuously denies her association with the other performers.

## II. Fictional Representations of Circuses – Performance and Social Order

The Circus's grotesqueness is historically rooted in the freak shows of the Western circus, specifically those of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period was prominent for using human performers and their unique abilities as a core of circus performance in lieu of the equestrian acts of the circus in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the freak show was a component of the circus, its role



was not foregrounded as a main attraction, so I used it as a departure point upon which to expand in *Circus-Turned*.

In replacing the staple trick acts<sup>7</sup> of the “traditional” circus with human oddity acts in the Circus, I also chose to exclude the menagerie (not to be confused with the “menagerie” glass house in *Circus-Turned*) of exotic animals like bears, lions, and elephants. This maintains the story's focus on the performers themselves, and more importantly, reiterates the Circus's status as a ragtag circus lacking the means to support such “frivolous” spectacles. As the function of the circus within the Pale is to act as a supply train, it would be impractical for a group that has difficulty keeping its own members alive to be able to have and maintain predatory/impractical animals in an antagonistic environment where the performers themselves are already being hunted by the often-alluded-to hounds.

As the Circus is geared toward fantastic realism rather than historical realism, my concept of a circus of the grotesque is in closer conversation with the more spectacular circuses depicted in the novels *Geek Love*, *The Night Circus*, and *The Electric Michelangelo*. As my process was mainly focused on the fantastical elements of these fictional circuses, I am excluding the latter novel from this analysis as the story was based on the real-life Coney Island amusement park in the 1940's—yet I used it as a reference when I needed a more realistic perspective of freak shows and the interactions within and outside this world of “otherness.” The common trait these three fictional circuses share is that they all exist outside the realm of normalcy by invoking a “second world.” What drew me to these circuses in particular was each author's execution of the spectacle and its function and role in the settings of their novels.

Because the performers in *Circus-Turned* transform in ways that require magic, I initially thought that the Circus's premise would resemble that of *The Night Circus's* Le Cirque des Rêves. However, as the story developed, I realized that my idea of magic for the Circus did not stem from an ethereal outside source as it does for Le Cirque des Rêves' illusionists Celia and Marco. Rather, the magic in *Circus-Turned* originates from the physical realities of the performers' bodies. On the surface level, such transformations appear magical to an outsider, yet the magic is just a natural manipulation of the body afforded to the performers via their biology.

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<sup>7</sup> The trick acts I refer to are acts based on skill rather than “freakishness,” such as horse-riding, acrobatics, juggling, balancing, and so on.

Unlike the limitless ends to which magic can be used in *Le Cirque des Rêves*, the Circus's performers are limited to the magical transformations that their bodies are able to offer.

The distinction between “magical biology” and conjuring magic led me to consider Binewski's *Carnival Fabulon* in *Geek Love* as a stronger referent, as the Binewski children underwent their own transformations in Crystal Lil's womb as a result of her and her husband Al's pre-natal experiments. The Binewski children are born as anomalies and cannot undo the process that marks them as “other.” Although the manipulative son Arty later devises a surgery to separate his conjoined sisters Elly and Iphy, the results are traumatic, leaving Iphy in a near vegetative state while Elly tries to keep the body she shares with Iphy alive. This “magic” is irreversible, unlike what the performers in *Circus-Turned* are able to do (to an extent).

As for the execution of the performances in *Le Cirque des Rêves* and Binewski's *Fabulon*, the Circus departs from both circuses in that its performances are raw and have no finesse. The unpredictable nature of the performances and the intention to disgust rather than inspire a sense of wonderment or idolization makes the Circus more of a space to release the tension between performers and audience. Although the performers regard their audience with strained tolerance, like the Binewskis do, the Circus's performers provide entertainment with a different intention and are straightforward about their agenda. As the Ringmaster says, “the crowd can't be left wanting, can they?” (5)

Building on this notion of disgusting entertainment, the Circus's performances represent the performers' reactions against their own persecution. They exult in their otherness in a space sanctioned by those who shun them. Here, the audience's reaction to the grotesqueries played out in the ring is a laughter reminiscent of “cold” Carnival.<sup>8</sup> The Circus symbolizes an “authorized transgression, framed by the surrounding order in time and place,” a space agreed upon by performers and audience to be “safe” to play out these conflicts under the veneer of entertainment (Hyman and Malbert 75). However, the space is not necessarily safe because no one can enforce that agreement. Once outside the circus tent, the behaviors of the audience and circus folk revert to supposed normalcy as the audience regains their power as oppressors of the performers, while the latter can no longer act out in their grotesque ways for fear of losing their

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<sup>8</sup> “Cold” Carnival as being a “blend of grotesquerie and satire . . . in an irrational, disorderly atmosphere” that lacks the conviviality of traditional carnival (Hyman and Malbert 76).

privilege in traveling outside the Pale.

### III. Conflicts between “Other” Performers

Offstage, but still within the private world of the Circus, there are also conflicts between the performers themselves. Not all performers are equal, as there is a hierarchy based on the length of time the performers have been in the circus as well as the amount of control they have over their grotesque bodies. The archetypes, or the “old timers” as Rowan explains to Carina, determine the Circus's route outside the Pale and maintain the delicate balance between the circus folk and gawks by negotiating and “policing” their own people (*Circus-Turned* 16). This “policing” is seen when the archetypes agree to take Rowan to the council for guidance after his accidental burning of the main tent results in a riot between performers and audience. Carina shares Rowan's position at the bottom of the Circus's social order. Her newness to the grotesque not only makes her dangerous to others, but her recent transformation distinguishes her from the conventional “other” where freakishness is inherited.

Other interpersonal dynamics that emerge from the Circus's role as a traveling circus highlight some similarities with the Roma, in that both groups are nomadic with a history of persecution. Yet even though the performers of the Circus are joined in their “otherness,” the circus departs from the Roma's idea of community under siege from outside forces. The unique characteristics of each performer mark them as distinct from one another—as in the case of Rowan who is an indiscriminate fire hazard. It is not until Carina is introduced that Rowan is able to form a bond with an “other.” As the siren has the opposite effect of Rowan's abilities in that she, or rather her sentient dress, douses everything in water, she negates any possibility for Rowan to set anything or anyone on fire. Other circus folk who do not share Carina's abilities must maintain their distance from the fire breather out of self-preservation. Group solidarity can only be maintained to a certain extent within this world as the circus folks' individual grotesqueries are not always attuned to each other. There is a need for community, but there is also a need for isolation for the safety of the group.

### IV. Gender and Embodiment

Although the convenience of Carina and Rowan's bond has a strong possibility of leading

toward a romantic relationship, I chose to have them remain platonic as I did not want to foreground a heteronormative relationship in this narrative of grotesque bodily “otherness.” Rather, I wanted to rework gender by complicating the bodily realities of the characters. For example, Carina's husband Morgen is a siren, a man set in a traditionally feminine mythological role. He lulls his victims to their deaths with his voice, a nonphysical, nonmasculine violence as opposed to Teren's gutting or Rowan's burning. He is also obsessed with beauty—another trait associated with femininity—killing beautiful women in the hopes of “stealing” their beauty to enhance his own. And the aesthetic similarity between his long dress-like coat and Carina's dress aligns his figure with that of his wife's body. As Morgen adopts characteristically feminine-attributed traits, his actions imply that he doctors his appearance for the male gaze despite his heterosexual preference in marrying Carina.

Teren himself also troubles the concept of maleness as he is not quite a “man” in the sense that he intentionally has an incomplete body which he accessorizes and swaps out with parts that have grotesque aesthetic functions. He has a different sort of “beauty” in mind and frequently changes his body to accommodate his visual experimentation. He is not concerned about how masculine he is; rather he seems to complicate his masculinity, as implied when he is first introduced as a changeling and one of the reactions he elicits from the men in the audience during his “gutting” is: “You think he can do that with his cock?” (4). The audience questions whether Teren can be a man without his genitals, yet still refers to him with the pronoun “he.” Although it is not clear whether he sexually disables himself, the question of what parts constitute male and female gender identity are in play. It is also evident that Teren is not always seen as a man, implied by his childhood friend Lucas's comment, “Now, this is the prettiest I've ever seen you” when he sees Carina and mistakenly thinks that she is another form of Teren's (39). By disabling parts of himself, Teren enables a fluidity that breaks the concept of a strictly defined gendered body

However, despite Morgen's and Teren's effeminate leanings, they are both inherently male, and their violence upon Carina was an aspect of the novella that I had difficulties in portraying. The initial act of pounding the nail into Carina's forehead by Morgen and later the repeated insertion of the nail into her head by Teren and Rowan throughout the narrative are both intimately violent acts. Although violence accompanies aspects of the grotesque in such an

environment, the repetition of violence against a woman by the men she perceives (at some point) as protector figures is problematic. Teren, Rowan, and to some extent Nessa—though it is questionable whether she feels this way after her first meeting with Carina—view this act as necessary for Carina's well-being as a fellow grotesque. Yet the act represents not only a physical violence, but also an implied sexual violence upon the siren. Carina's desire to be rid of the nail throughout *Circus-Turned* is justified as it is not only a physical reminder of Morgen's violation of her, but also prevents her from becoming “whole” as an unrestrained grotesque figure. When Rowan helps Carina remove the nail, Teren threatens the younger man away from further helping, or encouraging Carina to help herself. In Teren's defense, the changeling's desire to keep Carina under control is related to the safety of the circus folk. He is not trying to control the siren herself, but the power that she is capable of unleashing and incapable of controlling. Violence is the only answer Teren has to Carina's problem, and his hesitance to try other solutions risks the safety of their grotesque community.

Carina's passivity and reluctance to defy Teren risks making her seem like a stereotyped victim according to traditional gender norms. She is seduced and betrayed by Morgen who is reminiscent of the Gothic husband,<sup>9</sup> an aristocrat of mysterious origin, dark, threatening, an alpha male who takes control of his young wife. When Morgen temporarily leaves the narrative, he is replaced by Teren, a man whose bodily characteristics are similar to Carina's husband, and the cycle repeats itself via the insertion of the nail. Carina's betrayal by her husband calls upon the fairy tale elements of Bluebeard, and her role as the young wife to a mysterious older male figure in this context places her as a victim of violence. Paralleling the fairy tale's conclusion, Carina regains her freedom, her husband is killed—in this case the nail is returned to Morgen in the same way it has violated Carina—and the mark the victim is given by her husband remains with her as a reminder. However, unlike the fairy tale, Rowan helps Carina heal her wound by cauterizing the opening with a gentle breath of fire. It is not an action that ends with the male's help, as he tells her, “It won't go away, but maybe it'll heal now”—the rest of the healing lies with Carina (80).

Though Carina sometimes seems surrounded by male voices, Nessa exerts an influence

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<sup>9</sup> The conventional Gothic figures Margaret Atwood used in *Lady Oracle* provided me with a basis for Morgen's Gothic leanings.

upon her despite the Pin Woman's lack of a literal voice. I was initially concerned that Carina's voice would be isolated as the only female voice in the story, yet Nessa's interactions with the other performers reveal that her ability to communicate is not hindered by her lack of speech. For example, when Carina first arrives at the Circus, Teren has Nessa introduce the siren to the circus folk because he does not see her muteness as a handicap. She speaks via signing, and the direct translation of her "speech" is placed in italics for the reader's clarification. However, in addition to her lack of human speech, Nessa's physical characterization as a hulking woman who wears hound skins runs the risk of her appearing animalistic—an unintentional "beauty and the beast" contrast with Carina that may reinforce the differences between the two women. This assumption is countered by Nessa's role among the circus folk as a caretaker when they take Carina to her for healing after she is assaulted by the villagers. The Pin Woman even goes so far as to insert a nail into her own forehead to make Carina feel less "freakish" when Teren points out that the siren is no different from the rest of the circus folk. According to Rowan, the Pin Woman embodies an unconventional beauty in the scene in which Morgen compares her to a female gawk. Rowan recalls "the tiny stitches Nessa had made in his fire eaten shirt with those sharp hands and thought how careful she was threading and patching the ashen holes" and tells the siren, "The circus has everything I need" (22).

## V. Violence

On a macro scale, the interpersonal dynamics of the Circus are influenced by the Purge, a cyclical culling of the Pale's inhabitants that occurs every few generations. Although Morgen is the defined antagonist of the Circus, the Purge itself is an antagonizing event that pervades the everyday lives of the performers via the hounds that hunt them. The hunts are styled after the Wild Hunt in Breton mythology, and this choice of using a supernatural model returns to the notion of the "magic" that pervades the world of *Circus-Turned*. The hounds occupy a position of control over the Circus outside the Pale, but their initial introduction by a gawk aligns their malevolence with the circus: "*When I hear the hounds, I go home, keep the children away from the windows. They hunt children for sport . . . No one escapes the hounds*" (1). Although the hounds enact violence upon the circus and can be perceived as bestial representations of the violence the gawks desire to enact upon the performers, the destruction which the hounds are

said to enact upon the townspeople marks them as ambivalent figures whose function is twisted by those who use their presence to further their agenda. Because the hounds' mythologized quality identifies them as “other,” the gawks link this identification to the Circus; the circus becomes a scapegoat for the hounds' destruction and the hounds themselves solidify the hearsay surrounding the circus so that the circus itself is further ingrained in the villagers' minds as a threat. From the circus folk's perspective, the hounds are indirectly linked to the townspeople as the beasts are seen as regulatory figures that are used to keep the Circus in check. The hounds maintain a cycle of blame between the performers and gawks, and their role as instigators and creators of conflict helps to escalate the tensions between the two groups.

Like the hounds, the council in the Pale's capital are also figures of control, ambivalent in their allegiance as they provide guidance to the Circus, arranging the circus's movement outside the Pale, but also regulate and pass judgment on their own. The members of the council are “freaks” like the performers, but their identities are hidden to further separate them from their own people. They condemn Carina to death and Rowan to isolation because the two pose a threat to the order within the Pale and undermine their authority.

However, the story lacks a principal threat that is of representative of normative society. Although the villagers are not directed by an authority figure that maintains social order, they perpetuate and reinvent prejudice against the “other.” Hence my intention was to illustrate that this conflict is not the result of any one person, but the shared mindset of many.

The question of who performs the culling remains unanswered as the challenges the Circus faces are not meant to be overcome. This is not a story in which the “others” finally become the heroes, defeat their oppressors, and right evil in the world. Rather, the performers do not exhibit any higher ambitions for their community outside their initial role as a supply train for those within the Pale. As the cullings occur “naturally” within the timeline of their world, the circus folk view them as inevitable—the best they can do is survive and pick up the pieces afterward. The point is not to show heroics, but the less glamorized actions that a marginalized people undertake to help their own. In the face of eventual death, how do they keep their community together? What bonds them? How do they negotiate hardship knowing that they cannot overturn the inevitable? Hence the narrative displaces the Purge with Morgen, who is a more immediate and concrete threat to the Circus. However, having the Purge as a backdrop to

Morgen's antagonism does not lessen the importance of the event. Rather, as the Purge has happened before and the outcome is predictable, Morgen variegates the conflicts within this specific cycle of culling and provides a more relevant, even intimate connection to the Circus's current performers.

Here, I want to clarify that Morgen and the Purge are driven by separate motives, only sharing the objective of disposing of the “other.” Morgen himself is an “other,” but wants to disassociate his “freakishness” from the Circus's “freakery” as he perceives his “otherness” not as grotesque but as a desirable quality predicated on beauty. Yet placing Morgen, another grotesque, as the only well-defined antagonist in the story runs the risk of having the cullings become an internal problem that isolates those within the Pale from the outside world. The Purge, then, serves to balance Morgen's role as an antagonist as this “official” culling is sanctioned by society outside the Pale as a way to keep the population of the “other” in check while reminding them of their place in the social structure of this outer society that governs them.

## VI. Setting and Style

Aside from the hostile inhabitants of the world in *Circus-Turned*, I wanted the landscape itself to be an extension of the hardships the performers must adapt to rather than overcome in their survival. In fairy tales, the forest is treated as a liminal space of refuge, danger, or even a combination of the two, where the character undergoes a transformation to complete his/her journey. For *Circus-Turned*, a forest was not a viable option for the setting, as the Circus's status as a public scapegoat entails that the circus must always have an audience—hence it must always be in the public eye and cannot be hidden, even temporarily, as this would imply rebellion or resistance. In defining the environment for the Circus, I had to consider other liminal spaces where human intervention is minimal and an aura of the unknown remains. The moors of Northern Europe emerged as a strong candidate as it is mainly open shrubland, uncultivated due to its acidic soil, and a likely place for the “other” to be exiled to. The bleak, wet landscape has an abundance of “unwanted” vegetation, similar to the performers themselves, and is a refuge by default because it cannot be tamed. In a way, the performers are not only urban scavengers, scavenging human detritus—as implied by an unidentified speaker in the introduction to *Circus-*



*Turned*: “I’m out of work when they come. Can’t bury anyone with that lot around, always digging the bodies up right after”—but the environment forces them to become scavengers of nature as well, finding “beauty” in decay (1).

In terms of structure, *Circus-Turned* is separated into short narrative sections reflective of a screenplay due to my undergraduate training in film and animation. Although the cutting and rearranging of scenes representative of this stylistic choice contributes at times to a spatial and temporal dissonance, the “snapshots” reflect the fleeting nomadic lifestyle that the Circus’s performers lead. The events that are relayed to the reader are inconsistent in terms of pacing—some scenes are stretched out while others are brief to emphasize the performers’ stressed mentality. These snapshots condense the essential themes of the scenes, while also providing a path to guide the reader along the fluid timeline in *Circus-Turned* where the days are almost indistinguishable from one another. The timeline itself is reflective of the environment as occupying a sort of limbo, where time is pushed forward by the events that occur. Time itself is not an integral part of the story, as the performers have no need of knowing individual days. Seasons are the only indications of time passing as it relates to the Circus’s duty to supply those within the Pale with food to last the winter. Time is only relevant to survival.

The interludes woven into the narrative provide breaks from the overarching plot while enriching it with an extra layer of characterization. The perspectives these interludes share with the reader are at times from the villagers themselves, or that of the performers in their pasts. Though I set the world against the Circus, I did not want the narrative to be a one-sided story about the victimized “other.” The voices of the villagers humanize the Circus’s oppressors, and in doing so, complicate the villagers’ status as purely malevolent beings. Their voices provide another perspective that, in their eyes, justifies their actions against these outsiders. In addition to the villagers’ voices, the snippets into the performers’ backgrounds help to contextualize the varied prejudices the performers were raised with. Since the interludes are not limited by the linear timeline of *Circus-Turned*, they provide a transition between sections that helps to enrich the reader’s understanding of the current action without interrupting the flow of the narrative.

During the process of writing these interludes and the larger story of *Circus-Turned*, I referred to Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* for her rich poetic style of description. The details of the characters and their personal stories solidify the “realness” of the narrative, but I

also wanted to avoid unnecessary digressions from the inclusion of too much information. In *Circus-Turned*, I restricted a poetical style of description to the parts of the narrative that needed extra sensory detail such as the circus performances. But I also used it in the calmer parts of the story—the little moments outside the circus tent—to develop the relationships between the characters. In contrast, the action sequences are lean in description to mirror the pace and tension of what is happening. I wanted to emphasize the contrast in style between the important events and the “ordinary” events and reverse their importance. Here, in *Circus-Turned*, the intricacy of “otherness” is found in the seemingly small, everyday events that are overlooked in the larger events of the story.

## Conclusion

*Circus-Turned* is my introduction to spectacle and to the possibilities in twisting the traditional function of institutions like the circus to question and explore bodily identity. Rather than romanticizing the “other,” I wanted to broach the issues associated with marginalized bodies by foregrounding the grosser aspects of the grotesque in the public space via entertainment. Using the circus's function as a “second world” akin to that of carnival, *Circus-Turned* became a way to explore the “other” using popular culture to introduce the normative to the non-normative and question the conventional aesthetics of human identity.

## Chapter 1. Circus-Turned

*How can you tell them apart from normal people?*

*You really don't know? They smell like the grave.*

*Is that it?*

*And—and a mark. They usually have a mark somewhere. About this big. I heard it looks like a crescent.*

*You never saw it for yourself?*

*No. My grandmother told me a long time ago.*

\*

*I'm out of work when they come. Can't bury anyone with that lot around, always digging the bodies up right after.*

*What for?*

*To put them to work in their shows, of course. Or eat them, I wouldn't know.*

\*

*I don't go to their shows. Don't even look at them. When I hear the hounds, I go home, keep the children away from the windows. They hunt children for sport. On horses with the hounds baying. They always get them. No one escapes the hounds.*

\*

On most nights, the town brims with light and sound and color. But tonight the streets are dark and hushed because the circus is coming to town. When they arrive, there is only the long winding caravan whose shadows wash high up on the brick walls. In the morning there will be spikes in the ground and then in the night the white billowing tents.

\*

Everyone knows the stories. The not-people born of lust and envy, glut and greed from whose lips come snakes and whose eyes chill coals in grates. Whenever they come with their caravan, people disappear. Or are changed, somehow. Everyone knows that, yet in the night they go to the fields where the circus is to see the rumors come to life.

\*

*Those stories, they're not real, mama. I saw those people. They look just like Sam and Ana.*

*Where are Sam and Ana?*

*I don't know.*

## Chapter 2. Opening Night

The pit is dark when the gawks are led into the tent and seated. Not until the stands are brimming and the canvas flaps closed does a light flicker on from above to reveal its center: a giant wheel spinning on its side where a dirty white egg tall as a man balances on the iron hub. The egg turns, and turns, and when nothing happens, the murmuring in the stands grow louder, drowning out the delicate crack of the egg's thin shell. A sharp pop follows, then smoke. The Ringmaster's torso emerges from the fracture. The drum line crescendos. The crowd quiets. *Ladies and Gentlemen*, his voice booms.

### Chapter 3. Changeling

His name was, is, Teren, sometimes. Don't believe him when he says otherwise. A body swapper, a changeling, he shed his fingers and arms, toes, and legs and then rebuilt himself of foreign flesh so that not even he remembered his true form. Never the same, certainly not to the gawks whose claps of *freak, freak, freak* masked the sounds of retching from the weak of heart as he stripped parts of himself away in the harsh light.

Didja see that? He popped the fucker right off!

You think he can do that with his cock?

That was the most disgusting thing I've ever seen.

Animal. A fucking animal.

Because he bit off flesh and twisted muscle and bone to fling across the stage, grist to slop the arena and blood to paint the stands. The same blood and flesh like you and me, they say. He got them from yesterday's crowd, a real sick fuck.

His undressing takes thirty beats of a heart at rest, but it seems longer, certainly to those who call him *freak*. As Teren hurls his last bits into the crowd, the Ringmaster nods from his egg, and the bandstand hammers out a tune while clowns crawl out from beneath the stands to pick up the organic mess with Bacchanalian glee, all song and color and dance, with little mangy dogs that play fetch with the changeling's limbs. But hurry, hurry, because the rest is purged when the fire breather rains ash from above. You can smell the petrol on him before you see his wild devilish grin, grease smeared around his eyes like a mask. *He is the man whose veins run liquid fire*, the Ringmaster's voice booms over the roar of the flames. He is flammable, his body ignites with the lightest touch, and with his rods of iron, devil sticks, he spins fire from air and manipulates its form with caressing lips. The tent heats up, the smoke and rank smell of unwashed sweating skin upon skin upon skin in the stands choke up the most resilient of those who continue the chant of *freak*.

In between gasps for air, the men shout hoarsely for the women. They haven't come to ogle bastards.

Until now, the gawks have not noticed the moth women who crouch in the shadows of the tent's vaulted ceiling. They are seen once their droppings, white as their folded wings, splatter onto the men's heads. They leer down like gargoyles with powdered faces. Here are the women,

they chitter.

The Pin Woman lowers herself from the ceiling by large hooks embedded in her hulking back. From head to toe her black skin glistens with the studs of needles, blades, and bits of glass swallowed whole. Her movement corresponds to a trilling symphony of sounds from her embellishments, which, falling, leave a trail of pins at her feet. It is said she strips the skin of any man she touches, so splintered she is of metal that she has never felt another's embrace, nor will she house anything but blades in her womb.

The Pin Woman walks from the pit skewered with spears, and the Ringmaster bellows at the orchestra once more. Keep up the pace, he screams, for the crowd can't be left wanting, can they? Who can forget the funambulist pygmies, hunchbacks, parasitic twins, and limbless wonders?

But there is not enough time to name them all, because the hounds are coming and the circus folk can hear them. They will pack their wagons and leave their campfires to smolder in the morning dew. The sun will shine on an empty lot, the town quiet once more.

## Chapter 4. Siren

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold.

The townsfolk called it suicide. Even though there were marks round her throat and her body bled dry on the river's bank, no one pointed to the manor crouched dark and heavy on the craggy hills. They drove an iron nail into her forehead and pushed her deeper into the water.

She was the innkeeper's daughter and before that the goat herder's daughter. And before that no one knew.

Now she is the hungry ghost. All men beware her voice.

\*\*\*

The circus folk find her floating down the river at dawn, face up to the sky, her head a tangle of reed and rush trailing the pliant limbs of willow near the water's edge. She disturbs the clowns in the middle of their washing. When one of them, goaded by the others, pulls the iron nail from her forehead and her blue-lidded eyes open wide, she screams to see the swollen appendages and mangled wigs of the clowns whose faces are melting like candle wax. Her voice is a high wailing that tears at the clowns' ears before they are dragged down one by one into the river's deep.

Calls for help resound through the camp. The others come, and it is difficult to see in the near darkness of early morning what is happening. The circus folk see the brightly hued heads and clothes of clowns thrashing about in the water, but they cannot see the reason why at first. Teren sees the young woman's dress, black, brown, churning darkness beneath the clowns—an inkbloom welling in the current around a pale face in the water. The black hole in her forehead oozes.

Get away, she screams as those behind Teren have in their hands the fading white of a dismantled tent. She leaps down river. The clowns bob up.

Although the sun has barely risen and the mists lie heavy on their skin, the circus folk are not the only ones awake. The gawks are already about the fields, pulling the harvest from the earth. They see her splashing in the water, they think she is in need of help, but when they see the water turn dark around her, see her come from the circus camp upstream, they are not so kind as the others.

The younger children run along the shore throwing stones at the growing twisting shadow



under the water. At the shallow bend in the river, the men come down and drag her out and kick and tear at what looks like a long train of a dress split into writhing limbs that flop and scatter the stones under their feet. Shouts. They get a rope around her neck so she cannot scream, another around her legs pulled tight so it looks as if she is a fish ready to be gutted. Freak! Whore! Not so safe outside your circus tent now, are you?

Before her face is pushed to the ground, she sees the sheen of metal. Pain spreads over her body as she is stabbed, and no matter how she urges her legs to move, she only feels her dress move over her like a frenzied wave. And then, she is pulled up, enveloped in canvas as the circus folk surround her in a blur of color and dizzying movement. The farm hands shout.

You're on our ground.

You attacked one of us.

It's payback for when you freaks took my goats.

And the time before when they killed Jean's sheep.

That wasn't us.

We saw your dogs in the field. There were prints.

Little dogs, three legged dogs, they don't make prints that size.

Stop it. They won't hear us. Let's go.

We'll leave tonight.

## Chapter 5. Interlude

They were all volunteers from the Pale. A ragtag group of freaks who were better suited to making a spectacle of themselves under a circus tent than live on a remote scrubland churning the earth of stone. To those left behind, the circus meant survival because when the volunteers returned, their hands brought something other than stone to fill their stomachs. But to those outside the Pale, the circus was a scapegoat when things did not go right.

## Chapter 6. Pin Woman

It takes some time before the circus folk find the nail that was pulled from Carina's forehead. The flesh around the open hole moves like putty and an indent forms around the mouth where Nessa the Pin Woman pushes down on it. Old blood, brownish black, seeps out from it. Can't any nail do, someone asks. Nessa shakes her head as if to say, *no, it has to be the one. Sh, sh, shhh*, she holds Carina's head still between her palms.

*Here it is.* The nail is presented, wiped clean on someone's sleeve, polished up to a soft glint in Rowan's fire light.

*Hold her down.*

Carina screams.

Humming, Nessa cares for Carina's wounds because they have no doctor. Her fingers nurse the wounds with a needle she takes from the constellations of hundreds dotting her body. Carina makes no sound now because the iron nail juts from her forehead. Nessa strokes the side of her face, *sleep now.*

## Chapter 7. Awakening

Carina hears a squelching, and the first thing she sees is Teren's hands, solid pieces of flesh bereft of fingernails, wrinkles, hair, or marks of any kind, kneading a mound of clay. The water around her clouds with mud as he dunks his hands into the tub she's sitting in.

When she shifts, spilling water onto the floor, he says, The tub's small, I know. But your lower half, he wiggles his fingers at her, wasn't fussy about it. You dragged yourself in here earlier.

But I can't move, Carina says.

You're moving now. Teren flicks the hem of her dress hanging from the basin's edge back into the tub.

I can't feel my legs.

Your legs? They were working fine earlier. Gave the clowns a good wallop in the river.

Carina pushes aside the folds of her dress in the basin, fold after murky fold, until she sees her legs limp at the bottom of the tub. When she looks at Teren, her gaze shifts behind him. Among the other shapes she can barely make out in the weak light, there are thin legs, shapely legs, women's legs hanging like trophies on the walls.

Oh, *human* legs, Teren says.

Carina's mouth opens and the changeling claps a hand over her mouth.

Don't act like a gawk. Those are my legs. It's part of my act.

Carina shakes her head.

This is a circus. Look, he takes a leg off its mount and holds it out to her, foot first, See, it's not real. Carina flinches when he pushes it at her, touches the foot with a finger, feels the skin—soft, smooth, cold—and pulls quickly away.

It's real, she says, her dress agitating, pushing water over the lip of the tub.

Hey, hey, Teren puts the leg back. He looks at the nail in Carina's head, which begins to bleed.

She feels the blood, feels for the wound and scratches at iron, flinching.

Why are you surprised? This shouldn't be new to you. He taps on the nail.

\*

The caravan stops when daylight approaches. They form a large ring with their wagons

and tether the horses in the center so they can't be run off by wild animals. Teren sleeps on his workbench. As more light comes in through the window, Carina sees that the forms hanging on the walls are not just legs, but other parts of bodies, from humans, beasts, and some that she thinks could only have come from dreams. They are arranged in no particular order, hung like puzzle pieces so that the wall resembles a butcher's.

She remembers the women hanging from her husband's walls and the red mark on her forehead. The tight love noose of her hair twisted in knots around her neck. Fingernails digging into her scalp. Cold, sucking, the mud opening to kiss her face.

The fringes of her dress slide over the edge of the tub and Carina pulls herself out with her arms. She staggers, sees the fabric mesh itself tightly around her slack legs until it pushes her up, moving her legs for her. Arms held out to her sides for balance, Carina reels across the small room and opens the door.

## Chapter 8. Interlude

Rowan stood behind the others, a little boy, dirty, dusty, smelling of smoke, red-eyed, red lips open in awe. The two men from the capital were asking for volunteers. There was talk of another circus being put together. If they wanted supplies from the outside, they had to send one of their own. Who will go? No one was listening. It had been done before and those who went outside were torn apart by the hounds. There were other things that hunted people like them out there. What happened to the other circus, someone asked. There were murmurs from the crowd.

I'll go, he said, but no one heard him.

A middle aged woman stepped forward, and a man old enough to be Rowan's grandfather.

The men led them to a field outside the village and had each of the volunteers hold out their hands, palms facing up. A fire was burning, and in the ashes was an iron rod with a flat piece of metal at its glowing tip. They had ignored Rowan until now, and when he held out his hand to be branded like the others, they laughed.

You won't make it into the circus, little one. You don't look any different from the rest of them out there.

Rowan felt his face flush. I want to go, he said.

They don't need children. Go home.

I'm a freak too, though. See? He opened his mouth wide, the gaps where his milk teeth had fallen out a dark red, breath hot. The man gripped his shoulders and turned him round.

I'm going. He tried pushing the man's hands away and when he didn't budge, Rowan bit down hard. The man yelled, and in the place of teeth marks, Rowan left a patch of blisters on his skin.

You're the one who burnt that house down?

Among other things, the woman who came with them interrupted.

Rowan felt his eyes sting. He looked at the brand in the man's hand, nodded.

Before he was to depart with the others, they said he needed a mark to be identified on the outside and the brand wouldn't burn him. Rowan nodded again. The man took out a knife.

We'll need to carve it into you. Hand out.

## Chapter 9. Fire Breather

Rowan squeezes through the tight ring of the wagons, absently rubbing the scar on his palm. He runs his fingers over the white ridges, circles it with his thumb. In the daylight without the petrol or grease coating his skin, the soot and smoke, he looks like any other gawk save for the poor condition of his burned, peeling lips. He wanted to go back to a small village they passed along the way. Too small for any shows, so they passed it. But in their rush to leave the last town, they couldn't restock. The circus needed supplies before they came to their own villages in the Pale.

He approaches a farm on the outskirts of the village and asks one of the children climbing on the low fence if he can speak to his father. The child runs off. He counts the sheep they have grazing in the number of coats they made, blankets, socks, and from these things, how many people kept warm during the winter before the circus returned.

The farmer comes with another child this time. They look at him differently in the day, no hard looks, a hand extended in greeting. He asks the farmer if he would sell his sheep, one, or maybe two. The amount is more than he has. How about this, he shows him the coins in his hands, and labor for the day. For one.

\*

Carina follows the young man to the farm, watches him talk to the child and then the farmer. The farmer shakes his head when he asks something. He points behind the fence, and then he juts his chin out at her. The young man turns, looks at Carina's legs outlined by the clinging wet fabric of her dress. He gestures at her to come.

She's my sister, she hears him say.

What happened to her? His eyes shift from the bandages on Carina's arms to her drenched legs. Why are you wet?

We were robbed on the road, Rowan pauses, my sister was hurt badly. He puts his arm around her shoulders, pulls her close enough that Carina can smell the petrol on his skin.

I fell, Carina adds. In a pond, she points, back there.

She hasn't been herself.

The man looks at Carina, then Rowan. You work for one day, and the sheep's yours.

Rowan jumps over the fence and helps Carina over when he sees her wobble on the rails.

Behind the farmer's back he motions at her head, and mouths to her to hide the nail. Carina sweeps her hair across her forehead.

\*

At the end of the day, they return to the circus camp with a sheep between them.

What's your name?

Carina.

I'm Rowan.



## Chapter 10. Howl

The hounds are said to be the offspring of titan's blood, with coarse fur black as any moonless night. Their eyes are speckled with bits of red and gold. If sprigs of yellow monkshood bloom from their spittle, it means that the hounds are sure to return. When you hear that, find a juniper tree and climb it.

\*\*\*

Teren knocks on the egg once and puts his ear against the shell and listens. Carina can almost hear a scratching from within its walls before the top cracks open. A balding man pokes his head above the break, eyes sunken, cheekbones sharp against the slack skin on his face. He looks at Carina expectantly.

Lost your nail?

Carina frowns, looks to Teren, and he shrugs at her.

When she says nothing, Teren says, I'm going to have Nessa show her around.

Who is that, Carina asks Teren when they leave the wagon.

The Ringmaster.

Why's he in an egg?

Why were you in my tub?

It just happened.

Same thing for him, I suppose.

The Pin Woman is polishing her silverware when they see her, and before Carina asks about her glinting skin, Teren says, She can't talk, and adds, She's the one who stitched you up. Nessa puts her needles aside and takes Carina to meet the circus folk during their practice. High above in the tent the pygmies pause in their tumbling and spinning on the crisscrossing wires to peer shyly at the siren. The moth women brush her skin lightly with their antennae, smelling her saltiness. For each group they visit, there is a constrained curiosity the circus folk express when they meet her—as if they want to ask Carina something beneath the light frippery they say to her. But despite being one of them, she looks away, fidgets, does not answer their polite questions.

Nessa signs to Carina, asking if she feels unwell.

Is everyone like this?

The Pin Woman tilts her head, shrugs.

Never mind, Carina says. I just need water. Can we go back?

\*

She sits in the wash basin, her dress unfolding like ink in the clear water until the fabric turns a dark brown like the clay Teren uses to make his body parts. Nessa points at her arms and Carina holds them out to her so she can look at her stitches. The lips of her wounds gape open and closed in the water like little fish mouths.

Nessa motions at Carina's forehead, the nail that sticks out scabbed over with old blood.

Don't touch it, okay?

Nessa nods.

Carina lowers her head so Nessa can look at it and the Pin Woman breathes on it softly.

Isn't that my job? Rowan says. The young man Carina met at the farm stands in the doorway with a bottle in hand. It's for our welcome party, he says. Teren's out with the archetypes so he won't be back for a while.

Archetypes? Carina says.

The old timers.

Teren doesn't look that old.

Well, that depends on what he's wearing, Rowan says. Come on, I've got a show planned for you.

\*

Carina asks him if he was a part of the circus.

I'm here, aren't I?

I thought you just took care of the animals.

Everyone here's a freak. He waves his hand at her, scarred crescent white on his peeling skin.

What can you do?

The crackling of the fire is loud in Carina's ears and the flames that escape from Rowan's lips leap into the air between them. They collect in the clouds, a rose hued smoke roiling above them, rumbling gently. He drinks from the bottle, exhales, and the scenes above change,

flickering like lightning flashes. A light rain falls.

She doesn't give much thought to the faint howling until Rowan swallows the petrol he was to exhale.

What is it?

He motions at Nessa.

It's nothing. Get back to the camp, Rowan says. You remember the way?

Carina nods.

Don't wait up.

Carina reaches the camp the same time the howling washes over them all. The circus folk quiet, the fire is extinguished, and the crowd disperses around the camp, dismantling tents, packing away equipment, herding the livestock back to the wagons, quietly, quickly, so very quickly. Someone asks her where Rowan and Nessa are and she points.

Teren appears from one of the tents with the other archetypes, and he walks toward Carina, grabs her arm, and pulls her toward his wagon.

Stay out of the way, he says.

What's happening?

Can't you hear?

Carina sinks into the basin and feels a coldness creep into her limbs. Her dress wraps itself around her legs, squeezes gently. The walls shake.

\*

No one speaks of the night before, and Nessa does not appear in the morning by Carina's watery bedside to check her wounds. At the end of the day, Rowan does not show either. Teren comes and goes, and once, Carina asks him about Nessa.

You'll have to take care of yourself. She's busy.

What about Rowan?

He's not a doctor. At best, he'll burn you.

I mean where is he?

He's needed elsewhere.

Can I go outside?

No.

In the middle of the night, she smells something sickly sweet in the air. She lifts herself on the edge of the tub and peers out the half shuttered window. A large fire burns in the distance, a different kind of show meant for those in the circus.

## Chapter 11. Us

*Every so often, there are people who don't look like us that have to be taken to a place far away from the city. It's a place with a lot of fields. Far away. Farther than Sara's house. Yes, they have to live there because they don't look like us. That doesn't mean they are bad but we must never talk to them if we see them but to report them to the police. Do you remember what the police look like? They have two rows of buttons down their black coats and their boots are ever so shiny. We saw them talking to Daddy last night. They're here to make sure that the bad people aren't hiding under your bed so they can keep us safe. They have to put them back where they belong or they'll take you far away. The people in the big white tents? Mm, the funny people. No, they're bad, and you shouldn't talk to them. But you can watch them. They're supposed to make us laugh. But if you see them outside, don't let them see you. The hounds will take them home. It's part of life, sweetie. Don't worry, it'll pass soon.*

\*\*\*

When they move again, Carina asks Teren where the circus is going. As they move farther away from the towns, the country becomes more open, sparser now, darker, filled with coarse weed and scrub that prick at their legs. Teren looks up at her from his work bench where he's taking his shin apart to attach a cloven hoof long and curving where it touches the floor. He massages the flesh until it's pliable, and Carina hears a cracking sound. The Pale, he says. We're going home.

Not my home, Carina says. I don't belong there.

Teren frowns. Have you looked at yourself? He taps his forehead.

Later, she goes to Nessa's wagon to ask for a bandage. On the way up the caravan line, she notices that some of the wagons are hitched to the ones before, driver-less, the windows shuttered and dark. But amid the lonely creaking of wood there is a wagon that sounds like bells. On the outside, scrolled across its dun colored wall is lettering that spells out "menagerie." The windows are shuttered but she can hear crying within. She looks away and moves on. Nessa's wagon is a little bit ahead, the door inlaid with flecks of glass that glint in the waning light. Carina knocks.

*Are you hurt?* The Pin Woman says when Carina tells her why she's there.

For my head. I just want to cover it—the nail.

Nessa smiles gently at her. She takes a needle from her side and Carina watches the Pin Woman's skin slowly open and absorb the metal as she pushes it into her own forehead.

But you were born that way, Carina says.

Nessa's smile fades. She turns and limps into the small wagon, her hulking figure bumping against the table and chairs and trunks. There are large dog skins hanging from the rafters, and now Carina notices how sharp Nessa's teeth are when she tears a white sheet and gives the strips to Carina.

\*

Is everyone here from the Pale? Carina asks Rowan on one of their foraging trips. It didn't take her very long to learn the rhythms of the circus. No one strayed far from the circus camp, except Rowan.

Yeah.

What's it like?

Nothing good grows there. There's so much water running through the ground that it's almost a mud pit with stones. You wallow in mud so you'll be fine.

Carina wrinkles her nose. That's Teren. I told him to stop washing his hands in the tub. It's hard for me to keep it clean.

I'm joking.

He picks gorse, the yellow flowers bright against his purplish black stained fingers. There's a capital and villages surrounding. Not a real capital, he adds, just something better than the filth everyone's used to because it's on higher ground. It'll be a while before we get there. We have to see the border people first. They keep everyone inside safe.

From the hounds?

He nods.

Why do people like you live there?

Because we're dangerous. Easier to have us in one place when the Purge comes.

Carina's heard of that, from her mother, and the rumors. Rowan is the only one who says it so lightly.

Then why can the circus travel?

Ambassadors of goodwill. He takes the flowers from Carina's hand and tosses them.

That's not good for eating. You'll poison us all before our show tomorrow.

There's a show?

Our last one before the Pale. You can see what we do. And it's "us," not "you." You're one of us now.

## Chapter 12. Interlude

There was a man who lived of the water, whose hair was long and fine, seaweed-like, that trailed down his long coat in twisting strands. His skin was said to be as smooth as porcelain, that is, the parts that were not scarred where he'd dug his scales out with a blunt knife. His name was Morgen, and he was not to stay with the circus for long, Teren said when he first saw him perform.

He was a siren, but the songs that formed in his throat came out ugly and raw. The feeling born from it was of a mean adoration, and he was loved by women in a way that only a freak like him could be loved in the pit. Morgen said that was what made him different from Teren and the rest. He was not monstrous. He was noble, beautiful.

Why do you want to look like them? Rowan asked him.

Morgen sat at his dressing table, powdering, smearing, dabbing with creams. Rowan wondered why the man spent so much time hiding the scars when it would wash away in the many baths he took throughout the day. Morgen looked at Rowan's reflection in the mirror.

I want to live here, Morgen told him. So I have to look like them. He saw Rowan grimace. Nothing looks different about you. You could be one of them, if you wanted.

There's nothing to make me want to be like them, Rowan said. They're disgusting.

Morgen laughed, a little shrilly, his voice was higher than even Rowan's. Nothing? He pointed at a woman they both saw outside the window. Long curling hair framed her face, soft in the lantern light, her skin white and smooth as the porcelain horns protruding from Teren's body earlier that night before he'd ripped them off and bathed the crowd in red. Red as the woman's lips that looked like they were bleeding.

Rowan had seen her before, in the crowd when her soft lips stretched wide and shrieked at the trilling needles that dripped from Nessa's skin like water. Heard her say what a freak Nessa made of her hulking body, how could that beast do anything with her big, clumsy paws. And just before her performance, Rowan remembered the tiny stitches Nessa had made in his fire eaten shirt with those sharp hands and thought how careful she was threading and patching the ashen holes.

The circus has everything I need, Rowan said.

Morgen said Rowan was naive.



## Chapter 13. Lullaby

*Ladies and Gentlemen*, the Ringmaster's voice booms in the pit. The rotund figure spins in the dirty white shell of a pulpit as he addresses the crowd around them. Carina sits high above with the moth women who chitter around her. Best seat in the house, Rowan tells her before leaving to paint his face. He blows the moth women a mock kiss, lighting up the near darkness with his fiery breath. They hiss and spit at him as they pat down their wings, and he disappears down the ladder.

Teren opens the show by first opening up the stitches down his hunched back. A head erupts from the broken seams, eyes bulging, the mouth like a bellows opening and closing for air. Carina knows it's Teren controlling the muscles, but it looks live enough to climb out of him if it could. She is too high up to hear the intimate sounds of his body, but she sees the gawks' revulsion, sees them react in anger or fear when Teren slops his guts at them.

Teren's leftover blood bubbles black when Rowan takes up the end of the changeling's act. Amid the running and tumbling of the clowns and dogs who retrieve Teren's offal, he sends out his own fiery beasts to dance among them. The heat waves sway the pit so that Carina grips the beams around her. In the intricate framework that makes up the vaulted roofing of the tent, she is almost invisible to the gawks below until she hears a loud bang and the roof lights up and darkens. A moth woman trails fire as she falls, and the stands cheer. Then it lights up again and again, and the canvas catches fire.

Carina's scream announces her presence. The gawks point at her, a woman all in black, her voice drifting down, clear and heavy. Surely she can't be a monster too, they say. The freaks must've kidnapped her, someone shouts.

Rowan closes his hands and what fire is left in his palms smokes out. He runs to the tent's rigging to put out the fire but some of the gawks grab him, pull and tear at him. The crowd surges out of the stands at the rest of the circus folk, and Carina sees the Ringmaster topple in his egg.

Carina gathers up her dress and runs toward the burning hole in the roof. She looks down at Rowan, lost in the crowd, and she smothers the fire with the dripping folds of her skirt. Her hems writhe and steam under her hands, and the grip the dress has on her legs loosens so she falls on the scaffolding. But no one notices Carina—it seems as if the gawks have forgotten

about her as bodies become more entangled with each other in the scuffling below, blotches of red through the haze of smoke.

She breathes in deeply, about to shout, but instead releases a high pitched wail. Glass scraping against glass, consuming the shouts below. The gawks slump to the ground, the circus folk look up at Carina. When she sees Rowan making his way through the crowd, he's dripping blood, liquid fire.

When she stops, the others ask her what she's done.

The moth women flutter down to land on the bent backs of the audience, listening for breath.

Carina? Rowan says.

I don't know, I don't know.

Just like Morgen, the others say.

The Ringmaster's voice floats over the fallen crowd, It was her first performance, that's what, he says.

## Chapter 14. Interlude

The first time Rowan performed, it wasn't a performance. The crowd threw curses, flung rotting fruit at him because he couldn't make the fire burn hotter, burn higher. They'd paid for a show. The circus folk only had the one tent at the time and it was smaller than the one they have now. He didn't know what to do. His mouth was bitter with petrol but there was only smoke. He huffed. Nothing. A stone hit him on the side of his head. He staggered.

And then a shadow crossed in front of him. He could only see the man's back, but his left shoulder was larger than the other, skin keeled and lined with small spikes. The man raised his arm. Is this what you want? he shouted.

The man ripped off his fingers and threw them into the crowd. Rowan's legs collapsed from under him. The man didn't look back, he didn't have to, because under his coarse hair was a bloodshot eye blinking at Rowan. A mouth opened wide on the side of his head and jeered at the stands as he ripped off his forearm, blood spraying the air. The sounds were horrible. Cracking and slopping, like his father gutting rabbits. Rowan gagged.

When he was done, the man told Rowan to get up. I can't walk out by myself, the changeling said.

## Chapter 15. Burnaway

The cleanup is quick: the canvas is ripped off the tent, the scaffolding taken apart so that the slumbering gawks are the only markers of the circus's presence.

I don't know how long they're going to be like that, Carina says. What if they never wake up?

It doesn't matter. We won't be coming back anyway. That's another town off the circuit, Teren says. The changeling was outside the tent recovering from his act when the riot broke out, and by the time he returned fully-limbed, Carina had sung them all to sleep.

Teren carries away the moth woman who fell in Rowan's act, her body crumpled, arms and legs askew. Carina doesn't ask him why he doesn't bury her then. She sees him carry the moth woman to his wagon, the door closes.

\*

It was an accident, Rowan says to Teren. You know that. It just got out of control.

You were a child when you were out of control. I thought we were over that.

I can't even sleep indoors, he says. What makes you think I won't burn anything by accident?

The Ringmaster looks to Teren, looks back to Rowan. We'll ask the council. We'll find different arrangements.

And what, leave me out here to die? I should've burned everyone when I had the chance, those fucks.

## Chapter 16. The Pale

The edge of the Pale is marked by a jagged stone wall that winds up and down the coast. When she climbs on the the wagon's roof, Carina can see the fields beyond, slivered through with gray sky in still pools. The caravan makes a wide turn at a large gap marked by faded ribbons.

The mud sticks and pulls at the horses' hooves and wagon wheels so they move slowly into the interior. The villages they pass through on their first few days are empty. To Carina, they look the same, smell the same, sound the same as one another. Tiny houses clustering together in a creaking symphony of wood where voices should be.

\*

Why're you still with us? Rowan says to Carina. The fire breather's head rests on the edge of Carina's basin, bumping in time to the stones beneath the wagon's wheels.

I wasn't going to stay, Carina says, pauses. It's not safe for me out there on my own.

Because of the hounds?

Yeah.

You're not safe here either.

What do you mean? Carina sighs, cushions her hand between Rowan's head and the porcelain.

No, I mean the council. We're going to the capital to see them.

Are you going to be put on trial?

Something like that.

Carina's about to ask him how that makes it unsafe for her but says nothing.

It's about you too. They don't know what to do with you, he says. You're different.

I thought everyone here was different.

Freakish, yeah. You're something else 'cause you're not from around here. And, he pushes her hand away from him, you don't hear what everyone else says, but you're like someone who was with us before.

I heard them say "Morgen."

And the things he did when he was here?

I know what he did after. Carina points to her forehead. He's my husband.

\*

Once past the wall, Carina realizes that not everyone stays with the circus. Some people leave the caravan with hurried goodbyes, some leave silently.

Performing is voluntary, Rowan tells her, so once the circus returns to the Pale, those who don't want to go with them can go home with what food they earned from the outside. He waves his hand broadly.

Does anyone try to live on the outside?

If you want to die, Rowan says.

But Morgen's fine.

Seems so.

## Chapter 17. Interlude

The trouble began when the rumors spiked around a certain performer. This time it was the siren. Women started disappearing from the towns they camped near and it was said that Morgen did something with them, spirited them away somewhere. It could not be denied that as the circus had left the Pale, Morgen changed, became almost beautiful, but the circus folk assumed it was because he was like Teren. They were often seen together. The accusation was not new—Teren was always blamed for missing persons and livestock—so the circus folk were not as concerned when Morgen said he was not to blame. The hounds, they said among themselves, it was the hounds again. The archetypes set up watches, whomever they could spare during performances to watch at night for the beasts. If only they had looked within, they would have seen that for once, the rumors were true, or at least partly true. But they did not doubt their own people.

\*

He experimented with women, Carina says.

The day she saw the women hanging on the walls, Carina felt her voice shrink in her throat. The faces were still recognizable, if a little gaunt, hollowed and tinged blue by death, and their bodies twisted in unnatural shapes. That was Clara from the market who tossed rotted vegetables at Carina when she passed her stall, that was Diane who set her dogs on her in the fields, and the others she knew from the way they pointed at her and whispered, whispered, always whispering. They didn't dare go in the water.

This is how they want to see us, Morgen told her. His hands traced the edge of her shoulders, and she felt the webs of his fingers brush her skin.

Us? She said.

They would see you like this if they had the nerve.

Carina turned away from the scene—strange, how difficult it was to take her eyes from the tableau—and looked at his hands, then her own where between the fingers, thin bits of membrane remained from her infancy.

Her voice flooded her throat. It felt like she was drowning.

\*

Morgen disappeared after Rowan found the women's bodies. The ones that were not a

part of Teren.

It started when the siren asked Teren if he worked with real bodies.

Teren had a bucket of flesh in each hand, leftovers from the night's performance. Blood slopped over the edges to leave a red slug trail behind him. The soft flesh had already begun to harden and looked like pieces of broken crockery. Sometimes, he said. On certain occasions.

Can they be permanent?

It withers like any other living thing. It won't fix your scars.

I wasn't thinking of the scars. I wanted something more substantial.

The changeling looked at the dull scales flaking off Morgen's skin.

It's difficult to keep the living living. The pieces die off without their owner.

But this arm, Morgen grabbed his forearm. You've kept it for a while.

Some last longer than others, he said. This one's mine.

\*\*\*

What'll happen when that nail comes out? Rowan asks.

I don't know. Teren said I should leave it in.

Do *you* want to leave it in?

Carina looks at the tools lined up on Teren's workbench. No.

The nail does not move as easily as it had the first time. When they get it halfway out, Carina's arms stretched out against the tub for leverage, Rowan pulling with the pliers, Carina retches on the floor between them. The edges of her dress seep over the basin, onto the floor and up his legs, crawling, crawling, biting through the fabric of his clothes and into his flesh.

She covers her mouth, still heaving, except black threads, silk-like, pour out from the cracks between her fingers. Rowan backs up against the wall, kicking at the blackness that makes his feet stick to the floor.

Teren comes in, sees the black seeping up the walls, wavelike over the hanging arms and legs, hears the walls creak, takes a hammer from his work bench, and swings at Carina's forehead.

\*

You've caused enough trouble, Teren says to Rowan.

But she doesn't want it. You're forcing her to be like him.



So you were going to let her loose, like that, he points at Carina. And put everyone in danger. The siren is curled up in the basin with her dress, the long train of it wrapped around her legs. Her eyes are closed, and some blackness has dripped down her forehead to rest in the curve of her lips. He and Rowan shovel the black liquid out his door, down the porch steps to the growing pool of mud at its base.

She wasn't born that way. Morgen did something to her.

Teren stops shoveling. Then she can't go back to how she was before, he says.

Maybe she can.

She can't. She has to get used to being like us.

But Morgen left. She can just as easily leave us. I can leave too.

## Chapter 18. Crone Meat

The villagers cheer when the circus arrives. Carina looks from Teren's window as they pass through the dirt street. A little girl throws something at her and she ducks. It's just a flower, Teren says, dropping the wilted bloom in her hand.

The villagers crowd around the supply carts for the distribution, and bulging sacks are passed down, opened, and emptied. The livestock are taken to their new pens, while others are taken to kitchens to be slaughtered.

At night, Teren and Nessa and most of the circus folk disperse among the village's creaking houses to talk to the villagers. The children pull at Rowan's shirtsleeves, pleading for fireworks. He shakes his head, hold his hands up to them, but the children persist. Carina watches from the side, bucket in hand, on her way to the well to refill the water in her basin.

The children point her in the direction of the well and she almost misses it in the dark because there is nothing to mark it but a heavy wooden door set in the ground. Carina tugs the rope hanging out from over the edge and hears the dull thud of the bucket against the stone below. She pulls the bucket to the surface, pours the water over her head then tosses the bucket back in, draws it up, and empties it into her own bucket this time. When she does, Carina hears footsteps shuffle behind her. Hands outstretched, skin hanging in folds from her bones, an old woman bobs her head at her.

Water? The old woman looks at the bucket in Carina's hands.

The old woman's few fingers are tapered long and sharp like stakes. She looks down, then at Carina again. She taps at her own wrinkled forehead, points at the mangled hem of Carina's dress that is folding and unfolding on the damp ground, smiles.

Carina touches the nail in her forehead.

Water?

She gives the old woman the bucket. She drinks from it and then stops, her head tilts to the side, listening. A howling. And then another and another.

Carina reaches for the bucket, I have to get back, she tells the old woman. You need to go home. She tries to step forward but she is dragged back. The train of her dress falls into the well and pulls her in. There is a howling on the way down, louder than the air whistling past her ears, and then she sees the old woman shut the door.

\*

Some time later, she hears the clacking of stones above and sees Nessa's head haloed in firelight.

Is she there? Rowan says. Bits of fire fall and sizzle in the water around her.

Nessa, Rowan? Where's the old woman?

What old woman?

When she emerges from the well, the old woman is gone and she sees the carcass of a large hound lying near the village's gate. It's coarse and bristling, its fur matted with blood, long tongue lolling over its row of teeth, belly huge.

It ate her, Carina screams. Get her out, please get her out!

They slice the hound's stomach open, spilling out its intestines into the dirt, the stench of its guts making them gag.

We're too late, Rowan says.

## Chapter 19. Interlude

As a baby, Nessa was wrapped in the coarse bristled skin of a stray dog and left in the hands of a butcher and his childless wife. As a child, Nessa was wrapped in coarse aprons bloody from handling meats and bones in the shop and that was almost the same because it too smelled like offal. On some days, she was sent to work in the rich houses, and there were many, because Nessa lived in the capital. But the only thing she did was watch their daughters sew. She liked to sew but a butcher's daughter had hard hands. Too hard, so that when she tried to imitate the tiny delicate stitches stretched out on their snowy white hoops, she always stabbed her fingers. Sometimes she'd do it on purpose to see how deep the needle could go without any blood coming out. Once she pierced through her palm because the other girls dared her to and when she did, they screamed and then Nessa screamed because that was the normal thing to do.

When the belly of the butcher's childless wife rounded, they told Nessa that she had to leave and gave her her dog skin and a package of old meat that was to be thrown out in the morning. When she left in her bloody apron, no one noticed the knife she took with her.

## Chapter 20. Menagerie

Carina watches the hound disappear under the quick hands of Nessa and Teren as they take its body apart. Nessa takes the skin and Teren the bones, teeth, and nails. Even though there is enough meat to feed them all, they burn it in a field downwind from the village so the stench won't stick to their houses.

Enough for a feast, Rowan says.

Nessa clicks her tongue at him and slaps his hand when he peels a strip of charred meat from the edges of the fire.

Burn it faster. We need to keep moving, Teren tells him.

\*

Carina watches their supplies dwindle as the circus folk give away what food they have to each outstretched hand. The villages they pass through are nearer each other, the people seemingly fearful of them in their procession. Some tell them they cannot stay for long, a day or two at the most, some tell them to leave. They have their own to look after, don't you understand? Thank you for the food, but please leave.

The villagers they ask are tight lipped. There are only whispers until someone shouts angrily that the hounds are running wild. Wasn't the circus supposed to protect them? There are more of the beasts now, the villagers can hear them at night, see them slinking around their houses. The hounds never come so far into their territory, the villagers say when they see the entrails of their livestock spread out in bright red slashes across the wild fields. Mostly it is the young wet with dew and blood that the farmers find in the early daylight.

Nessa has taken to wearing one of the hounds' skins when she goes out at night. She tugs at the sagging ears when she puts its head over her own and pins its front legs to her shoulders. Rowan sees her crouching on all fours and nudges her with his foot.

They're already pissed at us. Don't provoke them.

Nessa pushes off the ground with her hands and stands. She shakes her head, scratches her face beneath the fur. She raises her head so it looks as if the corpse's muzzle sniffs him. The edges of her eyes crinkle.

Nessa, what's wrong? Rowan grabs the muzzle and tips it over her head.

Most gag when she passes. It seems only she is comfortable with the hide's stench. The

pile of skins Nessa collects grows, but still, the howling continues.

\*\*\*

It is not easy to hunt the hounds. It isn't a trick, a sleight of hand, a performance for the circus folk to do. They are not unlike the villagers, they too are vulnerable despite the devilry they parade so proudly in the circus tent. Not all of them are suited for killing.

Where does the music come from? Carina says to Rowan.

In the early morning when it was still dark, she heard the faint trills of birds and other sweet sounds but could not find its source. It faded away when the sun rose and she only remembered hearing it when she heard the faint clatter of Nessa's silverware in the next wagon.

The menagerie, he says. But we call it the "glass house."

It sounds beautiful, Carina says to Rowan. What's in there?

The musicians, he says. You'll have a lot in common with them. We can see them later when they're rehearsing.

\*

Carina wakes to pebbles plip plopping into her bathwater. She looks out the window and sees Rowan wave at her.

What are you doing? she hisses at him.

I thought you wanted to go to the glass house, he whispers.

Not now, it's dark. What time is it?

Rowan shrugs. A good enough time as any. And I'd like to be indoors. It's cold out here. You can make sure I don't burn anything down.

Unlike the rest of the circus folk, Rowan sleeps outside and has done so since he burned down his first and only wagon in the circus caravan. Since the moth woman's death, the fire breather does not go under any roof unless Carina is with him.

The wind blows lightly, smattering the window ledge with rain.

I'm coming.

On the glass house's porch, Carina hears a lilting from within, but when Rowan knocks on the door and opens it, the music stops.

Hey, he says. It's just me, and Carina.

It has been a while since Carina has seen fire in Rowan's hands so she does not ask him

why he closes the door behind them and leaves the room in darkness. There is a shuffling, perhaps a readjusting of the hand or mouth on instrument, and then the lively tune they heard outside is replaced by something languid, echoing slowly in deep patters from the walls.

Carina feels Rowan tug her hand down, and they both sit on the floor, listening. After the song ends, another begins, from another part of the room it seems, and she feels her body humming as the reverberations travel up her hands and feet to her throat.

After a little while, Rowan slumps against the door behind them and she hears his breathing deepen. Carina sings.

\*

When light comes in through the fastened shutters, Carina gets up to open them but the music stops.

Keep it shut for a while longer, a voice near her says. We don't like the light much.

Carina feels along the floor for Rowan and sits near him.

We've heard so much about you.

I haven't heard anything about you, she says. All of you.

We don't get out much. We would've come out and introduced ourselves earlier, but we're stationary, see. Like potted plants.

Carina laughs, thinks it's a joke, but no one else laughs with her.

She clear hers throat, hears the others shuffle. Rowan said you're musicians, she says. But I've never heard any instrument make music like this.

It's from our bodies, the voice says. It's almost like singing.

The Ringmaster said you might want to sing with us.

You sang the gawks to sleep.

Yes.

A chiming sound echoes in the room.

The darkness flickers, and Carina sees Rowan's finger tips light up. She sees rows of large glass bottles lined up on racks. She sharply inhales when she sees the tubular man worm his head up and out of a bottle's neck. The glass clinks against its neighbor when he wriggles out, and the sound echoes. More heads appear, and the light falters.

Carina turns to open the door but Rowan's blocking the way with his body. She shakes

him.

Rowan, Rowan.

Don't startle him when he's sleeping or you'll set us all on fire.

She feels something smooth and cold touch her arm, and she screams.

A high ringing echoes from the others.

Rowan gets up suddenly. What's going on? He says. Everyone was all happy.

Get up, Carina tugs at his arm. You didn't tell me they were like this.

No, 'cause you'd just panic like before. Calm down.

Move.

No.

The ringing continues.

You're scaring the little ones, can't you hear them? Calm down. Calm them down.

Carina shakes her head.

If they keep going, they'll shatter.

The pressure builds around them. Carina inhales, and croons.

\*

I told you you'd have something in common with them, Rowan says as he opens the door.

The room is quiet now, with soft undulating murmurs, like water on stone.



## Chapter 21. Runaway

Before they reach the next settlement, there is a knock on the door even as the wagon is still being drawn along by its horse. Teren rolls over on his stomach, groans into the mattress, and kicks the oilcloth partition between him and Carina.

Are you decent? He says to her.

Soon, she says, rubbing water on her face.

Get the door.

Carina pushes the curtain back to see the changeling's chest a concave maw of bones instead of ribs, the skin sunken in between. He glares at her and pulls the blankets over him. He jerks his chin at the door.

The morning light is bright as she opens the door, the edges of her dress creep back into the darkness of the wagon. On the porch is a man who takes a step back.

Now, this is the prettiest I've ever seen you, he says.

Do I know you?

I should hope so. Have you switched out your brain too?

Carina furrows her brow.

It's me, he says. Lucas! You jackass.

Lucas, I'm here, Teren's voice comes muffled from within.

Lucas looks over Carina's shoulder, then at Carina.

Well, shit.

Carina sits on the edge of the basin as Lucas tells Teren about the runaway child half the village is looking for. Have they seen her? It's Effie, he says, Derek's little girl, she couldn't have gotten very far as she only disappeared the night before.

How do you know she ran away? Carina says.

Lucas looks at her. She took things with her. Food.

Lucky thing you folks came now. We've just about run out of everything. The hounds came by a few nights ago and cleaned us out of the last pigs we were saving.

He looks at Teren's sunken body still covered by the blankets.

That's not a body the women go for.

Fuck off.

As the caravan reaches the outskirts of the town, the wagons stop and the circus folk come out among the mist laden field to talk among the handful of villagers. Carina leaves Teren and Lucas talking to find Rowan. Her dress becomes fuller as it sucks the morning dew tipping the long stalks of weeds as she passes by.

A crowd builds up around the caravan, the villagers expectant. This time, no sacks of food are handed down, no livestock. We don't have any more supplies, the Ringmaster explains. They barely have any left to reach the capital. Cries of disappointment ripple out among them. Carina notices that there are very few children here.

Ordinarily the circus would move on, having nothing to give, and the villagers upset, but they stay because Teren came from here. Most of the circus folk help in the fields. Others repair houses and fences. From their previous stops, Carina has already learned that it is better that she not help the villagers, or the circus folk for that matter, in their chores. She drips water on whatever she touches so she cannot make bread because it will become runny, nor make a fire because the wood will be too wet. Neither does she enter any of the flimsy houses because she will leave a trail of water behind her. Mostly she forages in the outlying fields until night falls. Sometimes if there is a pool of water nearby, she'll bring back fish, or even small game that her dress snatches in the brush.

Carina finds Rowan among the children. He's huddled in a small circle with them, their heads bowed over something in his hands. He looks up when she comes near and shoos the children away.

Eat it fast now, he calls after them.

Is that food? She says. The Ringmaster said we didn't have any more to give out.

It's from my own stores. I've been collecting it along the way. He peels a strip from what's left of a chunk of the dried meat he's holding and motions at Carina. Want to try?

Where did you get meat, Carina asks Rowan. We never have meat.

We do if we're not picky about it.

What is it?

Something exotic.

It's not human, is it?

I imagine human would taste better. He tosses it to her. Take it, you might change your

mind later.

\*

We have no wells, a village woman tells Carina. They have too much water here to need them. Keep walking east, and you'll find the pools.

## Chapter 22. Interlude

Anything of importance to Carina happened in the water. She was born on water, in a skiff that was taking her mother to the midwife. Just as the crown of her head emerged between her mother's thighs, a fish jumped onto the deck and Carina took her first shrieking breath. That was why Carina's hands were webbed when she was born. But the soft membranes are no longer there because her mother snipped them off with a pair of scissors as Carina cried through her first gasps of air. Her mother ate the fish shortly after and buried the webs with its bones.

She spent her youth in water more than on land, and it was in a river where she met her first lover. He stood on a low bridge and she beckoned to him from the churning water. But when he leaned over the railing to kiss her, he fell in and she did not realize that not everyone was suited to the water like her. When he stopped moving, she dragged him to the bottom of the river and weighted him down with heavy stones. She kissed his lips and closed his eyes before covering his face with a rock.

She wakes when Teren shakes her because the sound she makes during dreams like this is one of drowning. She touches her forehead to know she is awake.

## Chapter 23. Insect Girl

Mounds of rock stud the flat landscape. In between are pools of water that Carina steps through. Teren tells her it is the village's custom to bury the dead in stone rather than soil because it is too wet to have a proper grave without the body surfacing among the muck during the rainy season.

In some places where the graves are old and fallen, the stones expose slender bones bleached by the sun.

\*

The runaway girl comes to Carina's lilting voice as she sings, brushing out burrs and dead leaves trapped in the folds of her dress. When she hears a shuffling of underbrush outside, she thinks it's Rowan, and slops water out the window. She hears a yelp and looks out. The drenched girl, about eight or nine, peers out at her from beneath the wagon. Carina rests her chin on the sill.

Oh, sorry. I thought you were someone else. Come closer, I'll dry you off.

The girl doesn't move.

Are you her? The runaway—Effie? Everyone's out looking for you. Carina stretches out her hand, They said you took food. I have some, if you're hungry.

When Effie comes into the lantern light, Carina recoils. The girl's eyes are covered with moth wings and beetles and cockroaches crawl over her arms and down her legs.

What's wrong? Effie says.

That, Carina points at a beetle crawling out from beneath her collar and up her neck.

What do you mean?

## Chapter 24. Interlude

You're a freak, Carina's mother told her when she started her first bleeding. That's why the others stay away from you.

I didn't know if you'd be able to bleed, but you can. You can't have children. Don't give them this.

## Chapter 25. Little Bodies

After rubbing the water from Effie's clothes, Carina wraps the girl in Teren's blankets and looks through the cupboards for food. She remembers the chunk of dried meat Rowan gave her earlier and tears off a strip and sucks on it. There is nothing exotic about it, she thinks, and gives the rest to Effie who does not hesitate to put the whole thing into her mouth.

The insects have formed a little parade on the edge of her basin, and some have fallen into the water, waving their little legs in the air, drowning. Carina picks them from the bath and flicks them out the window while Effie watches.

The girl taps her finger on the bed and the bugs swarm to her. Carina thinks about the surprise Teren will have later, but says nothing.

Where's Teren, Effie asks. I thought he lived here. She points at the hanging body parts.

He does, Carina says. He'll be back soon.

Don't let Lucas know.

He said you ran away.

I didn't. He tried to give me to the water man.

What did he look like?

\*

Carina leaves Effie sleeping in Teren's bed and closes the door behind her. Down the steps, past the other wagons, windows dark. She asks the moth women crowding round the fire pit if they've seen Teren. Eyes fixed on the flames, their luminous white fingers point toward the village.

She finds Teren in one of the farm houses, fitting a leg to a young man whose face is set hard into a grimace as Teren's fingers work the clay flesh to the newly scarred nub. Carina waits in the doorway until he's done and the young man limps past her on crutches.

I found Effie. Carina twists a cloth in her hands and gives it damp to Teren.

Thanks. He wipes the clay from his molding tools on the bench. We should tell Derek. Where is she?

In the wagon. I want to tell you something first.

\*

Carina traces the same path she took earlier to the burial mounds and looks for the pond

Effie described to her. Although the moon is waning, it is not so difficult to find as there is only one juniper tree among the mounds of stone in that flat, barren landscape. She peers into the pond and lets her dress unfurl in its murky depths.

When was the last time you came here? She says to Teren.

Last autumn. The same as every year since I joined the circus, he says. What are you looking for?

So you'd notice if anyone was missing?

The pond is deeper than it looks. Her dress tugs at something soft, and when she drags it onto the muddy shore, it gives and falls apart in the fabric. Its stench saturates the still air.

That's part of a body, she says.

Graves have bodies, Teren says. What's this about? Stop, he grabs her shoulder as she steps into the water. Stop digging.

Have you noticed many children missing in the village?

She submerges her arms up to her elbows, sifting through the mud and weeds.

Teren, why are there just pieces?

What?

They aren't whole.

Teren follows the siren into the water and pushes the debris away.

This is a dumping ground, she says.

\*

Carina does not return to the village with Teren, but stays with the discarded children in their watery beds. She wriggles her hem in the cold muck of the ponds and watches her dress extend in long inky strands beneath its surface. Across from her, the water ripples, the circles lapping against her dress. She feels the drumming in the ground before she sees the horse, far off, and its rider.



## Chapter 26. Reunion

Teren finds Lucas first, tells them he's found Effie and that they should get her parents because the girl's raving and feverish and perhaps they can calm her down. Lucas insists that they go alone. We'll bring her home, he tells Teren.

\*

The horse's mane is drenched to its sinewy neck with ribbons of weed and rush and the water dripping from it reeks of stagnant pools. She hears it shriek and beat the water's surface with its slimy hooves. From beneath the water, Carina can still see the rider's features, see his long hair and coat that trailing to the muddy ground. He looks to his sides, but not to the water below where the siren's dress sways and curls in agitation.

\*\*\*

Teren returns to the burial mounds and sees a man on a horse. Carina is gone.

Where's Effie? Lucas says.

Away from here. We found their bodies. Do you kill them or does he?

The rider comes nearer.

He wanted young flesh, he says. The children wouldn't have lasted long anyway.

Does Derek know? The others?

He gave us food. We couldn't wait for you, we haven't had a year like this before. There wasn't enough food for everyone.

The man is close enough for Teren to hear his voice, with that lilt like Carina's. It is her husband, Morgen.

I was wondering if the hounds finally ate you, Lucas, the siren says. His lips stretch across his thin face in a smile when he sees the changeling. This is better than the children you've brought me.

What did you do to them? Teren says.

You said to experiment, and I found the young last longer. Don't look so disgusted. We're not under the circus tent anymore. This isn't any different from what you've been doing.

Teren looks behind Morgen, at the pool.

I only take what I need, Morgen says.

Morgen doesn't notice the water clouding beneath him until his horse bucks out of the

water, blackness stretching from its hooves in long sticky strands. He falls off the horse as Carina's head surfaces from the pool. The water in the smaller ponds surges onto the stony grass, overflows into the pool the two sirens are in. The horse's body is striped with Carina's dress as it tears away from them.

Lucas turns to run and Teren swings at him. The changeling misses, falls, unbalanced by the pulling mud beneath his feet. Teren hears an animalistic shriek. Morgen's hands are on his face, the skin welted red and bleeding from his wife. The siren flings Carina away from him, and from the water, the tendrils of his coat leap out toward the the nail protruding from Carina's forehead. Teren sees Morgen reach for it, and before the changeling can get to his feet, he feels a dull pain in the back of his head. Lucas stands over him with a large stone between his hands.

Teren wakes, the flesh of his shoulder torn, the bone exposed, tinging the water a rosy red. Lucas floats nearby.

## Chapter 27. Flood

Carina drains the pools around the graves, leaving a watery path behind her as she leaves the burial mounds. The villagers do not appear when she stumbles to the village. She covers her mouth with both hands, trying to stem the blackness seeping from between her fingers. Her shoulders heave.

Bloated with water, the dress spreads out from her, churning the rocks it flows over. She watches it creep over the first house.

Little hands pull at Rowan's shirt, voices calling him to wake. The fire breather opens his eyes and sees the village children hovering around him. They pull at him to get up and he sits rubbing his face. His back is cold and wet despite the ground being dry the night before. It hadn't rained.

They're all talking at once, and the words repeat themselves: water, lady, crying.

He pushes the children away so he can see around him. The houses far off seem to be fluid, rolling on the earth. Then he realizes the wet ground beneath him is pulling at him, the damp being drawn away toward the village.

He runs to the village where the water is swallowing houses and people with a slow, measured somnambulance. It is almost soothing, an ordered chaos as the blackness seeps from the ground and pools, engulfs, sinks, and moves on. Rowan sees Carina in the center of it all, gliding through the water, looking through the people who are already lulled standing in the roiling water. He shouts and sashes toward her, ignoring the gentle pulling at his legs that seeks to anchor him. The siren turns to him; the nail is gone.

He tries to pull her away, down the street. She shrugs off his hands and shakes her head.

Lucas took Effie to Morgen, she says, gagging up blackish threads of water. And the others. Where is he?

Rowan pushes past her and runs toward the camp shouting for Nessa. The Pin Woman gestures at her forehead, asking about the nail.

Can't any nail do? He shouts at her.

Nessa slips the nail out from her own forehead, the one she placed there for Carina, to show the siren when she first joined them that she would share in her pain. She holds it out between them.

## Chapter 28. Interlude

*You remember that girl? The pretty one who died a while back?*

*Which one? The pretty ones are always dying.*

*The one with the beautiful voice? Haunting, wasn't it? I always thought she was a little odd.*

*Because she was always swimming in the lake?*

*That, and she was always around when someone drowned.*

*A perfect match for her husband, then.*

*She would've lived if she just stayed on land.*

*She would've lived if she just stayed in the water.*

*Accidents happen.*

*It wasn't an accident. Her husband killed her.*

*No, she killed herself.*

*She deserved it, anyhow.*

There was a town by a lake—one so deep that its surface looked like night, one so wide that it took three days to cross it by boat—whose beautiful people always went missing. It was said that a monster lived in the lake, and dragged unsuspecting swimmers down to its depths to feast upon their flesh. Carina, however, was not missed when she disappeared, because she did not belong to anyone and grew up under different roofs throughout her girlhood. When she met the man who lived in the manor house by the lake, her mother was long gone, missing as well, and no one was there to mind her as she dripped home lake weed at day's end. But even though she knew such stories, it didn't matter to her; she loved the water so very much.

## Chapter 29. Trial

Carina hears the capital before she sees it, the voices of the people within its walls breaking the silence of her dreaming. She feels hot, and pushes the blankets away from her, confused that the water in the basin barely reaches her shins. Her head burns and she feels her forehead. The nail feels different, she thinks, smoother, almost new. The partition is drawn back so she can see Effie sleeping in Teren's bed and when she peers over the basin, Rowan sleeping on the floor. She hears Teren's voice outside. The door opens shortly after, and Teren's sleeve is empty. He follows her gaze to his arm.

What do you remember? He says to her.

\*

The white dirt of the road is rutted with claw marks and the heavy wood of the gates are splintered near the ground. When the circus caravan enters the capital, the people look resentful. What have they brought back? The people ask.

\*

The archetypes are responsible for the circus, so when the hounds come running after the wheels of their caravan, through mire and thorn and villages between, they must take responsibility for the villagers' deaths. And so it is the same for the fire breather and the siren.

After setting up the circus camp within the city's walls, the archetypes head toward the city's center where there is a stone monolith bleached white by the sun. Intersecting scenes of the circus's predecessors span upward on its surface, so to Teren, it looks as if there is no rest for their dead. The show must go on, he thinks. The figures of the first performers are carved into the base of the monolith. Their faces are twisted in pain, the muscles on their stone bodies straining under the weight of the bodies they carry and will carry. A doorway leads within.

Light comes into the chamber through the eye holes of the figures carved into the building's exterior. In the dimness, Teren can see the veiled members of the council interspersed at varying levels along the walls. The one who is in the lowest gallery speaks.

He asks about the supplies the circus has brought back, the outer villages, the abandonments. The hounds are mentioned, but only briefly; the council and everyone in the capital is aware of the beasts biting at the heels of their gates. Then the circus itself. What of the volunteers?

Rowan and Carina are named.

Rowan will be retired, they decide. Isolated from the rest so he cannot hurt anyone more.

The Ringmaster protests, they were expecting something else, to help him.

He has a history, does he not? Of flame and smoke and burnt lives trailing after him.

He was given time to amend his ways and he has not improved.

Carina, they say, she did not leave here with the circus.

Carina's from the outside. We were taking her here for safety, says Teren.

She drowned a village. The village you came from, they remind him. She will be left to the hounds.

Morgen was at fault for that, Teren says.

She's the same as the siren before?

Then for the safety of all those who live here, let the hounds take her away. She's not ours.

\*

Carina combs Effie's hair, picking out the beetles crawling in and out of her hair, blows away the wasps flitting around her head.

Rowan's fidgeting, looking out the window.

Sit down, Carina tells him. What is it?

The archetypes are meeting the council now.

Nothing will happen. Teren said we'll be fine.

I'm leaving. I'm not going to wait for them to tell me to die.

Effie looks at Carina wide-eyed.

Even you know what happens, right? He asks Effie. Bad luck for you, being with us. He takes Teren's carving tools from their places on the wall, picks out the sharpest ones and bundles them into a cloth. I'm going. You can stay if you want.

\*

We won't leave her to be killed, Teren says.

Is this the circus's decision? The council asks.

Teren hesitates. No, it's mine.

## Chapter 30. Split

Teren returns to the caravan.

Where's Rowan?

He left.

Where did he go?

He left the capital already, she says. He said he'd be better off with a head start from whatever the council decides for him.

Isolation. You need to go too. Leave Effie with Nessa.

He turns to go and Carina grabs his arm, the flesh ungiving. Teren, she says. Why did you bring me here?

I thought you'd be safe.

I'm not?

He shakes his head.

\*

Carina and Teren leave in the night, Effie between them, fireflies leaving a soft halo around her head.

\*

The circus is blamed for Carina's and Rowan's disappearances. The council tell the other archetypes to bring them back.

As long as she is in the Pale, she threatens the others.

The circus will take responsibility for the deaths.

\*

Will it stop bleeding? Effie murmurs, her eyes half closed.

Carina touches the bandage on her forehead, stiff with dried blood. It will. Go to sleep now, she says.

Effie nods and a few beetles fall to the ground, right themselves, and retreat up her legs. Carina strokes Effie's head and croons softly at her.

The three of them walked until morning, where they hid among the long tangled grasses to stay out of sight. Carina convinced Teren that she'd take the first watch, and when he refused, the siren hushed him to sleep with her voice. Effie did not follow as easily because the bugs

stoppered her ears.

Carina? Effie jerks out of Carina's hands.

Carina turns and sees a hound. A large hound, manged, spots of red scabby flesh erupting from its fur.

A low growl ripples through its body, and when it steps closer, Carina pushes Effie behind her. Wake Teren up, she says.

Then another low rumble, and she feels Effie push into her back. A howl erupts from behind her.

Get away, she yells at Effie.

\*

Rowan hears the hounds yelping, their cries echoing across the fields.

\*

The hounds tear at the black writhing forms of Carina's dress, that, serpentine, rear up from the mud to sink deep into coarse fur. Find water, she thinks. Find water and we'll be safe. She shoves Effie ahead of her. The hound nearest her yelps as her dress lashes it to the ground and pulls the other off its feet. They run, and the hounds follow, leaving Teren behind.

Water, she tells Effie. I need water! The girl's a little ahead of her and Carina feels her dress pull her away. She calls to Effie, grabs her arm and yanks her through the trees, the train of her dress trailing in tatters as they stumble over waves of root and stone. She pulls the girl through the interlocking branches and when she sees the white lipped river, plunges into the water.

Her dress covers them, churns the water to ink above their heads as the water rushes past. She hears the stones clatter near them, water splashing, barking, yelping, and tastes blood. Effie jerks on Carina's sleeve, and again when she does not let the girl go because she can feel the feet of the hounds and their jaws on her dress. Feeling it tear between teeth and the shreds that float away so that the sharp pain becomes a dull throb as it is washed away downriver.

When she hears the splash of the second hound's body in the water, she heaves Effie to the surface toward the shore where she throws up water onto the smooth stones.

The girl coughs and coughs, gasping for air. Carina rubs her back and tugs at the drops welling in Effie's lungs from her mouth. Tiny worms curl in the water she throws up.



We're fine now. She looks at their supplies, scattered over the field. And her dress, dripping black, moving weakly in the current.

## Chapter 31. Interlude

In his first night in the circus, Teren was blamed for the missing livestock of a nearby farm because the help swore they saw Teren chase down a horse and tear its legs off before he took it back to the circus camp.

If I only took the legs, where's the rest of the body? Teren asked the farmer who showed up outside the billowing white tent after his performance. It was a hot night, and the smell of offal on Teren's skin made the man and the others step back from him.

The man looked to his friends, and said, We had to burn it. Who knows what filth you left on it.

I didn't go near your farm, Teren told him. The arm isn't real. Look, he popped off his arm, gently, unlike in his performance, and held the hooved limb out to the farmer. He knocked on it, see, it's hollow.

The man didn't touch it, and his friends goaded him until he did and yelled in fear.

It's fucking moving, it is!

They had to pay a large fee, more than the price of one horse that the Ringmaster took from the circus's earnings. It's always real to them, he told Teren later. We're the monsters they want us to be and more. Let them think it's real.

It *is* real, Rowan tells them—Teren, the Ringmaster—watching the farmer and his hands leave the circus grounds. He picks up the hoof that the farmer threw to the dirt, the hair sticky with guts, ankle twitching, and holds it in his hands.

A different real, the Ringmaster tells him.

I don't get it.

Do you really need to drink petrol to make your fire?

No.

Then why do you drink it?

I guess, Rowan paused. He remembered the time when he first saw how people on the outside make fire. He asked Teren why they buried the coals in ashes because the fire felt so sick and weak to him. Rowan flexes Teren's hoof. It makes sense to them, he says.

Don't fool yourself, Teren tells him. Make it a show, but don't fool yourself into believing it. And don't, he takes the hoof and points at the gawks milling about them, giving them a wide

berth around the three, go after them later. Let them be.

Rowan frowns and wipes his hands on his shirt, leaving a trail of muddy blood down his front. He looks at the villagers around him who gawk at Teren and the Ringmaster, but not at him. He licks the blood under his nail.

## Chapter 32. Disbandment

Rowan, veins a soft glow beneath his skin, red and flowing with blood that tastes of something rancid, stumbles in the mist rising from the earth, through bramble and weed, following the deep claw marks in the trodden grass until he sees a gaping of broken branches in a grove of trees and beyond that, hearing a river. Water on stone.

He does not see Carina. There are shreds of brown that look like leaves scattered across the chalky shore, dried up and curling at the edges. The claw marks end in the rushing water.

\*

When Teren and the others do not return by nightfall, the council summons the Ringmaster to the monolith. The hounds are baying at their gates, calling the other beasts to beat on their walls. The circus is responsible for Carina's and Rowan's disappearance. They must do something or be turned out with them.

When it is dark, the circus has their own performance among the hounds.

\*

The Ringmaster remembers the names of the circus's dead by writing their names on the walls of his shell as he is reborn after each purge. He writes their names in vertical lines, row after row like bars across the creamy white wall that circle him. So when he watches the circus folk leave the gates—the archetypes, the younger ones that followed after who have grown from childhood in this circus, his circus, the egg he is in cracks just a little bit more. He reminds the archetypes to look after the others, as always.

Would Teren sacrifice all the rest?

### Chapter 33. Siren's Pool

When Rowan follows the river, he sees nothing for a time, and then insects on the stony ground. Beetles and wasps and bees that lie with their legs to the sky. Leeches that slide ahead of him on the stones where the slowing river leaves more and more debris entangled among the long netted water weeds.

At its end, the river opens up into a large pool. Carina floats in the depths, he can see the whiteness of her face and her arms a little below, hands hidden in the murk. Effie sits on the shore, watching, while dragonflies flit about her head.

I was calling, he says. Why didn't you tell me you were here?

She's not waking up.

Rowan looks at the girl's feet and shins, drawn up to her body, skin raw and scratched.

How did you get that?

I tried to get her to come out, she said. But she wants to stay there.

Carina, he yells. Her eyes do not blink, her body still. Rowan takes off his shoes and when his bare foot touches the water, the murk rises up his leg and the tingling he feels sharpens. He swears as he pulls back from the water and Effie tells him again, she won't come out. Carina's dress, the thin whispery thing in Teren's wash basin, now expanded, settles back across the lake's bottom.

The whites of her eyes shift, her pupils slide to look at him. Effie half stands, then sinks back to the ground as she sees the inky blackness crawl up Carina's skin so that her arms have melted into the depths below.

Shit, Rowan says, looking at the darkening sky.

\*

Rowan builds a fire on the lake's shore and sits Effie in its warmth. The girl is shivering, her clothes still damp from the river. Rowan rubs her shoulders, and his hot palms dry her sleeves.

Where are your bugs? He asks her, noticing that there isn't anything crawling up her arms.

Effie shrugs. The bugs don't want to come near here. They know she'll swallow them up.

He looks at the middle of the pool, a moon reflected in the water. No moon tonight though, it is just Carina's face, pale amid the still, black water.

## Chapter 34. Interlude

Carina was wary when in the middle of the lake, a man in a rowboat gave her a card written in a thin sloping cursive—an invitation to dinner that night. She cocked her head toward the looming manor overlooking the lake and felt her gut wrench, but she accepted and smoothed her only dress under the water to get the wrinkles out.

\*

The lord of the manor was older than Carina, but by how much, she could not tell except for the fine crow's feet around his eyes. But it did not matter when he took off his gloves and showed her his webbed fingers. He said he came from the Pale, did she know of that place? She should because she would have come from there too. No? Her mother perhaps? Carina shook her head.

How fortunate, he said.

## Chapter 35. Way with Water

When Rowan wakes in the morning, it's to a sodden shoe half submerged in water. He pulls his foot away quickly, peels off the leeches sucking on the leather, kicks at the pulling blackness.

Hey, he shakes Effie. The water hasn't reached the girl, she is still high up on land. Effie opens her eyes, looks at the lake.

It is quiet. No birdsong, no insect calls, no howling. The trees are still.

The pool is closer than before, but it isn't the water that is rising. Where the pool was yesterday, there are dried watermarks on the stones. Carina moved during the night.

She's not there anymore. Effie points to where Carina was floating the day before. It's just water now.

## Chapter 36. Interlude

They'd married quickly after their first meeting at the manor, and Carina was never seen in town after that. The only time the townsfolk saw her was when she was swimming in the lake, a small figure bobbing in and out of the glassy surface. In the evenings, her husband joined her, but the townsfolk only saw something large and serpentine loom under the water. People still disappeared, but Carina's husband did not warn his young wife away from the lake.

Carina? Her husband called her. He asked her to come in the water with him. She did, and did not question why he hugged her so tight and pulled her down. It was a game they played to see who could stay underwater longest. She won sometimes, but she knew that he let her win. This time, he did not let go.



Chapter 37. Way with Water (cont.)

Rowan steps into the lake again, setting one foot firmly after the other when Carina doesn't respond. And when he wades deeper, the water at his chest, the pressure around his body increases. Carina's eyes blink out of the murk. Her head surfaces, her hair wrapping around his shoulders.

He looks back at Effie on the shore.

The grip on his legs tightens, and before he's pulled down, he takes a deep breath.

Rowan, come in the water with me.

## Chapter 38. Interlude

It had been months since she'd seen the room with the hanging women, and months before she let him touch her again when he asked her to come in the water. He told her she didn't have to think about them anymore, that he'd had the bodies taken away. She could stop dreaming about them. It was his fault, so please forgive him?

He pulled her close and kissed her collarbone, she smiled. Holding each of her hands in his, stroking her fingers, he asked her how much she loved the water. Very much, she said. She thought it an inane question. More than you, she teased.

Good, he said. And the water rushed above their heads.

It was some time before Carina went limp and heavy in her husband's arms, after the twisting and spasm for air, him watching the air bubbles leaving her mouth get smaller and smaller as they rose to the surface.

## Chapter 39. Surfacing

Carina croons to Rowan the same song she sang to Effie the night before. *Shh*, she tells him, as Nessa told her when she drove the nail back into her forehead the night the circus took her in. But he tries to swim up to the surface in the dizzying darkness, tries to pull her up with him, and when she feels his movement slacken, she feels the water burn.

\*

Rowan burns through Carina's grip on him, through the parts of her dress that hold him down, burns her hair as it entangles his arms, gasps for air when he surfaces. The water isn't deep, so it doesn't take very long for him to reach the shallows and anchor his feet in the muddy bottom of the lake. The water around him steams and ash floats on the surface like leaves. Carina is a little ways from him, her arms and neck lined with dark red welts, blistering in the heat. Her forehead still bleeds.

\*

Rowan walks around the retreating edges of Carina's dress, treading fire in his footsteps until he stands in front of her. Her eyes, unfocused, stare down at her torso protruding from the muddy ground, the blackness spread out around her in thin, ragged waves. The ring of fire Rowan's made around Carina prevents the weak appendages of her dress from slithering into the river. The dress rears up, teeters near the flames, and he hears a faint shrieking that seems to echo in Carina's throat. He doesn't want to touch her, set her off, have her smother him in the black stagnant water that remains so he seals the circle and crouches in front of her.

Rowan raises his arm and shoots fire into the air.

## Chapter 40. Interlude

When the circus is alive, there is no use for the imagination because everything is bared to the circus-goers in the harsh spotlights of the ring. What has been dreamed in the night becomes real. But what do the performers imagine? Teren imagines the circus folk outside the capital's walls, strewn across the fields in blues and purples, greens, yellows, but most of all reds. He imagines the hounds and the riders picking them off as the crows descend to feed on carrion meat. He imagines the victims in fragments, an ear, a finger, a hand, and wonders what will be left and how will he wear them all.

\*\*\*

Teren sees the flame rise up against the overcast sky. It bursts at its peak, releasing a spray of multihued reds, ringing as it trails toward the earth. But after the flare is gone, leaving the dull sky gray again, the ringing persists.

\*

Why didn't you burn the gawks when they were trying to drag you into the pit? Carina asked Rowan after they buried the moth woman.

Because they'd burn the next person and the next person until everyone was on fire. Imagine that, Rowan says.

And yet, you burn me.

## Chapter 41. Return to Water

Teren arrives at the pool, now barely a pond that Rowan has dried up with fire. Carina hunches forward, more of her body disappearing into the muck while the dregs of her dress spasm in the heat. She blinks, focuses on Rowan, Teren, down to the long nail in the changeling's hand. Her eyes widen.

I don't need it, she says as she tries to get up, falls on her side, her dress writhing around her. The fire catches on her hem and she cries out.

Rowan blows out the ring of fire and scoops the smoldering bit of Carina's dress in his hands. She slaps him. Her fingers blister.

He takes the nail from Teren and holds it out to Carina. Take it then.

Carina shakes her head. Throw it away, she says. I don't want it.

The men stay on the riverbank while Carina lowers herself into the water. The weeds wrap around the siren as the water carries her away downstream, her body covered in the little white flowers of crowfoot.

## Chapter 42. Silent City

Teren, Rowan, and Effie return to the capital whose large wooden gates lay open upon their arrival. But inside, the city's innards laid bare, it does not appear any different from when they left. The buildings of wood and stone slant into each other at odd angles, the alleys shrunken between their creaking bulk, the chimneys smoldering with wet fuel, the tiny streams of smoke mingling above in the humid air. It begins to rain. A light rain at first, soft drifting like snow, collecting in beads on their heads, the color of frost. Cold creeps into their limbs. The city is quiet under the darkened sky.

They walk back toward the circus camp as the rain gets heavier. The earth begins to bloat from the water, dirt turns to mud, cracks in the ground begin to well up with reddish clay. The camp, like the city, is still. Teren finds Nessa with the Ringmaster, the half man torn from his egg, curled on the floor of the menagerie. His shell is cracked open and the lower half of his umbilical body rests deflated among the wagon's still inhabitants. Effie bends down to help Nessa scoop the brittle inked pieces into piles. Ants crawl from the folds of her clothes and pepper the glass strewn floor.

Did you bring her back? the Ringmaster says, his eyes straining past Teren into the rain.

She's not coming.

Dead? The hounds finally got her?

Teren shakes his head. We left her. She's not coming back.

Like Morgen. The Ringmaster holds a piece of shell in his hand, motions at the two dates on it, a beginning and an end. She'll be back, in time.

Where is everyone?

You haven't seen them yet?

No.

The Ringmaster motions outside, hides his face in his hands.

Teren gets up and looks outside at the puddles forming from the rain. Little flesh colored islands protrude from the mud. Faces and arms and legs that appear out of the mass of clay. But they are not from his wagon.

How will you wear them all? The Ringmaster says to Teren.

## Chapter 43. Down

In what is left of his overturned wagon, Teren sifts through the clutter of limbs that now, without form, look like broken crockery. He is looking for his arm, his real arm with the crescent mark like Rowan's and Nessa's that he put away when he first joined the circus. It's stiff and cold when he finds it wrapped in coarse cloth, the hand clutching a wad of paper to hold its shape.

\*

The council chamber is empty when Teren enters. Council, he shouts up at the ceiling, dark where the light does not reach. His voice echoes, faint, council, council, the sounds come back distorted. Nessa cocks her head to where she hears a faint howling through the tiled floor. When they pry up the flooring, they see a shaft in the darkness, leading down.

Effie stays with the Ringmaster. I'll put him back together again, she says.

\*

Carina watches the clouds snake above her as she makes her way downriver. In the current, her dress blooms outward, seeping away from her in inky tendrils that grasp and push her away from shore and away from the rocks protruding in little islands from the water's surface. She keeps wiping at the wound on her forehead and spreading the wrinkles from her dress.

She thinks of Rowan.

She thinks of Nessa.

She thinks of Teren.

And Morgen.

Carina sits up in the water. Her dress moors itself to the middle of the river where the current swirls around her.

## Chapter 44. Body Tunnel

Rowan's silhouette is rimmed with a soft glow as Nessa and Teren follow the fire breather down into the darkness. A flickering light below marks where, earlier, Rowan had spat a gob of fire to see how deep the tunnel ran. He feels along the curved wall for handholds and looks up at Teren and Nessa.

Looks like we can go down, he says.

So they go down hand over hand, a hundred and four rungs, Rowan counts, feeling the air close around them as they descend. Where the fire is brighter, Rowan skips the remaining distance and jumps to the ground, scattering bits of ember with his feet. The flames shoot off at the edges of the room, and they see that the walls are cobbled with bones. By their smell, some are still fresh.

Teren traces his hand along the brittle pieces, a yellowish brown from what he can see, and asks Rowan for more light. Rowan breathes in and exhales, releasing a cloud of fire above their heads. The motes of light hover for a few minutes, and they can see that the bones are arranged according to the part of the body they came from, the shaft lined with the cylinders of vertebrae. Before them is a narrow hallway, just big enough for Nessa's wide shoulders to pass through.

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, Teren murmurs.

What's that? Rowan turns from the threshold. Nessa shakes her head.

I just remembered something Carina told me.

\*

They follow the hallway until it splits. Up till now, the walls have remained still, but now in the corner of their eyes, they see bits of movement. Interspersed to the left and right are skulls, whose jaws unhinged jiggle at them as they pass. Nessa's shoulders are scratched, and Teren's arm snapped at. Rowan, the slightest of them, avoids contact with the rattling teeth.

Which way? he asks them. The fire in his hand stirs from the skulls' chorus of musty breath and sets the light quivering along the moving jaws.

Nessa points with her chin toward the right, where the clattering is the loudest.

At intervals, the walls change, so that the room filled with skulls opens onto a hallway of spines, then arms. They see hands now, mostly skeletal, but some still fleshy, contorted, bent at



odd angles but pointing the same way. One strokes Rowan's head as he passes.

Can you use these? Rowan tugs at the overhanging fingers.

Maybe, no. I don't think so. They're too decayed, Teren says.

After a time, Rowan repeats the patterns to himself, head, hands, ribs, feet, adding one more to the list as they enter another hallway or gallery. Head, hands, ribs, feet, hips. Head, hands, ribs, feet, hips, hands. Hips, hands.

At one point, Teren tells him to stop.

But we need to remember how to get back, Rowan says.

## Chapter 45. Return to Water (cont.)

Carina lets the eddies of the pool tumble in the folds of her dress, which by now expands a good deal beyond her thin, unmoving legs. The fabric has returned to its black sheen, like oil on water, its incandescence reflected in the afternoon light. She looks around her at the interlocking trees, the gently sloping hills, and beyond, the towering wooden walls of the capital. A cloud of black smoke is beginning to form above the city, and the air, when she sticks her hands out of the water, feels clammy.

Then, she feels thunder, the reverberations echoing down the river bed, passing through the stones to her body. The black birds fly from the trees. Faintly she hears a barking, then a chorus of it and she dives underwater and propels herself toward the sound.

## Chapter 46. Interlude

Can you hear that? Morgen would ask his young bride from time to time. He'd wake her in the middle of the night, sometimes he'd look up from a book he was reading, and his body would stiffen. Carina always shook her head, and he'd murmur, how fortunate, to her and stroke her head.

Why do you keep asking me that? She asked.

You'll see one day, he'd say.

He'd look calm, but there was a slight tremble in his lips.

For the short time after Morgen pulled Carina into the lake, held her under the surface until her body no longer spasmed for air, she opened her eyes and heard the howling. It was faint at first, and she thought it was just the wind. Storm's a-coming, she thought.

You can hear them now, can't you? He asked her again.

It was the townspeople who probably sent the hounds after them. How they found out about Morgen's red room, she didn't know, but in that shifting haze, she remembered hurried splashing, her body tossing about in the water, and the howling from far away.

## Chapter 47. Siren Song

When Carina surfaces, her dress pulls the river from its bed, sweeping up the hounds in a long watery train edged with willow and weeds. The huntling horse that had come with the hounds rears up at her. *Ssh*, she holds a finger to her lips as she grabs the horse's dripping bridle.

Don't you want to take me to Morgen?

\*

Hips, again, Rowan says as they round another corner. Don't you look familiar, he says to the curved bowls of pelvises where the shadows gather as he passes with his light. The fire in Rowan's hand expands and contracts erratically, and Nessa starts more and more at the waving appendages protruding from the walls. Teren suggests they stop.

Turn out the light, he tells Rowan. We can rest in the dark.

Okay, Rowan says, but the flame only wavers.

Nessa puts her hand under Rowan's and forces him to close the flame in his palm. The skin covering it glows red, outlining the bones in his fingers, and then the light goes out.

In the darkness, they no longer hear the faint chattering of jaws from the skulls. The sharp clacking of the skeletal orchestra finally quiets, they can hear a soft refrain that they had mistaken for a howling when they first found the shaft. Nessa feels Rowan's slumped body straighten.

Carina followed us? he says.

No, Teren says. She would have gotten lost.

She's trying to find us.

Teren tries to grab Rowan before the fire breather rushes down the tunnel, yells at him to stop but in the darkness, Teren and Nessa's larger bodies are hindered by the grasping bones and soon, their light source disappears.

But the singing still remains.

\*

Unlike the other sounds reverberating off the walls, the singing is one clear strain, pulling Rowan's body so it isn't long before he emerges into a gallery larger than the previous ones they had entered.

The pools of water on the ground are a tangible black like Carina's dress. He calls out to

the siren.

Something stirs on the far end of the room and he raises the light so that he can see bodies heaped against the wall. Rowan recognizes the man looking up at him as Lucas. And next to him, other faces arranged in a half circle, faces he knew.

He stumbles back, kicks away the hand resting near his foot and slips in the water that has begun leaking into the room.

The singing increases in volume in a lower register is a voice he remembers from before.

Morgen, he says as he sees the black water pool around a figure, tall as Rowan, that spreads out its arms in welcome.

## Chapter 48. Transformation

The horse takes Carina to the capital. Her dress's train has picked up more debris along the way, tiny flowers and thorns and nettle leaves that gather in the folds of fabric. She looks back at the floral tangle, picks a bloom from the bunch and tears it in half before sticking it in her hair.

\*

Morgen's voice, unlike Carina's, agitates Rowan's body, and he feels his muscles twitch even after the siren's voice fades. The water drips off his face as he smiles. It's just you, Rowan? Where's Teren? I wanted to see him most of all. The bones told me the three of you were coming.

The last Rowan had seen of Morgen was when the man's mask was snatched from him in his performance on one of the last nights he was in the circus. The audience cried out, and the fire breather heard the familiar cries of freak! ring out in the tent. His face was already badly scarred, but after Rowan pushed him back from the grandstand, the scars turned a bright red from the fire breather's touch. Water flooded out from beneath Morgen's coat to grasp at the spectators who shoved and pushed their way through the tent's single opening.

When Teren came, Morgen rushed toward him, grabbed his bleeding shoulders and begged Teren to change his face. Teren said it couldn't be done. It was against nature.

We're all against nature, Morgen screamed.

I wanted to show Teren what I did, he says now. Look, he brushes his long hair away from his face.

The skin is smooth and pale, but hard, Rowan sees. Like porcelain, but not like the living flesh Teren fit on his body.

He beckons Rowan toward him. I can change you too.

## Chapter 49. Nail

Pressed up against the cellar door, the young man turns to the other shadows crowded in the little space.

I don't hear the howling anymore. The freaks left.

They're gone?

I think so. Wait, I think someone's outside.

It's Jacob, it's Jacob. Hurry up and open the door before they come back.

No, no, the old woman says. Up till now, no one's heard the old woman muttering in the corner, muffled under the rags that keep her warm. The blankets fall from her lap as she stands to stop the woman, but the latch lifts, the door swings open, and a chill wind rushes in.

\*\*\*

Carina dismounts the horse at the council chamber. Her dress writhes over the ground, obscuring the bodies on the floor as she walks toward the open shaft. She hears singing, sweet singing that she remembers fondly. The train of her dress pulls her down into the darkness, the black form churning and wriggling like tiny hands reaching out.

The siren moves quickly through the corridors, unhindered by the skulls and hands that are now still and silent. She hears voices ahead and calls out.

Rowan?

But it is Teren and Nessa. Their hands touch in the darkness, and she pulls them in the direction her dress leads her.

The chamber ahead lights up with fire. She sees Morgen, and then, Rowan.

I want my nail back. Carina holds her hand out to Teren.

It's for my husband, she says when he pries it from his chest and gives it to her, blood staining her sleeves.

\*

Morgen picks up half a limp body, dangles it in front of Rowan, and drops it back into the water where it sinks in the churning muck.

It's for our cause, he tells Rowan. I'm getting back at them. Isn't that what you wanted?

*Leave them alone*, he remembered Teren telling him, like a litany when he first joined the circus, setting a man on fire because he called Rowan a freak.

They'll never change, Morgen says. So we have to start again.

Carina changed, Rowan says.

\*

From where he stands, Rowan only sees a dark mass whip out at Morgen from behind, the blow knocking the siren to the ground. In his place stands Carina, and he hears her voice, but something pulls him down into the water and he can't hear her. Just the muffled splashing of their footsteps, the thudding of Nessa's feet. The water feels like little hands, trying to pry open his eyes and mouth. He gets up and sees Nessa tear at Morgen's arms with her hands, but the limbs she flings away are replaced by more. In his struggle, the siren's body begins to lose form, and the black writhing forms rear up as Morgen is held down under the weight of Carina and Teren.

For Carina, it is not so hard when she holds the nail above Morgen's head and watches Teren's hand rise and fall, hammering the iron into her husband's skull. She focuses on his mouth, and feels her body shake with his screaming.

\*

When the chamber quiets, and Morgen's body stills, the four begin the task of taking his body apart. As the siren is no longer holding the pieces together, he comes apart with a quick and firm tug, and it doesn't take very long until only his head remains in the mass of tangled hair.

I have to burn this place, Rowan says.

\*

The sickly sweet smell of Morgen's burning hair trails after Carina as she follows Nessa and Teren out of the catacombs.

Rowan reminds them of the list he made before, of the bone patterned walls they passed to get there. Head, hands, ribs, feet, hips, hands, he tells them. Except backwards. Take him with you too.

They each take pieces of Morgen's body with them, and along the halls they shove the dripping fragments between the grasping hands and chattering jaws.

When they emerge from the floor of the council chamber, Rowan sets afire the tunnel below, and soon, they hear his footsteps and his singsong voice reciting the way out. He appears sticky with sweat and soot and a little ash, reminding Carina of his performances under the circus tent.



## Chapter 50. Last Call

*Ladies, and gentlemen,* the Ringmaster's voice booms. In the light of the pyre, the man in his giant egg spins as best he can without the aid of his wheel. The sound of wood and bodies settling on top one another in the fire replaces the rat-a-tat of the drums that used to signal the start of the show. The heat has dried up the field around them, but Rowan's skin is goose pimpled by the fingers he can almost imagine touching his legs, his arms. *We have a special show for you tonight.*

The Ringmaster is not up to his usual banter, his voice choked by the names of the circus dead inked within his shell. The little marks have grown in the past few weeks as the circus has moved away from the capital. It is difficult to pitch to a silent crowd, and for the circus, the ones who remain—the Ringmaster, Teren, Nessa, Rowan, Carina, and now Effie—are left to fill in for the empty acts. When the Ringmaster falls silent, Carina croons in a low voice. Tonight will be a different performance.

\*

The hounds had passed while they were underground. The city's surface silent as they had left it, and silent when they returned. A giant egg the size of a man stands in the smoldering ruins of the circus camp. Effie's head is pressed against its creamy surface, knocking softly.

\*

They round up the horses and tether them to what wagons are left undamaged by the hounds. Carina no longer dreams of drowning, but their sleep is broken now by the wailing of the Ringmaster from within his shell, sounding out the night's hours. Nessa cannot get the smell of burning flesh from her nose and Effie's arms are white with maggots from the dead. Teren picks what bodies to take with him. *How will you wear them all?* the Ringmaster keeps asking him as the changeling fills a sack that bulges with the shapes of mismatched limbs, slinging the weight of those lives over his shoulder. It is a shoulder that Carina has never seen before because it is his own real arm he kept with him in the circus and never wore until now. Rowan is quiet, spinning wispy strands of fire in his hands, humming the way out.

On their last night in the Pale, when the stars of the sky ride along the stone boundary's ridge, Rowan joins Carina away from the fire, the slick black of her dress gliding across the dewy grass. The fabric opens, closes, sucking in the moisture, and blooms out again.

Rowan taps his forehead. You're still bleeding.

I thought it'd stop with Morgen, she says. Carina wipes the watery grime away as if wiping tears. The movement has become a habit, and she hadn't bothered to bandage it anymore. It seems permanent.

I know what to do.

What?

Rowan brushes away the wet strands of hair covering the wound and blows softly on her damp skin. Carina's body stiffens, and he slides his hands to the back of her head so she won't move. Her dress creeps across the carpet of weed and thorn and stone to Rowan's feet. It climbs up his legs, stops. Clings to him when he steps back.

The edges of her wound have scabbed over. Carina touches her forehead.

It's won't go away, but maybe it'll heal now, he says.

Chapter 51. Final Interlude

*Have you seen all the smoke coming from that place?*

*Yeah, there's a big stink coming from there. I hope they killed all the freaks this time.*

*It'll be safer now, with the hounds gone. And that circus, too.*

*But I just saw them. She said they were coming.*

*She? Who talked to you?*

*A woman. With a hole in her head. She told me.*

*The circus is coming to town.*

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