

**THE (FALSE) DICHOTOMY OF THE AUTHOR AND
READER IN THE SHORT STORY CYCLE**

and

HESKET

Sara Bayat

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative and Critical Writing

The University of East Anglia
School of Literature, Drama, and Creative Writing

May 2023

This copy of the thesis has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it is understood to recognize that its copyright rests with the author and that use of any information derived there from must be in accordance with current UK Copyright Law. In addition, any quotation or extract must include full attribution.

ABSTRACT

Critical discourse surrounding the short story cycle has traditionally offered two differing approaches to formal unity. One method, championed by Robert Luscher, emphasizes the reader in the creation of coherence, whereas the other foregrounds the author and form, as conceived by Forest Ingram. Recent scholarship has questioned the necessity of this division but is yet to conclusively interrogate if and how these oppositional methodologies work together. My critical thesis aims to bridge the two approaches by demonstrating how the creation of unity is in fact an interactive process, evidenced by my analysis of both a published short story cycle (*The Shore* by Sara Taylor), and through my engagement with archival materials from the British Archive for Contemporary Writing, to investigate the compositional history of that text.

My creative component is an exploration of the short story cycle form in which the ordinary and the peculiar commune in shifting perspectives and intertwining stories. It posits how the uncanny and the natural world intersect, and then examines the way in which this convergence occurs within a small Norfolk community.

Access Condition and Agreement

Each deposit in UEA Digital Repository is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the Data Collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission from the copyright holder, usually the author, for any other use. Exceptions only apply where a deposit may be explicitly provided under a stated licence, such as a Creative Commons licence or Open Government licence.

Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone, unless explicitly stated under a Creative Commons or Open Government license. Unauthorised reproduction, editing or reformatting for resale purposes is explicitly prohibited (except where approved by the copyright holder themselves) and UEA reserves the right to take immediate 'take down' action on behalf of the copyright and/or rights holder if this Access condition of the UEA Digital Repository is breached. Any material in this database has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the material may be published without proper acknowledgement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	2
LIST OF FIGURES	4
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
THE (FALSE) DICHOTOMY OF THE AUTHOR AND READER IN THE SHORT STORY CYCLE	6
INTRODUCTION	7
CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS A SHORT STORY CYCLE?	13
CRITICAL TAXONOMY	13
PUBLISHING THE SHORT STORY CYCLE	21
MIXED METAPHORS	26
CHAPTER 2: READING <i>THE SHORE</i> AS A SHORT STORY CYCLE	29
A PATTERN ENACTED: THE AUTHOR AS ARCHITECT	34
THE PATTERN EXPANDED: THE ACTIVE READER	39
“THE FILAMENTS OF A SPIDER’S WEB”	43
THE CUMULATIVE	46
CHAPTER 3: THE WRITER AND THE ARCHIVE	49
THE WRITER’S INFLUENCE	50
MAKING CONNECTIONS	53
THE READER’S INFLUENCE	59
CONCLUSION	66
BIBLIOGRAPHY	68
LINKING THE CRITICAL AND THE CREATIVE	72
HESKET	76
ISLA	78
RIO	95
NELL	111
JACK	126
EMIR	139
FINN	156
EILEEN	173
ARTHUR	188
RAIN	202

LIST OF FIGURES

Figures 1 and 2: A list of connections in *The Shore*, written by Sara Taylor. Page 55.

Photograph taken by Justine Mann (2023)

Figure 3: A circular diagram depicting connections between stories, drawn by Sara Taylor.

Page 56. Photograph taken by Justine Mann (2023)

Figure 4: An early draft of the family tree, created by Sara Taylor. Page 60. Photograph by

Justine Mann (2023)

Figure 5: A document depicting two potential options for story arrangement for *The Shore*,

written by Sara Taylor. Page 61. Photograph by Justine Mann (2023)

Figure 6: A document depicting story order and a list of connections to add, written by Sara

Taylor. Page 61. Photograph by Justine Mann (2023)

Figures 7 – 9: Jason Arthur’s letter to Sara Taylor. Pages 63-64. Photograph by Justine

Mann (2023)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Naomi Wood and Dr Nonia Williams, whose guidance, wisdom, consideration, and warmth saw me through all the myriad peaks and troughs (especially troughs!) of the last few years. I cannot express the depth of my gratitude and appreciation for you both enough.

I am enormously grateful to my family for their unwavering support and love, particularly my parents, Ahmad and June, and my partner, Ben. And my friends (and Ben, again), for pep talks and reading stories.

I would also like to thank: Sara Taylor, for so kindly agreeing to speak with me, and for allowing me to publish images of her archival materials; Jason Arthur, for granting permission to publish his letter; and Justine Mann, whose knowledge of, and assistance with, all things archive was such an incredible help – thank you for kindly providing much better photographs than I could have taken.

**THE (FALSE) DICHOTOMY OF THE AUTHOR AND
READER IN THE SHORT STORY CYCLE**

INTRODUCTION

To set the scene: there is a toilet on the lawn of a property in a rural part of Virginia known as ‘the Shore’; the lawn is littered with other things that don’t typically belong on a lawn, much of it stolen and all of it “junk, cracked or rusting or covered up with tarps”.¹ More specifically, this is a disabled toilet, and there is a seven-year-old boy named Cabel throwing stones into its bowl to pass the time while his childminder, Izzy, waits for a ride to a pharmacy in another town, miles away, so that she can purchase a pregnancy test in secret. The toilet, Izzy reasons, is worth some money, not the kind of thing someone would simply discard, but her partner, Donnie, found it shortly after she moved in with him; like everything else on the lawn, he intends to sell it. In the grand scheme of Sara Taylor’s, *The Shore* (2015), this is a small and seemingly insignificant moment taken from the short story, “Boys”, one of thirteen interlinked stories that comprise the text. *The Shore* is laden with instances such as this one, quietly churning with tension and indicative of the sort of setting we find ourselves in. This world is provincial but impoverished, the kind of place that is both a home and a prison, and where people rely on selling a disabled toilet to make a bit of extra money. The same toilet appears in another scene within *The Shore*, this one in the story, “Skirt”. There is an old Victorian house, elsewhere on ‘the Shore’, being stripped and refurbished; the parts that are valuable, such as the original claw-foot bathtub, are to be sold off before the house itself is put on the market.² Amongst the items is a disabled toilet, removed by one of the builders, Tiny, and left on the back porch. One morning, not long after, they find the toilet has been stolen; gone too, is the “three hundred bucks” they could have profited from it.³

This example of the disabled toilet is just one instance of what is fascinating about the short story cycle, in that it permits what is ostensibly an unremarkable object to take on a life of its own beyond the confines of the individual stories. In this liminal, unwritten space between “Boys” and “Skirt”, the reader can conceive of Donnie, perhaps under cover of darkness, pilfering the disabled toilet from the back porch of the old Victorian house, and depositing it on his lawn, where, years later, a young boy will fill it with stones.⁴ In this way, the toilet assumes a significance because of its repetition and is transformed into a portal between these stories, linking them together to create a greater, more enriched effect. Not

¹ Sara Taylor, *The Shore* (London: William Heinemann, 2015), 95.

² Taylor, 129.

³ Taylor, 132.

⁴ Later, the reader learns that Tiny is the biological father of Cabel, the boy throwing stones into the same disabled toilet that Tiny removed from the Victorian house; another link between the two stories. I will discuss the story, “Skirt”, in more detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

only is this capacity for unity between what are otherwise wholly distinct, stand-alone stories a compelling mechanism of the short story cycle genre, but it poses the interesting questions of how linking elements such as the disabled toilet operate, and why do they work in this way? How does the reader engage with points of connection in a cycle? How does the author animate this engagement? These, in turn, raise wider questions about form: how does the short story cycle function? What happens when we scrutinize the roles of the author and reader in the creation of unity? How might we practically offer a critical framework for thinking about these roles in relation to the workings of the short story cycle? This critical thesis will address these questions in three parts: by considering the critical landscape of the cycle (Chapter 1); conducting an extended reading of *The Shore* (Chapter 2); and interacting with Sara Taylor's archival materials at the British Archive For Contemporary Writing (Chapter 3).

This thesis responds to the friction between critical approaches in scholarship to the short story cycle. The first method was established by Forrest Ingram and later adopted by Susan Garland Mann and James Nagel.⁵ This school of thought foregrounds the formal properties of a cycle, as designed by its author, which imbue the text with unity. In response, Robert Luscher, whose argument was later endorsed by J. Gerald Kennedy, emphasized the reader as unity-creator, in that the reader interprets coherent features during the reading process.⁶ Recent critics, however, such as Elke D'Hoker and Bart Van Den Bossche, have addressed this disparity as an unnecessary one,

After all, the reader-oriented approach fastens on many of the same elements as the formalist approach – e.g., recurring characters, settings, or themes; a shared fictional world; paratextual elements – but recasts them in terms of the effects they have on the reader's interpretation of the collection as a whole.⁷

⁵ See: Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre* (The Hague, Mouton, 1971); Susan Garland Mann, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1989); James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

⁶ See: Robert Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Jo Ellyn Clary and Susan Lohafer (Louisiana State UP, 1989), 148–67; J. Gerald Kennedy, ed., *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷ Elke D'hoker and Bart Van Den Bossche, 'Cycles, Recueils, Macrotxts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective', *Interférences Littéraires/Littéraire Interferenties*, no. 12 (15 February 2014): 15. See also: Suzanne Ferguson, 'Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in Genre Criticism', *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de La Nouvelle*, no. 41 (1 September 2003): 103–17; Anja Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018); Patrick Gill and Florian Kläger, 'Introduction: Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle', in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018).

How these elements unify – whether at the hand of the author or the reader – is debated between the two differing schools of thought, yet the aim of these oppositional approaches is the same: to illuminate how the individual stories become a cohesive whole. If theorists can agree that the stories in a cycle are simultaneously both independent from and interactive with one another, why does predominant methodology of the cycle not take a similarly dual stance to include both reader and writer as fundamental to creating unity? This thesis recognises the validity of both the author and the reader as independent forces, and questions why one must be foregrounded over the other when it comes to accounting for the realisation of textual wholeness.

Contemporary critics of the cycle have acknowledged that, with the exception of Forest Ingram's foundational study, both approaches tend to somewhat eschew the author in favour of form and/or the reader.⁸ This is likely because it is inevitably easier from the position of the reader-critic to analyse a text from the perspective of the reader, and because the text's formal characteristics are more readily examinable than authorial intention, which may typically remain obscured. Furthermore, as Anja Müller-Wood states in her study on the cognitive and biological conditions involved in reading short story cycles, neither approach actually "thinks of literature as an act of communication or a dialogue between author and reader".⁹ But at a rudimentary level, communication is the intent of both an author who seeks to express their ideas, and of the reader who receives them.¹⁰ That the division between 'formalist' and 'reader-focused' approaches has persisted for so long is perhaps in part because the author is not granted enough of a presence within theoretical discourse of the cycle to mediate between form and reader.

In this thesis, I disagree with the term 'formalist approach', as it is not indicative enough of the author's influence; it is, after all, the author who is responsible for creating the formal properties of a cycle in the first place. To that end, the 'formalist approach' is reframed as the 'author-focused approach' here, as it returns agency to the author. This is not to diminish the formal properties of the cycle, but to emphasise the author's hand in their creation. To allow for a greater understanding of the author's role in relation to the short

⁸ See: Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', 32; D'hoker and Bossche, 'Cycles, Recueils, Macrotexts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective', 15.

⁹ Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', 33. Despite pointing out this limitation, Müller-Wood herself omits authorial intent in this instance, locating the separate approaches instead within reader response and formalism. Though she references J. Gerald Kennedy and Robert Luscher in her overall argument – both of whom are the early devotees of a reader-centred approach – her analysis is one-sided in that she neglects to include the work produced by foundational critics who championed authorial intent and form. See: Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*; Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book'.

¹⁰ William D. Page, 'The Author and the Reader in Writing and Reading', *Research in the Teaching of English* 8, no. 2 (1974): 170–83, p.170.

story cycle, I examine the composition of *The Shore* using materials from the Sara Taylor archive held at the British Archive for Contemporary Writing at UEA, and by incorporating interviews with Taylor herself, including a discussion with me that she generously agreed to participate in. Further, I approach the critical project with my own experience of writing a short story cycle, which comprises the creative component of this thesis.

Despite recent critics having questioned the need for divergent approaches separating author/form and reader, there has not yet, to my knowledge, been a focused examination of how both methodologies are simultaneously at work within a text, in order to substantiate or disprove the division in short story cycle theory. It should also be noted that although the critics I predominantly focus on – Forest Ingram and Robert Luscher – were writing decades ago, they remain key thinkers in the critical landscape. Contemporary criticism on the short story cycle still returns to these foundational texts, and much of the work published subsequent to Ingram and Luscher – including more recent theses – engages directly with the original theories proposed by them.¹¹ For this reason, I demonstrate that an investigation which specifically tests the theories of both Ingram and Luscher within a singular text in order to more fully determine how unity is created within a short story cycle, is a useful undertaking. I apply both the reader-focused and author-focused approaches to *The Shore* and examine how these processes work in detail. While the first chapter of this thesis considers a broad range of critical perspectives, the second and third chapters implement a much more focused study. Although I refer to a broader scope of story cycles within these two chapters, this thesis works primarily with one specific text, as this allows for the requisite depth of analysis within the word count constraints. To focus the lens further, I chart the unifying theme of misogyny within the overarching narrative of a single character, and use this as a frame through which to examine the author as *cohesion*-maker and the reader as *coherence*-maker in the creation of unity.¹² Ultimately, this critical project

¹¹ See: Jennifer J Smith, 'One Story, Many Voices: Problems of Unity in the Short Story Cycle' (Indiana University, 2011); Elke D'hoker, 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives: The Lucky Ones as Short Story Cycle', *E-Rea. Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone*, no. 10.2 (18 June 2013), <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/3230>; D'hoker and Bossche, 'Cycles, Recueils, Macrotexts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective'; Debbie Brouckmans, 'The Short Story Cycle in Ireland: From Jane Barlow to Donal Ryan', 21 April 2015, <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/1807900>; Kate Elkington, 'WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel's Whole Text Coherence', 2015; Helena Kadmos, 'Riding Waves: Representing Women's Relational Autonomy in the Short Story Cycle' (Murdoch University, 2015), <https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/27336/>; Ling Liang, 'The Short Story Cycle in Winseburg, Ohio' (2015 International Conference on Social Science, Education Management and Sports Education, Atlantis Press, 2015), 66–70, <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/ssmse-15/25841994>; Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles'; Hager Ben Driss, 'Nomadic Genres: The Case of the Short Story Cycle', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2018): 59–74; Gill and Kläger, 'Introduction'; Rolf Lundén, *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* (Brill, 2022).

¹² I use the terms cohesion and coherence as Danielle McNamara does. In her examination of the role of cohesion in text production and comprehension, McNamara makes the distinction "between the

demonstrates that the separation between unifying processes in these theoretical approaches is unnecessary. Not only do both schools of thought complement one another, but this thesis demonstrates that they interact, and that they do so within both a published text and its compositional history. I propose, therefore, that the author-focused and reader-focused approaches should no longer be thought of as separate, oppositional methodologies, but recognised as part of a singular unity-creating process of both cohesion and coherence.

This thesis adopts a three-chapter structure, beginning with a taxonomical overview of the short story cycle in order to more fully explain the differing critical approaches my intervention responds to.¹³ In this way, Chapter 1 addresses the question of definition by outlining the differing theoretical approaches of Ingram and Luscher. In order to show the practical as well as critical implications of disparate approaches when it comes to the short story cycle, I address the discrepancy over how short story cycles are published and viewed in the literary marketplace. This subchapter considers what categorisation might mean in terms of prize culture and discusses aspects of how the writing and reading of these texts is influenced by forces within the marketplace. To conclude Chapter 1, I focus on the metaphors – a ‘network’ and a ‘wheel’, respectively – used by Luscher and Ingram to exemplify their differing perspectives to unity-making. I address the ways in which they are each valid yet limited and suggest that it is instead more prudent to overlay these metaphors as a more effective way of thinking about Sara Taylor’s work.

I begin Chapter 2 by establishing *The Shore* as a short story cycle, discussing it in terms of the formal properties and generic markers summarised in the taxonomical chapter. My examination of the author-focused and reader-focused approaches begins with a consideration of the image of a family tree as a marker of unity, and how this image speaks to not only the interlinking form of the cycle, but also the multidirectional process of reading these collections. In order to test out the two theoretical approaches identified in the taxonomy, my study follows one key character, Chloe, across the overarching narrative of *The Shore*. This chapter involves an examination through detailed close readings and analyses of the text, to show how the author and reader each interact with the recurring thematic pattern at work within *The Shore*, and this allows me to interrogate how these differing unifying processes are working on the page.

cues that are objectively observable in the text or discourse (i.e., cohesion) as compared to the connections that are formed in the mind of the reader or listener (i.e., coherence).” Danielle S. McNamara, ‘The Epistemic Stance between the Author and Reader: A Driving Force in the Cohesion of Text and Writing’, *Discourse Studies* 15, no. 5 (1 October 2013): 590.

¹³ Because my thesis centres on the author-focused and reader-focused approaches, I only include the theoretical studies that relate to or address the disparity between them. There is simply too much and too varied critical discourse to involve a broader range, but I provide references to texts within the footnotes which tackle the wider criticism.

The final chapter concentrates on Sara Taylor's archive. I reveal how not only is the interaction between the author and reader traceable within the published text, but it is also evident within its composition. This reveals another dimension of unity-making, in that authorial intention is demonstrable. Perhaps most significant, the archive materials offer tangible representations of the 'wheel' and 'network' metaphors, making visually explicit the processes that Ingram and Luscher theorize. All of this allows for a demonstration of and reflection on the value of archives, not only as repositories of compositional history, but as illuminators of the creative process. Further, it addresses how the archive can deepen critical thinking about the reader and writer of the short story cycle.

The experience of writing about *The Shore* has been not unlike the experience of reading it. The text is a warren of intricately linking elements that require a multidirectional readerly engagement, but that also demand nonlinearity in its scholarly analysis. In this way, the metaphors I examine – one circular, the other weblike – are evoked in the writing and examination process. An excavation of the recurring image of a medicine chest, for example, might offshoot any number of ways, or an editor's note examined in Chapter 3 that comments on the circularity between the penultimate and first stories, might link to a footnote in *Critical Taxonomy* in which critics address precisely this kind of cyclical organisation, and I inevitably must tunnel back, only to be led off in another direction again. This is reflected in the structure of my thesis: an interrogation of the differing theoretical approaches leads to a question of placement within the literary marketplace, to an unexpected coalescing of metaphor, to a reading which navigates a focused selection of intricate and multifold directions within *The Shore*, and to Sara Taylor's archive and the influence of agents and editors, all of them distinct yet linked spaces, which is itself indicative of the short story cycle form, simultaneously independent and interdependent parts, the many forming a unified whole.

CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS A SHORT STORY CYCLE?

CRITICAL TAXONOMY

At its most rudimentary, the short story cycle is an interlinked collection of short fiction. A closer examination of its workings, however, reveals that it is a more sophisticated and elusive form than may first appear. Numerous scholars have produced work that offers detailed histories of the critical discourse surrounding the cycle, but due to the size constraints of this critical thesis I will instead offer a distillation of the theory most relevant to my study.¹

The term *short story cycle* originated with Forest Ingram, who conducted the first significant analysis of the form, a text which remains widely referenced in recent scholarship. One of the most enduring aspects of his study is the debate provoked by his choice of terminology. Critics have either embraced or shunned it, and as a result there are now several names for the form, such as short story cycle, short story sequence and composite novel.² For the purposes of this thesis, I use *short story cycle* as it is the original and most pervasive term, and it is suggestive of the recurrence and movement which both underpin the form and interest this project. More pertinently, the term highlights the cyclical, generational trauma that features within *The Shore*, and as this thesis will further demonstrate, the penultimate story within the collection, “Missing Pieces”, refers back to the

¹ For a broader overview, see research theses and critical theory by: Ferguson, ‘Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels’; Smith, ‘One Story, Many Voices: Problems of Unity in the Short Story Cycle’; D’hoker, ‘Linked Stories, Connected Lives’; D’hoker and Bossche, ‘Cycles, Recueils, Macrotxts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective’; Brouckmans, ‘The Short Story Cycle in Ireland’; Elkington, ‘WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel’s Whole Text Coherence’; Kadmos, ‘Riding Waves’; Liang, ‘The Short Story Cycle in Winseburg, Ohio’; Driss, ‘Nomadic Genres’; Gill and Kläger, ‘Introduction’; Elke D’Hoker, ‘A Continuum of Fragmentation: Distinguishing the Short Story Cycle from the Composite Novel’, in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018); Jennifer J. Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2018), amongst others.

² Prevalent designations include the *short story cycle* [Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*; *Studies in a Literary Genre*; Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*; Gerald Lynch, *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles* (University of Toronto Press, 2001); Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*; Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle*.], *short story sequence* [Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’; Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*; Ferguson, ‘Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels’], and *composite novel* [Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. (New York: Twayne, 1995).], and *short story composite* [Lundén, *The United Stories of America*.], though there are a number of lesser-used alternatives, such as the *rovelle*, *novel of interrelated stories* and the *integrated short story collection*.

beginning, which speaks to both the recurrence of trauma throughout, and to the repeating, linking qualities of the form itself.³

The disagreement amongst critics does not end with terminology, however, as the question of how best to define the short story cycle has led to varying discordant critical approaches being proposed in the aftermath of Ingram's foundational study.⁴ Perhaps unintentionally, Ingram somewhat foreshadows this subsequent debate over the workings of the cycle, when he addresses the difficulty of attempting to classify so "elusive" a form:

While each story in a cycle may be relatively simple, the dynamics of the cycle itself often poses a major challenge to the critic. Like the moving parts of a mobile, the interconnected parts of some story cycles seem to shift their positions with relation to the other parts, as the cycle moves forward in its typical pattern of recurrent development. Shifting internal relationships, of course, continually alter the originally perceived pattern of the whole cycle.⁵

What Ingram describes seems like an alive thing, a creature that adjusts and moves of its own accord rather than a collection of stories, which is perhaps why critics have been in dispute as to how exactly to categorise it, precision made difficult with so shifting and

³ Kennedy objects to the term *short story cycle* because it connotes an "an overdetermined, even circular, arrangement that defines the genre rather narrowly". As does Rolf Lundén, because it emphasises "undue stress on a cyclicity that is often absent from this form of narrative" (they prefer the terms, *short story composite* and *short story sequence*, respectively). Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, xv; Lundén, *The United Stories of America*, 14. While there are cycles that do feature final stories that refer back to the beginning, such as *The Lucky Ones* (Rachel Cusk, 2004), *The Spinning Heart* (Donal Ryan, 2012), and *The Shore*, there are many others that do not – *Folk* (Zoe Gilbert, 2018), and the *Olive Kitteridge* books (Elizabeth Strout, 2008, 2019) for example – and neither Ingram nor Susan Garland Mann, another advocate of the term *cycle*, ever argue this notion of a return to the beginning is a characteristic of the form. What Lundén may have misinterpreted in Ingram's study is his reference to P.M Kramer, who used the term 'cycle' in relation to specific kinds of story collections in which the end returns to the beginning. Ingram, however, asserts that although Kramer was the first to apply the term 'cycle' to short stories, Ingram's theory is actually more akin to Helen Mustard's use of "lyric cycle", which she used to define a collection of poems grouped together by their author. As quoted by Ingram, these poems feature a "cyclic principle" in which poems are "linked to a central concept and to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of the poem and the necessities of the larger unit". This is clearly the inspiration for what would become Ingram's foundational theory on the cycle, particularly his ideas of the tension between the one and the many, and the pattern of recurrence and development. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 15, 20. See: Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*.

⁴ Champions of both the *composite novel* (Dunn and Morris) and the *short story composite* (Lundén), for example, have proposed differing formal properties to those this taxonomy will focus on. While all three critics list simultaneous self-sufficiency and independence as a quality of the cycle, Dunn and Morris also stress the importance of the form's kinship with the novel and allow for the individual texts that comprise it to be generically various; rather than simply short stories, a collection might instead be a blend of fiction and poems, for example. Lundén, on the other hand, identifies four subgenres of the form – the cycle, the sequence, the cluster, and the novella – with cycle and sequence having the highest degree of coherence. Both studies focus on new ideas for genre and form, rather than addressing the question of whether it is the reader or the author who constructs unity, which is why this thesis does not examine these studies more closely. See: Dunn and Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition.*, 4,8; Lundén, *The United Stories of America*, 37.

⁵ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 13.

multifaceted a form. This quotation draws attention to various aspects of Ingram's theory of the cycle. To begin with, there is Ingram's concept of the tension between the one and the many, which highlights the duality of the form. The stories within a cycle are both complete stories which are *independent from one another*, and stories that are so *interconnected to one another* through various repeating elements that together they form a united whole.⁶ Susan Garland Mann later expanded this principle to emphasize that this dynamic of independence and interdependence occurs *simultaneously*, in that the reader may encounter an event in one story, for example, and then be prompted to recall a similar event in a previous story.⁷ Not only does this ability to be both at once underscore the complexity of the form, but Mann identifies this concurrent dynamic to be the cycle's most essential quality; indeed, it seems to be the formal characteristic most consistently recognised amongst critics.⁸ What Mann does not consider, perhaps because she has not herself composed a short story cycle, is the writing of these texts presents a similar challenge to the author as it does the reader, in that they must approach the composition of each story individually whilst keeping ways to link it to the rest of the collection in mind. Herein lies the tension between the one and the many: the stories are concurrently experienced (in the reading *and* the writing, I would argue) as individual components of a collection whilst at the same time being reconciled within the context of the greater whole. For Ingram, the process of the many becoming a one is achieved through the pattern of recurrent development.⁹ This notion is central to his theory, and it essentially accounts for the repeated elements – such as theme, setting, character – within the cycle which enable the individual stories to interlink.¹⁰ In this sense, the author creates unity by way of this recursive, developmental pattern, and the reader observes the pattern as it recurs and develops over the course of the cycle. *The Spinning Heart* by Donal Ryan, for example, uses the event of a murder in a small Irish community as a unifying event which the various stories orbit throughout the collection.¹¹ Aside from its shared

⁶ Ingram, 19.

⁷ Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 15. Although Mann reflects on the reader's experience here, her study on the cycle is derived from and in support of Ingram's author-based approach, though she is less explorative of authorial intention than him. Her work is instead predominantly concerned with the formal and structural qualities of the cycle, with a focus on identifying in more detail the major unifying methods and generic markers that Ingram only briefly considers.

⁸ Mann, 15.

⁹ Jane Alison refers to a "one and the many" structure in her study of patterns in literature but identifies them as "cellular texts made of discrete parts that gain power through patterns of images or ideas rather than sequential incidents." Jane Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative* (Catapult, 2019), 190.

¹⁰ Mann is more extensive in her examination of the formal properties of the cycle, and additionally cites plot, imagery, point of view and myth as unifying devices. James Nagel, another theorist who foregrounds authorial intention and form, further expands on Mann's study to include elements such as objects and symbols. See: Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*; Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*.

¹¹ Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart* (London: Penguin Random House, 2012).

setting, this cycle is populated by numerous characters which reappear in one another's stories, as do themes of distrust, fragmentation and loneliness, and a damaged spinning heart that appears on a gate in the first story becomes a symbol of the community and its varying themes by the cycle's end, all of which creates a definite sense of unity, the many becoming a one.¹²

The extent to which a cycle is unified, according to Ingram, is dependent on its author. He proposed that cycles exist on a spectrum: those that "have been COMPOSED as a continuous whole, or ARRANGED into a series, or COMPLETED to form a set."¹³ The first, a 'composed' cycle, is the most interconnected, the author envisaging the collection as a united whole from the start of its composition. At the other end of the spectrum, an 'arranged' cycle is the least unified and comprises stories arranged into one volume by the author and/or editor after having been written. Finally, a 'completed' cycle exists somewhere in between 'composed' and 'arranged', beginning as stories which are disconnected from one another, but that become more unified as the author recognises unifying elements between them.¹⁴ He does not, however, include how one might ascertain this information should the author not readily disclose it. For Ingram, the importance of the author is paramount, the cycle's unity attributed to authorial intention. Perhaps this is most evident in the way Ingram defines the cycle as "a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts."¹⁵ The

¹² Although I refer to *The Spinning Heart* as a short story cycle (as does Debbie Brouckmans in her study, *The Short Story Cycle in Ireland*, in which she makes a detailed and convincing case as to why it is a cycle and not a novel), it was published as a novel. It is undeniable, however, that Ryan's book adheres to many of the formal conventions of a cycle, in that the stories are simultaneously autonomous and interlinked, and feature recurrent patterns, such as characters and themes, which develop over the course of the collection and connect the stories together. See: Brouckmans, 'The Short Story Cycle in Ireland'.

¹³ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 17.

¹⁴ Gerald Lynch is a proponent of Ingram's 'composed', 'arranged', and 'completed' cycles, briefly offering an example of each in his study of Canadian short story cycles, but he offers little in the way of expansion or modification of Ingram's theory. J. Gerald Kennedy, however, heavily criticised Ingram's spectrum, not only because he saw no distinction between Ingram's proposed 'arranged' cycles and a collection of unlinked short stories, but "every single-author volume of stories manifests certain narrative homologues, commonalities of style or sensibility, that (in the absence of scholarly evidence) might be construed as premeditated design." Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ix. I will address Kennedy's criticism again in this taxonomy, but Elke D'Holker makes a similar argument in her work proposing that the short story cycle and the composite novel (another term for the cycle) be regarded as two separate genres. She argues that *all* short story collections are capable of readings which stress unity between the stories, just as they are capable of emphasising separation between them. While Mann agrees that stories written by the same author will inevitably create similarities between them, they lack the sufficiency of connection required by the cycle to be recognised as such. See: Lynch, *The One and the Many*, 20. D'Holker, 'A Continuum of Fragmentation', 22. Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 15–16.

¹⁵ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 19.

emphasis is on the author's role as text and unity creator, whereas the reader merely 'experiences' or observes the text through the recursive patterns the author imbeds; in other words, the author *does*, and the reader is *done to*. While Ingram's definition remains, in my opinion, quite accurate in its recognition of the author's efforts and the cycle's fluidity of form, his undermining of the reader as passive is problematic, not least because by the time Ingram's theory was published in 1971, reader-response theorists were already beginning to argue otherwise.¹⁶

Supporters of Ingram's approach to the cycle adopted and expanded his work; one of the most notable of whom is Mann, who similarly emphasises unity but slants her study toward the formal qualities of the cycle.¹⁷ Mann highlights the simultaneous independence and interconnection as a central tenet of the form, and like Ingram, examines a range of case studies noncompetitively (her focus is on American and Irish authors, two of which, Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, are texts also used by Ingram), with a concentration on each cycle's formal unity. Although she references Ingram's spectrum of unity in her introduction, she does not directly identify the texts in her case studies as being 'composed', 'arranged', or 'completed'. Rather, she attempts to reconstruct the composition and publication history of a selection of the texts in order to determine where on Ingram's spectrum of authorially intended unity they are placed. This often leans toward the speculative, such as her chapters on Hemingway and Steinbeck, and some of her case studies omit this history altogether, one assumes because it was simply not available to her.¹⁸ Additionally, Mann includes generic signals that an author might use to alert their prospective reader to a unified work. A cycle's title, she asserts, will often

¹⁶ Reader-response theory is an incredibly expansive field, and while this thesis is too narrow in its scope to include an involved examination of this branch of theory in conjunction with the short story cycle, Kate Elkington offers a thorough and informative integration of the two in her thesis (*WOOL SPIN BURN*, 2015). However, I will draw somewhat on the theories of Wolfgang Iser – whose work Luscher uses in support of his argument foregrounding the reader in the cycle – and Louise Rosenblatt in my reading of *The Shore*. See: Elkington, 'WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel's Whole Text Coherence'; Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 279–99; Louise M. Rosenblatt, 'The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing: Transactional Theory of Reading' (New York: Routledge, 2019), 451–79.

¹⁷ James Nagel places a similar emphasis to Mann on the formal properties of the cycle, including the principle that "each component work must stand alone" and at the same time "be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories." Nagel, 15. He frames his study within an ethnological perspective, highlighting the form as a multi-ethnic tradition, well-suited to multicultural storytelling. Jennifer J. Smith offers a detailed analysis of Nagel and ethnicity within the cycle in her thesis. Smith, 'One Story, Many Voices: Problems of Unity in the Short Story Cycle'. For additional studies on the cycle and diasporic identity, see: Driss, 'Nomadic Genres'; Michael C. Frank, 'Two Worlds in One Book: Ways of Sunlight and the Migrant Short Story Cycle', in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018); Janine Hauthal, 'Unity in Diversity? Imagining Europe in Julian Barnes's *Cross Channel*', in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁸ Perhaps this is because, as Kennedy will later remark in his critique of the author-focused approach, authorial intention is often not readily accessible to the reader.

underscore its unity – she cites *Winesburg, Ohio* as an example, which is also where the stories in Anderson’s cycle are set – as opposed to an unrelated collection which will often be named after one of its stories and sometimes features the supplement, ‘and other stories’.¹⁹ Other markers she identifies include the blurb on a dust jacket alluding to the text’s unity within, the inclusion of a preface in which the author might acknowledge the unity directly, and the table of contents which may sometimes thematically group its stories into sections.²⁰ Mann does not credit the extent to which publishers might influence the presence of these markers, but it can be assumed that the contents of a dust jacket, for example, are at least in part determined by more than just the author.

Ingram’s author-framed definition of the cycle provoked a response from critics who disagreed with his diminishing the role of the reader. Published the same year as Mann’s study supporting Ingram, Robert Luscher drew on reader-response theory in his critique of Ingram’s author-focused methodology. He reframes the cycle as a “volume of stories, collected and organized by their author, in which the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of [their] perceptions of pattern and theme.”²¹ Whereas Ingram highlighted the role of the author and composition, Luscher’s emphasis is on the reader. For Luscher, the reader is not a passive observer of the patterns seeded within the text by the author, and nor do these patterns modify or act on the reader’s experience; rather, the reader recognises patterns for themselves and actively adjusts their own understanding of the text each time the pattern recurs. In this way, Luscher bestows the short story cycle reader with an agency lacking in Ingram and Mann’s approaches. He does so, however, at the expense of the author, who now merely ‘collects’ and ‘organizes’ their stories for the reader. That Luscher chooses to use ‘collects’ rather than ‘composes’ is telling of just how much he distances the author from the cycle’s unity.²² For Luscher, since it is the reader who realises the unifying patterns within a cycle, it is the reader, and not the author,

¹⁹ Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 14. A more recent example of a cycle indicating its unity would be *Olive Kitteridge*, named for its central character who appears, to some degree, in every story.

²⁰ The contents page of *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo uses such subdivisions, setting together stories which feature characters who are in some way related to one another. Grouping the stories in this way suggests to the reader that they are linked before the reading has even begun. See: Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019).

²¹ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 148. For direct comparison, Ingram’s definition of the cycle is, again, “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts.” Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 19. In Ingram’s definition, the text created by the author is given agency in that the pattern is modifying the reader’s experience; for Luscher, the reader is modifying the pattern.

²² Luscher does credit the author with composition of the cycle in his argument, but these instances are framed in terms similar to the author providing an empty shell and the reader filling it with meaning.

who is therefore responsible for its unity.²³ Luscher attributes the structure of the cycle with encouraging the reader's coherence-making. While he acknowledges the cyclical patterns integral to Ingram's argument as being an important element of the cycle's unity, he counters that it is actually the successive ordering of the stories in conjunction with these repeating patterns which enables the reader to perceive unity.²⁴

For Luscher, Ingram places too much emphasis on the cycle's recurrent properties alone, and contends one must take into account that because the reader experiences the text sequentially, their assembling of its patterns as they move through the text are therefore sequential as well, and recommends *short story sequence* as a more accurate terminology.²⁵ The cycle as a whole, he argues, is an open entity, the short stories that constitute it successively impacting one another, so that the individual parts – the stories – are not completely independent from one another. This openness encourages “the reader's pattern-making faculties to formulate the variable connections and build textual consistency” as they “develop relationships between the enclosed parts.”²⁶ The individual stories are enclosed, distinct from one another, yet taken as a whole, they are also open and interconnected. This dichotomy is a variation on Ingram's “the one and the many” and Mann's “simultaneous self-sufficiency and independence”.²⁷ Another critic of the form, J. Gerald Kennedy, later published his own study of the cycle in support of foregrounding the reader, arguing that Ingram's spectrum was flawed because it required access to details of a compositional history that might be hidden to the reader.²⁸ Consequently, because classifying a cycle as

²³ At one stage in his argument, Luscher claims the author of a short story cycle, unlike the author of a novel, actively “courts disunity” in order to encourage the reader to seek patterns within the text and create unity for themselves. See: Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 158.

²⁴ Luscher, 149.

²⁵ Luscher, 149. Rolf Lundén disagrees with Luscher's emphasis on sequentially, as it is not a quality which is exclusive to the short story cycle. Rather, he argues, “a similar sequential experience of reading takes place in the reading of the chapters of a novel.” Lundén, *The United Stories of America*, 15. However, the same point could be made about the recurrence of patterns within a novel, or the use of chapter titles. Neither Luscher nor Ingram mention exclusivity in their respective proposed formal conventions of the cycle, so Lundén's point feels somewhat superfluous, particularly when the only central tenant that remains consistent in most, if not all, critical discourse on the conventions of form is its simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence. Nagel is similarly dismissive of ‘sequence’, because “in most [short story cycles], ‘sequentially’ is the least important aspect of the groupings of stories within a volume. The relationships among stories in a short-story cycle is far more complex than the simple following of one another in sequence.” Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, 12.

²⁶ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 155. Anja Müller-Wood points out that Luscher neglects to explain what exactly these pattern-making faculties are, nor does he illuminate what the cognitive processes behind these faculties might be. See: Müller-Wood, ‘Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles’, 36.

²⁷ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 19; Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 15. Like Ingram and Mann, Luscher also includes examples of cycles in his study (some of which overlap with Mann) but does not examine them in the same detail. Rather, his discussions are brief and limited in scope, concerned only with structural arrangement.

²⁸ Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ix.

‘composed’, ‘arranged’ or ‘completed’ necessitates access to the author’s process of creation in order to determine the degree of authorially intended unity – a process, Kennedy argues, that could very well remain obscured – authorial intention is therefore deemed both inscrutable and irrelevant.²⁹ Kennedy does not make reference to literary archives in his argument, but their existence as repositories of creative process and compositional history does somewhat undermine his claim of inscrutability, as this thesis will demonstrate.

Luscher is less dismissive of Ingram’s ‘composed’, ‘arranged’, and ‘completed’ cycles. Whilst he acknowledges these categories as “shaping forces”, he argues that they do not have total power over the degree to which a cycle is unified, since it is entirely possible that a cycle created “primarily by arrangement” could ultimately be more unified than one “guided by a master plan.”³⁰ Furthermore, it is difficult to ascertain which singular category a cycle falls into, since all cycles “undergo some arrangement (and possibly rearrangement), whether planned beforehand or envisioned afterwards”, and it is possible for a cycle to fit within more than one category.³¹ Luscher parenthetically alludes to the author’s compositional process throughout his criticism, however the degree to which he emphasises the reader in his argument prevents him from deepening this acknowledgment beyond the indirect or the surface level, perhaps because to do so would necessitate admitting that the author’s involvement in the cycle’s unity is greater than he claims. After all, this “unifying composition principle” would not “reside[] in the text for the reader to develop” were it not for the author crafting these stories and, it therefore stands to reason, being the original creator of the unifying patterns which ‘reside’ within the stories in the first place.³² Luscher himself seems to recognise this quandary, in that he admits “[o]ur greater awareness of the unifying strategies *not selected by the author* should lead us to cast about for others; loose unity demands that our pattern-making faculties bristle with attention and seek to pull together material which might initially seem disparate” (emphasis added).³³ Although this statement is one of the few instances in which Luscher credits the author with having a hand in the creation of unity, it is still foregrounded through the reader. For Luscher, the reader is tasked with bringing to life the unity which is lying dormant within the text, and his study examines this prospect extensively, but because he neglects to sufficiently examine the compositional process which allows for this dormant unity to begin with, he diminishes the role of the author.

²⁹ Kennedy, ix.

³⁰ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 163.

³¹ Luscher, 162. As I note in Chapter 3 of this thesis, Sara Taylor’s archival material demonstrates that *The Shore* is both a ‘composed’ and a ‘completed’ cycle.

³² Luscher, 162; 164.

³³ Luscher, 157–58.

Put concisely, for critics who take the reader-focused approach, “textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader.”³⁴ Although Luscher is much less concerned with composition than critics who emphasise the author, he does, like Mann, address generic markers of the form in terms of qualities which might aid the reader in identifying the text they are reading as a cycle. The reader “must somehow recognize when to approach a volume with [their] synthesizing powers at full steam. Usually, a combination of signals, some of which are discovered only after proceeding into the volume, can provide clues to its sequential nature.”³⁵ These signals include a title which is not shared with one of the stories within the collection, a map of the place in which the stories are set, an epigraph that hints at a recurrent theme, a framing prologue and epilogue, and an author’s preface which might alert the reader to formal qualities, such as recurrent patterns.³⁶

PUBLISHING THE SHORT STORY CYCLE

Another arena in which it has proven difficult to categorize the short story cycle is in publishing. That publishers do not recognise the short story cycle as its own genre is perhaps an extension of the difficulties critics have in placing its workings within a precise definition.³⁷ The archive materials reveal that, during the composition process of *The Shore*, Taylor thought the “format of linked short stories appear[ed] to be especially well-suited to the project, as it require[d] the cohesion of a novel with the height of polish demanded by the story. The finished collection would be marketable as a whole or could easily be disassembled into its components and submitted to literary journals.”³⁸ In our interview,

³⁴ Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ix.

³⁵ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 158.

³⁶ Luscher, 159.

³⁷ Examples of short story cycles which have been published and marketed as novels include: Tessa Hadley, *Accidents in the Home* (2002); Rachel Cusk, *The Lucky Ones*; Jennifer Egan, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* (2011); Elisabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*; Donal Ryan, *The Spinning Heart*; Alice Munro, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (2015); Donal Ryan, *From a Low and Quiet Sea* (2018); and Elisabeth Strout, *Olive, Again*.

³⁸ Sara Taylor, ‘Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, 8 December 2011), 2, Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia. In an interview with Deborah Kalb, Taylor revealed that she submitted the stories that were cut from the published manuscript to literary journals; “Wallops”, for example, was published in *The Fiddlehead* as “Flight”. Amongst the archive material is feedback for “Wallops”, in which her undergraduate supervisor, B.A. Goodjohn questions how the story connects to the rest of the collection. It seems to have been later omitted from the manuscript because the linking elements were not established enough. See: Deborah Kalb, ‘Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb: Q&A with Sara Taylor’, *Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb* (blog), 22 February 2016, <http://deborahkalbblogs.blogspot.com/2016/02/q-with-sara-taylor.html>; B.A. Goodjohn, “‘Wallops’ Supervisory Notes’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, 16 February 2012), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

however, Taylor explained that she had used the terms ‘fractured novel’ or ‘novel-in-pieces’ when submitting her manuscript to prospective agents.³⁹ Out of the three agents interested in representing her, two wanted her to rewrite the book as a novel; the third, whom Taylor went on to sign with, submitted the manuscript to publishers as a linked collection of stories. When it was picked up by U.K publishing house William Heinemann, it was done so as a linked collection, and, according to Taylor, was then edited as one. That the archive reveals the editor discusses the manuscript as a novel, then, is an interesting discrepancy, particularly since the U.S version of the book, published by Hogarth, opted to explicitly attach a genre to *The Shore*, supplementing the title with ‘A Novel’ on the book’s cover; the U.K version makes no such declaration.⁴⁰ All of this speaks to how unstable the generic classification of the short story cycle is, not just for critics, but within the market too, which connects to the difficulty in knowing how to promote and review these texts.

In his essay on literary communication, the reader-response theorist, John Harker, states that the book as a concrete object has characteristics – its title, for example, or its page and chapter arrangement – which will demand a certain kind of attention appropriate to its genre; these “literary conventions [which are] displayed instruct the reader in a particular kind of reading”.⁴¹ Applied to *The Shore* – for this thesis, I have used the version published by William Heinemann – an analysis of the physical book highlights just how ambiguous it is. The contents page, for example, seems to straddle genres: it lists each story title, as it would in a miscellaneous collection of short stories, but alongside them are numbered chapters more indicative of a novel. The book’s blurb is similarly muddled, using both ‘debut novel’ and ‘interconnecting stories’ within its text summary. Readers of the book seem no less confused. *The Guardian* published two pieces on *The Shore*, written by two separate reviewers: the first called it a “book of interlinked short stories”, and the second, “a novel in stories, with chapters”.⁴² Reviewers at *Publisher’s Weekly*, *The Times*, and *The Literary Review* use “novel” to discuss the book, while *Huffington Post* and *Library Journal* employ “interweaving stories” and “interconnected stories”, respectively.⁴³ A reader at the

³⁹ Sara Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*, Audio Recording (Norwich, UK, 2022).

⁴⁰ Jason Arthur, ‘Editor’s Letter to Sara Taylor’, typescript, n.d., Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - *The Shore*, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.; Sara Taylor, *The Shore: A Novel* (New York: Hogarth, 2015).

⁴¹ W. John Harker, ‘Literary Communication: The Author, the Reader, the Text’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 2 (1988): 9.

⁴² Kate Clanchy, ‘The Shore by Sara Taylor Review – a Southern-Gothic Delight’, *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/18/the-shore-sara-taylor-review-kate-clanchy>; Anthony Cummins, ‘The Shore by Sara Taylor Review – Harrowing Debut’, *The Guardian*, 10 April 2016, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/10/the-shore-sara-taylor-paperback-review>.

⁴³ ‘Fiction Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor.’, *PublishersWeekly.com*, accessed 12 October 2021, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-553-41773-9>; ‘The Shore by Sara Taylor | The Times’, accessed 11 October 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-shore-by-sara-taylor->

Irish Examiner refers to *The Shore* as “a sprawling debut novel” that “reads like a collection of inextricably linked short stories”.⁴⁴ Nina Allan, writing for *Strange Horizons*, goes so far as to classify the book “of thirteen self-contained chapters” as most definitely a novel, on the basis that “a novel’s defining factor is authorial intent. That [...] Taylor wrote the chapters that make up *The Shore* with a view to having them published as a unitary work, that she intended them to be read in sequence, in the order which she has carefully assembled them, cannot be in doubt.”⁴⁵ According to Ingram’s theory, however, Allan’s argument here aligns with the definition of a ‘composed’ short story cycle.

The Shore is not alone in being confusingly positioned within the literary marketplace, as many short story cycles have been subject to similar uncertainty. *Folk* by Zoe Gilbert does not have an overarching narrative nor as complex an interlinking structure as *The Shore*, neither does *I Want to Show You More* by Jamie Quatro, or the collections concerning J.D Salinger’s famous Glass Family (as featured in *Nine Stories*, *Franny and Zooey*, and *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction*), which is perhaps what makes them easier to locate on shelves as short story collections. The cycles that do have through-narratives tend to be marketed as novels, such as *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout, *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernardine Evaristo and *The Spinning Heart* by Donal Ryan, the latter of which is structured somewhere between monologues and stories, and (as previously mentioned in *Critical Taxonomy*) uses polyphonic voices to chart an event in a small Irish village.⁴⁶

The issue of market categorisation can be connected to a text’s performance. When it comes to the reader, some theorists point out that classification can mean the difference between a book succeeding or failing. Harker asserts that there is a visible combination of conventions in a text which guide the reader to anticipate a certain kind of reading.⁴⁷ We would read an epic poem, for example, and expect it to adhere to different generic conventions than an academic essay because observable characteristics such as “title,

5b3xjl80n5l; ‘Thea Lenarduzzi - Coming of Age’, *Literary Review*, accessed 18 October 2021, <https://literaryreview.co.uk/coming-of-age-3>; ‘The Ones To Watch: Best Debut Fiction Coming In 2015’, *HuffPost UK*, 18 December 2014, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hannah-beckerman/the-ones-to-watch-best-de_b_6345848.html; Sara Taylor, ‘The Shore’, *Library Journal*, accessed 19 July 2022, <https://www.libraryjournal.com/review/the-shore>.

⁴⁴ SAT, 28 Mar, and 2015 - 00:00, ‘Book Review: The Shore’, *Irish Examiner*, 28 March 2015, <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20320694.html>.

⁴⁵ ‘Strange Horizons - The Shore by Sara Taylor By Nina Allan’, accessed 21 October 2021, <http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-shore-by-sara-taylor/>. Allan’s claim about Taylor’s ordering of the stories is complicated in Chapter 3 of this thesis, in which I examine Sara Taylor’s archival materials.

⁴⁶ The stories that make up these cycles are each distinct and complete, and while the reader undoubtedly has a deeper and richer experience reading them together, because the stories are capable of being published as stand-alone pieces of fiction, they can still constitute a story cycle rather than a traditional novel.

⁴⁷ Harker, ‘Literary Communication’, 9.

subtitle, print variations, and line arrangement all signal a required accommodation to a particular kind of text”.⁴⁸ In this sense, categorisation is important because if a text is mislabelled, it may be read with certain performative expectations that will inevitably not be met. If a reader is led to believe the book they are reading is a novel because it has been marketed as such, but it does not meet the expected generic conventions of a novel, this may lead a reader to regard it as having fallen short or failed.⁴⁹ The reader “usually approaches a text alert to cues offered by [it]” and “automatically adopts the appropriate predominant stance”, so if the paratext on the outer book and the text within it are in generic disagreement, it can affect how the book is read and appraised.⁵⁰

In reviews of the U.S. publication of *The Shore* – which was marketed as a novel – some readers found the structure of the book difficult to engage with, perhaps because the “text provokes certain expectations which in turn [the reader will] project onto the text”.⁵¹ One reader wrote that she was “initially frustrated with the convoluted structure” because she was “expecting a novel” since it was identified as such on the cover, but instead the “book read[] much more like short stories with some recurring characters”.⁵² As a result, the “chapters” tended to “jump around” and this “randomness of time periods bothered” her.⁵³ Another reader found the “novel” too “difficult [to follow]. Each chapter focused on a different character, in a different year”.⁵⁴ This reader felt that had “the book [taken] only the chapters from the 1980s-2010s, then put them in sequence, it would have been a much easier read.”⁵⁵ They feel this way, perhaps, because the “text provokes certain expectations which in turn [are projected back] onto the text”, and so if the reader “cannot find (or impose) this consistency, sooner or later [they] will [disengage].”⁵⁶ For these readers, it seems, explicitly classifying *The Shore* as a novel “detract[ed] from [their] understanding of [it] by imposing too conventional a set of expectations”.⁵⁷ Because *The Shore* does not inhabit the space of a chronological novel, it does not conform to the parameters expected of it.

The issue of categorizing these texts affects the author, too. In our interview, Taylor stated that she was informed by her publishers that sales numbers for short story collections in the U.K. are much lower than for novels; this could have been a factor in both her agent

⁴⁸ Harker, 9.

⁴⁹ D’Hoker, ‘A Continuum of Fragmentation’, 18–19.

⁵⁰ Rosenblatt, ‘The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing’, 459.

⁵¹ Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, 290.

⁵² ‘Sarah’s Snippets Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor’, *Sarah’s Bookshelves* (blog), 19 May 2015, <https://www.sarahsbookshelves.com/sarahs-snippets-book-review-the-shore-by-sara-taylor/>.

⁵³ ‘Sarah’s Snippets Book Review’.

⁵⁴ ‘Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor - A Paper Arrow’, accessed 19 July 2022, <http://www.apaperarrow.com/2016/01/book-review-shore-by-sara-taylor26.html>.

⁵⁵ ‘Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor - A Paper Arrow’.

⁵⁶ Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, 290.

⁵⁷ Harker, ‘Literary Communication’, 12.

and editor suggesting ways in which to make the stories more unified, and therefore more novel-like. In her essay on the positioning of short story cycles in the literary marketplace, Corinna Norrick-Rühl states this is a myth; sales, after all, mostly come down to marketing, and collections of stories, interlinked or not, traditionally do not receive the same publicity and promotion that novels do.⁵⁸ It is a detrimental cycle: essentially, collections sell less because they are not marketed well enough, but publishers put fewer resources into marketing collections because of the pervasive belief that they do not sell. Norrick-Rühl's idea that "publishers may tweak or withhold genre information for marketing purposes" is perhaps evident with the U.K. version of *The Shore*.⁵⁹ Taylor confirmed in our interview that publishers kept its generic classification intentionally vague in order to ensure that a wider net could be cast for its entry into literary prizes, enabling its submission for both novel and short story awards.⁶⁰ Two of the most prestigious competitions – the Women's Prize for Fiction and The Booker Prize – only accept novels.⁶¹ *The Shore* was longlisted for the Women's Prize in 2015; in the same year, the Booker would not consider *The Shore* for its longlist because they viewed it as a short story collection.⁶² In 2019, however, not only did The Booker accept *Girl, Woman, Other* for consideration, but it awarded Bernardine Evaristo joint first place (alongside Margaret Atwood). Although *Girl, Woman, Other* uses a framing device (Amma's play) to bookend the 'chapters', the book includes no obvious through-narrative and no overarching narrator to speak of, and is composed of thirteen individual stories that feature thirteen individual protagonists; arguably, one could make a case for calling it a short story cycle.⁶³ It is this conundrum which highlights the slipperiness of the cycle's form; not only are theorists and critics unable to settle on a singular name or concrete definition, but the market, reviewers and literary prizes cannot consistently measure these texts.

⁵⁸ Corinna Norrick-Rühl, 'Short Story Collections and Cycles in the British Literary Marketplace', in *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle* (London: Routledge, 2018), 56–57.

⁵⁹ Norrick-Rühl, 55.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

⁶¹ 'Publisher Information', *Women's Prize for Fiction* (blog), accessed 20 July 2022, <https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/about/publisher-information>; 'Entering the Prizes | The Booker Prizes', accessed 1 May 2023, <https://thebookerprizes.com/information-for/entering-the-prizes>. The Booker Prize does not outright specify that it only accepts novels in its rules, stating instead that submissions must be 'long-form fiction'. However, the only collection of stories to have ever been shortlisted is Alice Munro's *The Beggar Maid* in 1980, and the Prize has not accepted any since. See: 'The Big Novels of 2012', *The Guardian*, 13 July 2012, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/13/big-novels-2012>.

⁶² Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

⁶³ *Girl, Woman, Other* has been variously identified as a novel, interlinked stories, and what Evaristo herself terms, 'fusion fiction'. The book certainly does fit within the formal conventions of a cycle: the simultaneously self-sufficiency and interdependence of its stories; its recursive patterns of character and theme; its unifying narrative style and framing device; and its epilogue, which brings together elements (characters, themes, plot points) from the stories that come before it (Ingram refers to this as a 'rounding off process', which I will discuss in Chapter 2).

MIXED METAPHORS

Both Luscher and Ingram rely on metaphor in order to explain their respective theories, which speaks to the difficulty of articulating how these texts work, particularly since the metaphors used to clarify such a multifaceted form are themselves somewhat complex.

For Ingram, coherence is seeded within the text by the author and resembles the motion of a wheel:

The rim of the wheel represents recurrent elements in a cycle which rotate around a thematic center [sic]. As these elements (motifs, symbols, character, words) repeat themselves, turn in on themselves, recur, the whole wheel moves forward. The motion of a wheel is a single process. In a single process, too, the thematic core of a cycle expands and deepens as the elements of the cycle repeat themselves in varied contexts.⁶⁴

I find Ingram's use of 'turn in on themselves' unclear. The phrase implies insularity and detachment, so perhaps it refers to a separation between the various recurrent constituents – repeating images are distinct from reoccurring characters, for example. But its positioning in the sentence more likely implies another mechanism of circular propulsion, which is to say, it is simply another way of stating that the elements repeat.

Ingram's wheel in motion highlights the intricacy and fluidity of the cycle and speaks to its ability to be concurrently both distinct parts and a singular whole. While this metaphor is certainly useful for addressing the recurring, evolving patterns which are inherent to the form, it remains limited in terms of its ability to adequately encompass the cycle's multidirectional nature. In Ingram's metaphor, the emphasis is on a forward movement, when in fact the connections between stories within a cycle operate nonlinearly.⁶⁵ Because the focus is solely on the repetition of the elements themselves, elements which have been seeded in the text during the writing process, Ingram's metaphor aligns with his theory in that it privileges the author and negates the reader. The image of circularity engineered by the author, of elements rematerializing at the author's discretion, suggests a process that is *done to* the reader, rendering them an observer rather than an active participant, which is manifestly not the case. Harker, for instance, views a literary work as having two creators: the author as a text maker, and the reader a text 'remaker'.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 20–21.

⁶⁵ Ingram only mentions the multi-directionality of patterns once in his definition of the cycle, but does not examine the idea further, perhaps because it would require a consideration of the reader's perspective. His wheel in motion metaphor places emphasis on a *forward* movement; again, this is likely because he is foregrounding the author's process over the reader. Elsewhere, he likens the interconnected elements of a cycle to "the moving parts of a mobile", though he does not clarify if these parts move multi-directionally or not, and the metaphor itself neglects to comprehend the pattern of recurrence and development. Ingram, 13.

⁶⁶ Harker, 'Literary Communication', 10.

The author who translates a work by another author in another language, for example, is still a creator of that text; in the same sense, the reader who interprets coherent cues between the stories of a cycle and uses them to craft cohesion is a creator of unity. Whereas the author imbues a cycle with elements that signal an intended unity, it is the reader who actively links these elements together across the stories. Ingram, however, neglects to recognise this dualism in his metaphor. In doing so, he does not address how the reader might use the pattern of recurrence and development to construct cohesion during the reading process.

Luscher uses an array of metaphors in his essay foregrounding the reader as a creator of cohesion, but for the purposes of this thesis I will limit my focus to the metaphor which concerns unity.⁶⁷ That Luscher offers a number of metaphors perhaps speaks to an awareness that they are not sufficient enough to describe the way the short story cycle operates, and this is because he undermines the role of the author in the construction of unity. For Luscher, the formal openness of the cycle “[invites] the reader to construct a network of associations that binds the stories together and lends them cumulative thematic impact.”⁶⁸ The binding “threads” that constitute this connective network may be “cable strong” (a term Luscher borrows from Dirk Kuyk, writing about Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*) or even “as thin and intricate as the filaments of a spider’s web.”⁶⁹ Luscher views unity as a web-like structure, aggregating linking threads as the reader moves through the collection, and like a spider’s web, the threads that bind do so in a multidirectional pattern. The reader’s experience of unity is “spatial rather than temporal,” the “backward glance[s]” a reader engages in to construct this network, “subvert[ing] strict chronological progression.”⁷⁰ Here, Luscher highlights the paradoxical quality of the ‘sequence’, in that while the stories themselves are successive, the connections that exist between them are not. Although the reader assembles patterns sequentially, the way they link elements to construct coherence is nonlinear. In this way, the network is useful for addressing the multidirectional nature of the connections at work within a cycle.⁷¹ His network of threads metaphor, however, while acknowledging that the varying degrees of connective elements that exists within a cycle (those ‘cables’ or ‘filaments’) have a ‘cumulative thematic impact’, does not account for *how* they repeat to form a pattern in the way Ingram’s wheel does, nor how these

⁶⁷ Luscher variously uses comparisons to a “musical sequence” (149), “bubble[s] on a stream” (151), “a wide circle which contains a number of smaller ones” (154) a “network” (149), and “[binding] threads” which are either “cable strong” or “thin and intricate as the filaments of a spider’s web” (157). Aside from the network of threads, the only other sustained metaphor in Luscher’s argument is small circles within a larger circle, but this pertains to the simultaneously independent and interdependent structure rather than a cycle’s unity, which is the focus of this thesis.

⁶⁸ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 149.

⁶⁹ Luscher, 157.

⁷⁰ Luscher, 166.

⁷¹ This multidirectional network brings to mind the image of the family tree which I will discuss in Chapter 2, the character’s connected generationally to form a visible network.

patterns develop and expand over the course of a cycle. This is likely a consequence of overlooking the way in which the author literally creates patterns which they then seed within the text in an original construction of unity. In her discussion of the short story cycle genre, Susanne Ferguson is of the opinion that “we critics had better give some deference to the authors, and plenty of leeway to the readers.”⁷² To examine the repeating elements of a cycle, then – elements which have been intentionally included in the text by the author – necessitates a greater recognition of the author’s role.

These metaphors are critically useful because they offer us a visual, mobile, multi-dimensional way of thinking about the short story cycle, and a more tangible way of examining and discussing these texts in that they provide a framework for analysing their workings. Each of these metaphors are rooted in oppositional theoretical approaches to unity in the short story cycle, and each of them address processes which are vital to understanding the form. The cycle is both united by its recurrent patterns (Ingram’s wheel in motion), and the nonlinear way in which the repeating elements comprising these patterns are connected across the overall text (Luscher’s network of threads). Yet these metaphors are offered in opposition to one another. If the realisation of unity in the short story cycle is indeed a collaborative process between author and reader – as I set out to demonstrate in this thesis – then these metaphors must work in conjunction with one another. An analysis of both *The Shore* and Sara Taylor’s archive materials demonstrates that we need to consider how these metaphors work together to produce a richer, fuller reading. I therefore propose a coalescing of the wheel and the network as a more suitable way of thinking about how unity is achieved within the short story cycle. If we overlay the metaphors in order to capture both Ingram’s recurrent pattern and Luscher’s multi-directionality in a synchronised, united process – a network or web housed within a wheel or hoop – then it might resemble something like a dreamcatcher or a fishing net. Overlaying the separate metaphors into a singular one not only offers a more multifaceted reading of *The Shore*, but it enables me to bring together the differing key theories of the short story cycle, and to concurrently recognise the author and reader as fundamental to the unifying process.

⁷² Ferguson, ‘Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels’, 7.

CHAPTER 2: READING *THE SHORE* AS A SHORT STORY CYCLE

To promote *The Shore* ahead of its publication, Sara Taylor penned an article for Penguin on the writing of ‘multi-threaded narratives’, in which she summarizes the process of beginning with one story and one protagonist, and expanding until she could see “the pattern of how the characters all connect” to create “a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts”.¹ Here, Ingram is brought to mind, Taylor’s words evoking his notion of the pattern of the whole, the one and the many. By conducting a detailed and focused reading of *The Shore*, we are able to examine this connective pattern by using the metaphors outlined in Chapter 1 as a framework for thinking about the published product, thereby examining how unifying processes occur on the page. Overlaying these metaphors permits an analysis of how the pattern of the whole is co-constructed collaboratively between the reader and the author within the short story cycle. Although there are inconsistencies in terms of how it has been labelled, *The Shore* adheres to the formal conventions of a cycle, comprising of thirteen distinct stories which link to create a combined effect.² The various linking elements which unite the individual stories typify many of the recognized generic conventions of the short story cycle: there is a collocation of oft-recurring themes, images and characters that are “connected through a common setting [and] shared history” and further linked through an amalgam of “[t]ragic events”.³

Of these linking qualities, the “most prominent feature of coherence in many short story cycles has typically been that of a shared locality in which all the constituent stories are set”, and this is certainly true of *The Shore*, its cohesive setting conspicuously alluded to in both the title and paratextual material.⁴ The stories collectively take place on a series of small islands that are based on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, a real peninsula located off the state coast where Taylor herself grew up. For the reader, this consistent setting acts as a vital reference point, anchoring them over the course of the collection as they move through the

¹ ‘Sara Taylor on Multi-Threaded Narratives’, accessed 25 August 2021, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2016/sara-taylor-on-multi-threaded-narratives.html>.

² In our interview, Taylor stated that she set out to write something “that had the long arc of a novel, and [which] let [the reader] get to know a place like a novel did and [enabled them to] see a plot unfold, but that was focused on moments of revelations or moments of reversal [like short stories].” She wanted her work to be “something in between short stories and novels that would have those reverberations, but then also a long arc that [the reader] could follow.” Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

³ D’Hoker, ‘A Continuum of Fragmentation’, 17.

⁴ Gill and Kläger, ‘Introduction’, 9.

individual stories;⁵ such a prevailing element can, Luscher states, prompt the reader to “be alert for other potential unities” in the text.⁶ Danielle McNamara’s essay on the role of cohesion in text production and comprehension emphasizes the intentionality behind cohesion-signalling, suggesting that writers, editors and publishers make intentional choices which “must be driven by some awareness of the needs of the reader.”⁷ In titling her collection *The Shore*, Taylor alludes to the stories as a collective, alerting the reader to seek cohesive cues in their reading, to experience, as she stated in her article for Penguin, a pattern of connection, a whole greater than its parts.⁸ For Taylor, setting was the “primary link for the collection” early in the composition process, and this is evident in the repetition of locale-specific details throughout the stories, such as the pungent stench of the chicken plant or a red-floored house that has stood for generations.⁹

Taylor’s fictional ‘Shore’ is rural without being quaint or pastoral, the community deprived, with trailers propped on cinderblocks, neglected single-storey houses and outbuildings that could be drug dens juxtaposed with a bucolic expanse of cornfields and oyster shell roads, a creek.¹⁰ Because the collection is grounded within such a small and isolated community, there is a concentration of characters who are known to one another, recurring in each other’s lives, each other’s stories. And so while the shared setting moors the collection, it is the characters who frame it, the stories a collective portrait of two familial lines descended from a common ancestor. During an interview on the *Literary Friction* podcast, Taylor describes ‘the Shore’ in reality as a “rural community that’s difficult to escape”, the kind of place where everyday violence lingers “beneath the surface” and where “people have disappeared”, but “because everyone knows everyone” there is an implicit agreement to “ignore it”.¹¹ This observation manifests continually throughout the

⁵ Jennifer Smith uses the term ‘limited locality’ to refer to the use of a singular setting used to comprise and link the separate stories in some short story cycles. Jennifer Joan Smith, ‘Locating the Short-Story Cycle’, *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de la nouvelle*, no. 57 (1 September 2011): 2.

⁶ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 159.

⁷ McNamara, ‘The Epistemic Stance between the Author and Reader’, 589.

⁸ ‘Sara Taylor on Multi-Threaded Narratives’. In terms of Mann’s generic markers of the cycle, the title of *The Shore* is indicative of unity between the stories, since it does not emphasise their independence from one another the way it would had the book been titled, *Target Practice and Other Stories*, for example. See: Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 14.

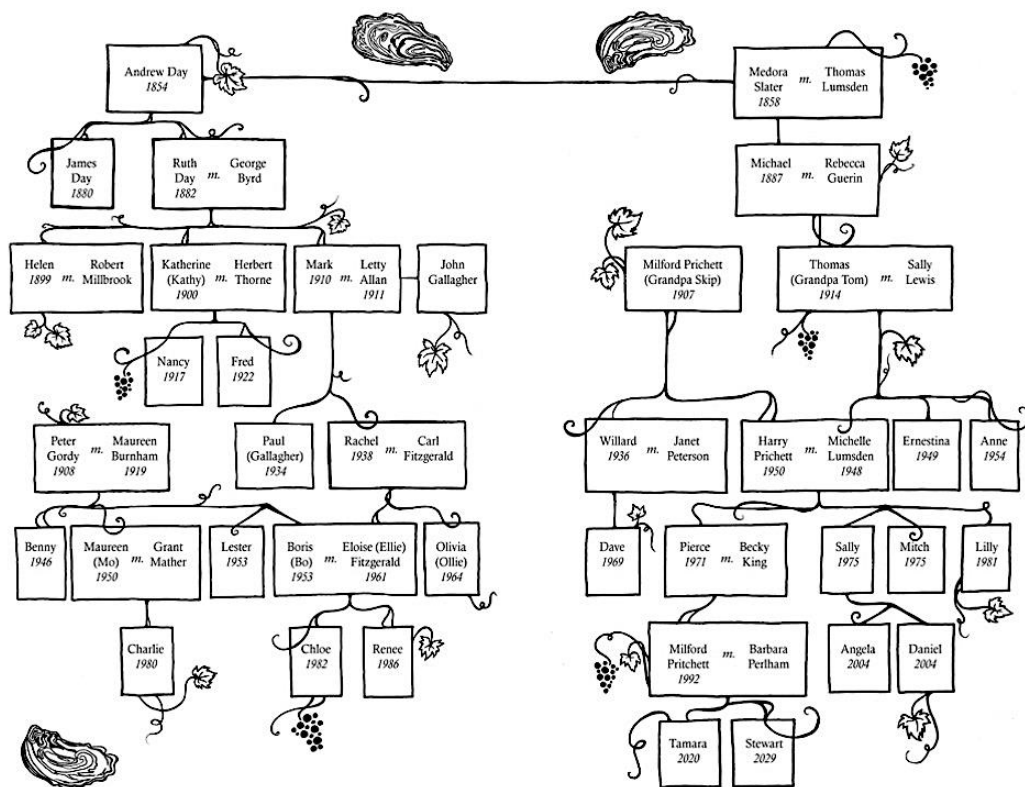
⁹ Taylor, ‘Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic’, 1. In our interview, Taylor stated that *The Shore* began as a portrait of place, eventually evolving with the inclusion of “Missing Pieces” to become the story of a character. Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

¹⁰ The majority of the community – including the characters who descend from Medora and her first husband, Andrew Day – is poverty-stricken. In contrast, a small percentage of the population who descend from Medora and her second husband, Thomas Lumsden, have considerable financial security resulting from the events of “Out of Eden” and “Many Waters”. In this sense, the setting evokes generic conventions of the short story cycle: the one and the many; the haves and the have-nots.

¹¹ Carrie Plitt and Octavia Bright, ‘Literary Friction - Generations with Sara Taylor’, *Literary Friction*, n.d., 6 min 32 sec; 7 min 52 sec; 7 min 58sec; 8 min 20 sec; 8 min 22 sec.

collection, with Taylor centring the women who are variously and inexorably tethered to this place, many of whom are trapped within cycles of abuse, their suffering inflicted by men.¹²

Set within the opening pages of *The Shore*, another cohesive cue is easily discernible: the family tree. For Taylor, the image of the family tree initially began as a way to keep track of names and dates for herself during the composition process, and at the suggestion of her editor, it was included in the published text for the benefit of the reader.¹³ Its presence “sends the reader off to look for unity from the beginning.”¹⁴ The family tree alerts the reader to a connective tissue at work between the stories, directing them toward a shared history, to the expectation of recurrence and unity before the reading has even begun.¹⁵ It is an invitation to engage in a dialogue in which the author leaves clues for the



¹² This cyclical violence mirrors the formal quality of recurrence inherent to the short story cycle form. Along a similar vein, Bernadine Evaristo summons another aspect of the genre's form with *Girl, Woman, Other*, the distinct stories working together to create a polyphonic experience for the reader, evoking the heterogeneity of its cultural setting. In his essay, 'The American Short Story Cycle', James Nagel posits that the short story cycle form is particularly suited to "the exploration and depiction of the complex interactions of gender, ethnicity, and individual identity". James Nagel, 'The American Short Story Cycle', in *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, ed. Blanche H. Gelfant and Lawrence Graver (Columbia University Press, 2000), 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/gelf11098.4>. See also: 'Nomadic Genres: The Case of the Short Story Cycle' by Hager Ben Driss, and 'Dispelling Difference: Reader in the Role of Interpreter in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*' by Justin Sturgeon.

¹³ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

¹⁴ Taylor.

¹⁵ Luscher proposed that the inclusion of a map at the start of a cycle detailing the locale in which the stories are set is a good indication for the reader to expect unity between the stories. The inclusion of a family tree at the start of *The Shore* functions in much the same way. Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 159.

reader to find and thread throughout, interlinking the stories to create a unified whole. Taylor initiates this interaction between writer and reader by selecting cues of cohesion – such as the family tree and recurring characters – to seed within the text in such a way that the reader will likely recognise them; the reader responds by using these cues to construct coherence between the stories in order to perceive the author’s intended unity, therefore turning the many into a one. Such an interaction parallels the interlinking formal conventions of the cycle, the individual stories connecting to and affecting one another, working as a whole. The networked and interlacing nature of the short story cycle is itself reflected in the cross-connecting structure of the family tree, the links between stories made visibly manifest in the tendrils connecting the generations, linking these individual characters, their stories, into a greater narrative: a multitude of pasts, presents and futures comingling into one familial history. Given the non-chronological structure of *The Shore*, the family tree serves as a beneficial referential tool for the reader, a way to keep track of the multitude of characters and relationships that weave these stories together.¹⁶ The multidirectional nature of reading a short story cycle is similarly made explicit in both this nonlinear arrangement of the stories and in the structure of the family tree, its connective branches evoking Luscher’s network of interconnectivity.

The process of reading a cycle, of linking the individual stories into a one, is not unlike what Jane Alison refers to as a network or cellular configuration in a literary work, wherein the reader

gaze[s] upon many segments, or a web. Instead of following a line of a story, [their] brain *draws* the lines, makes connections. Any literary narrative of depth asks [the reader’s] brain to pull threads across the whole, so, in a sense, all complex narratives are networks: [the reader’s] experience moving through them is never purely linear, but volumetric or spatial as [their] thoughts bounce across passages.¹⁷

The reader is not an inanimate witness to the text unfolding before them. Rather, in ‘drawing the lines’, the reader’s experience is interactive and productive as they construct unity in a multidirectional or ‘volumetric/spatial’ linking process. The very nature of the cycle requires the reader to cast backwards in order to “formulate the relationships of the past to an

¹⁶ As examined later in this thesis, there is evidence in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing which suggests that Taylor likewise used the family tree to keep track of characters and dates as she wrote *The Shore*.

¹⁷ Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 188. A non-linear organising principle is not limited to the short story cycle genre. However, because the cycle is made up of numerous complete and disparate stories, each with their own narratives and unique connections unlike the chapters of a novel collectively following a more sustained and often singular plot, the reader is perhaps required to work harder to perceive unity between the parts because it is not made implicit by its structure. Alison likens the process of reading to a “motionless movement” that “leaves in your mind a luminous shape of the path you travelled.” Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 5.

evolving whole”, thereby resulting in a unified structure that is fashioned spatially rather than temporally, since its development is not chronological.¹⁸

It is likely that the very presence of the family tree will spur the reader to refer to it as and when they are introduced to new characters – on reading the book for the first time, I consulted it at the start of each story at a minimum – trying to place the characters and stories within the overall framework. To read *The Shore* then, one must also engage in a material movement, a flicking back-and-forth between pages in order to consult the family tree. This physical experience is similarly nonlinear to the movement that occurs within the mind, in that the reader must cycle back on themselves throughout the reading process. According to Iser, it is these nonlinear relationships “between past, present and future [which] actually causes the text to reveal its potential multiplicity of connections”.¹⁹ Iser refers to these forward and backward movements that occur during the reading process as anticipation and retrospection.²⁰ As the reader casts back and retrospectively recalls an iteration that has occurred previously, expectations aroused by these repeated iterations create anticipations that the pattern will continue. Once armed with the knowledge of events that occur, it follows that subsequent readings of the same cycle will similarly result in the reader producing a forward anticipatory glance as they recall elements of the text and realize connections previously unknown to them on a first reading.

Given the network structure of the short story cycle, and that a reader continually modifies and synthesizes as the patterns of connection aggregate, it is inevitable that a second reading will yield cohesive cues only illuminated in retrospect. Therefore, in order to offer an analysis of the ways in which both the reader-focused and author-focused approaches interact within a published story cycle, my examination will stage the reading process, both the initial and subsequent readings. I will perform a reading of the text which attends to the experience of reading *The Shore* for the first time, whilst also considering particular aspects of the collection that take on additional significance in a second reading. Due to the constraints of this thesis, it is not possible to conduct a thorough and detailed reading of *every* connective thread within the collection; that would simply be too vast an undertaking. A character named Chloe, for example, recurs directly and indirectly in all thirteen stories, most often referenced numerous times throughout each one, underscoring assorted repeating themes and events, connecting to a multitude of characters. I will offer a limited mapping of Chloe’s trajectory over the course of the collection, focusing on the stories in which she directly appears on the page or which substantially link to her. My reasons for selecting Chloe to anchor this examination are threefold: The first echoes what I

¹⁸ Luscher, ‘The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book’, 166.

¹⁹ Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, 283.

²⁰ Iser, 286.

have already stated – Chloe recurs in high frequency in the book, her presence imbuing even the stories that she is not objectively observable in; to this end, she is an ideal candidate for examining both the author’s cohesion-making and the reader’s coherence-making processes. Second, Taylor herself notes that the inception of this collection centred around Chloe before radiating outward: “I started writing about [Chloe and her sister] alone on the marsh, and then I started wondering what happened to their mother. And once I started writing about the mother, I started wondering about *her* mother and her aunts and cousins, and everyone else that was involved” (emphasis added for clarity).²¹ Effectively, Chloe was Taylor’s anchoring point in the writing of the collection, so it is fitting that Chloe, too, is the anchor in an examination of it. Lastly, *The Shore* is bookended by Chloe, her life, her history, charted over the course of the collection.²² She is arguably the overarching protagonist of *The Shore*.²³

A PATTERN ENACTED: THE AUTHOR AS ARCHITECT

Of the thirteen stories that constitute *The Shore*, my analysis will primarily focus on three, occurring at the beginning, mid-point and end of the collection. The arrangement of these stories – “Target Practice”, “Skirt” and “Missing Pieces” – variously correspond to significant stages of Chloe’s life: conception, childhood and adulthood, though not in that order. Each story in the collection is titled, dated and given a chapter number; “Target Practice” is additionally titled “Chapter I” and dated “1995”, “Skirt” is “Chapter VII” and dated “1981”, and “Missing Pieces” is “Chapter XII”, dated “2010”. It is necessary to provide a brief summary of the events of each story at the beginning of my analyses in order to provide context for the first and second readings I will be concurrently conducting.

Before I summarize the events of “Target Practice”, however, I will first examine how the story begins, as “it is through the introduction to this universe which these opening lines provide that the reader’s attention is fixed and manner of reading determined.”²⁴ The opening line of *The Shore* is where the interaction between writer and reader is initiated, with Taylor prompting the reader to engage in a certain kind of process. The reader enters

²¹ Plitt and Bright, ‘Literary Friction - Generations with Sara Taylor’, 10 min 24 sec.

²² The final story in the collection, titled “Tears of the Gods”, is set one-hundred-and-thirty-three years after Chloe’s narrative ceases; Chloe’s final story, “Missing Pieces”, is the penultimate story in *The Shore*. I will return to this in Chapter 3.

²³ As evidenced by the archive, Chloe is the only character to originally feature as a protagonist twice. Before the book was published, however, the decision was made to split Medora’s singular story into two, thereby making both Chloe and Medora the only characters to have more than one dedicated story in the book. I will return to this in Chapter 3.

²⁴ Harker, ‘Literary Communication’, 9.

The Shore: “When news of the murder breaks I’m in Matthew’s, buying chicken necks so my little sister Renee and I can go crabbing.”²⁵ It is a provocative first sentence, the author drawing the reader in with the promise of something sinister: the revelation that there has been a murder; the image of the chicken necks. George Saunders refers to this as “the writer creat[ing] an expectation”, which in turn prompts “a suite of questions” in the reader’s mind.²⁶ The reader’s curiosity is sparked, the allure of discovering more about the crime, and what this might mean for the story, the protagonist, compels the reader onward. There is another mystery, too: the identity of the first-person narrator. Who is speaking? What is their connection to this news, if any? Taylor anticipates the reader’s position and – in terms of the identity of the narrator at least – “scaffolds the knowledge-seeking reader” by offering the resources to answer this particular question: the date about the title, the family tree, the identifying marker of a little sister named Renee.²⁷ In arousing the reader’s curiosity and providing these clues, Taylor encourages their engagement from the offset; if the reader chooses to respond proactively – consulting the family tree with the date and name given – the question is immediately answered. And while the story soon confirms that the narrator is Chloe aged thirteen, in affording the reader the opportunity to piece together the identity for themselves, Taylor sets a precedent: to be alert to clues within the text in order to perceive meaning.

Like many of the stories in *The Shore*, “Target Practice” deals in abuse of various forms. Chloe and her sister Renee live with Bo, a volatile drug addict prone to fits of violence; their mother, Ellie, who often bore the brunt of his anger, has vanished, leaving the girls as his sole targets. But the girls find no solace outside of the home either. Chloe discovers Cabel Bloxom – the murder victim identified in the first sentence – molesting Renee, and Chloe is subject to attacks from a group of her peers. The story culminates with Chloe slitting Bo’s throat in self-defence, and as the blood flows so too do the revelations: the first, that Bo murdered Ellie and buried her in the garden; the second, that it was Chloe who castrated and shot dead Cabel Bloxom.²⁸ Here, we might consider this individual story as a microcosm of

²⁵ Taylor, *The Shore*, 1.

²⁶ George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 132. In his essay, “Narrative Progression in the Short Story”, Michael Toolan discusses the concept of narrative prospection, which “cumulatively and serially guide[s] the reader to expect the story currently being read to continue and terminate in one way rather than [in] others.” In this sense, the reader may predict, based on the first sentence of “Target Practice”, that the murder will feature in this story, and therefore expect to learn the who, what and why of the crime by the end. Michael Toolan, ‘Narrative Progression in the Short Story: First Steps in a Corpus Stylistic Approach’, *Narrative* 16, no. 2 (25 April 2008): 105.

²⁷ McNamara, ‘The Epistemic Stance between the Author and Reader’, 590.

²⁸ Later, in “Missing Pieces”, we learn that following the events of “Target Practice”, Renee went into foster care while Chloe was put into a psychiatric hospital with a “bunch of sociopaths that killed cats” (the recurrent motif of cats is addressed later in this chapter). The two lost touch after Renee “blame[d Chloe] for everything”, and then ran away with her boyfriend, the sisters not having seen or

the story cycle, the narrative performing on a smaller scale the recurrence and development that occurs over the course of the whole collection. A dynamic pattern emerges as the narrative unfolds: Chloe is repeatedly forced to endure violence at the hands of a male and must defend herself. Ingram's metaphor of the wheel in motion is exemplified, in that as the pattern repeats (Chloe is attacked by a male and defends herself), it also modifies (Chloe is choked by Cabel Bloxom when she catches him sexually abusing her sister, only escaping strangulation when she knees him in the groin; Chloe is hit with rocks by a bully from school named John-Michael, before she knees him in the groin and runs away). In repeating and modifying this pattern, Taylor prepares the reader for the escalation that occurs in the final iteration: Chloe is attacked by a male (recurrence); Chloe is attacked by her father, who also physically assaults her sister (recurrence/development); Chloe saves herself and her sister by killing him (recurrence/development/escalation).²⁹

Ingram's metaphor is limited, however, in that it does not account for the way in which the reader interacts with this recurring, developing pattern. If one recalls the interaction between reader and author that was established at the start of the story, the question that arises in the reader as this pattern recurs might be 'for what purpose is this pattern being enacted?' As the pattern returns, altered, in various contexts throughout the story, the reader becomes involved in a process of retrospection – what Luscher refers to as casting a backwards glance – in which each new context "brings to light new aspects of what [the reader] had committed to memory".³⁰ Chloe's torment is continual and situational, the pattern and context both influencing and influenced by one another. Following the fight between Chloe and John-Michael, for example, his mother arrives at the house to complain about the injuries her son sustained whilst Chloe defended herself, and catches Bo with his drug paraphernalia. Bo, believing John-Michael's mother will call the police after she hurriedly leaves, becomes enraged and attacks Chloe. As the pattern unfolds, the perpetrators and situations alter depending on the context, and the reader expects this

spoken to one another since. Renee's narrative path bears a similarity to her grandmothers: We learn in "Rain" that Rachel had "run off and gotten married", then returned to the island to have Ellie and Ollie, "before running off again and abandoning her husband and two daughters". This situation also bears a striking similarity to "Target Practice", in which Ellie, having been murdered, is absent, and Chloe and Renee are left with Bo. For this fragment of the family, disappearance becomes part of their mythology, repeated variously over three generations and evoking the short story cycle form, its patterns of recurrence. Taylor, *The Shore*, 248–49, 41.

²⁹ The revelation that Chloe murdered Cabel suggests that an escalation had already occurred *before* the fictive present of the story. Although this means that the chronology of the story therefore begins with an escalation, for the reader experiencing the story, the revelation – and therefore the subsequent escalation – remains at the end. However, because we do not know the context of the event – whether Cabel attacked her again and she defended herself, or she deliberately sought him out with the intention of killing him – it cannot be affirmed with any certainty if this event adheres to the pattern of a male-initiated attack in which Chloe defends herself.

³⁰ Iser, 'The Reading Process', 283. See: Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 166.

dynamic to continue. Saunders observes that in literature, “the repetition of a pattern makes us anticipate continued repetitions of that pattern, which, in turn, focusses our expectations, and puts us into a tighter relationship with the writer”.³¹ In enacting a thematic pattern, Taylor creates an expectation in the reader that it will recur, which in turn makes the reader more alert to the cohesive cues that Taylor has seeded within the text; in this way, the pattern makes the interaction between Taylor and the reader explicit. The reader cannot build for themselves a highly unified whole that is not already there by some design. Taylor lays a foundation for the overarching narrative that is yet to come, in which the events of “Target Practice” reverberate over the subsequent stories, a cohesive thread that knits the many into a whole.³² Vitality, the pattern established in “Target Practice” – Chloe is forced to endure violence at the hands of a male and has to defend herself – continues beyond the boundaries of the story and across the rest of the cycle, altering with each story it encounters, the various characters of *The Shore* taking on the role of victim and aggressor, but always the theme of misogyny remains at the core. This is evidenced over the next few stories, in which Taylor prompts the reader to cast back to “Target Practice”, in a process of active participation.

The pattern of misogyny established in “Target Practice” recurs in “Things I Could Tell You” (Chapter II; 1933), “Out of Eden (Chapter IV; 1876), “Boys” (Chapter V; 1984) and “Porter Mountain” (Chapter VI; 1991).³³ Chloe, Ellie and Renee are peripheral characters in

³¹ George Saunders, *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), 147. Along a similar vein is Wolfgang Iser’s theory of anticipation and retrospection in “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach.” Kate Elkington uses Iser’s theory extensively in her thesis, “Wool Spin Burn: the role of the reader in determining a composite novel’s whole text coherence”. See: Iser, ‘The Reading Process’; Elkington, ‘WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel’s Whole Text Coherence’.

³² Although an overarching narrative is a typical generic convention of the novel, there are short story cycles that also feature this kind of through-narrative – what Ingram refers to as the “‘main plot’ of the cycle”. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 22. *Olive Kitteridge*, for example, features an overarching theme of loneliness which informs Olive’s trajectory from wife to widow to new love interest over the course of the cycle. In *The Shore*, Chloe’s overarching narrative acts as a frame for the stories, further linking the individual parts. See: Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*.

³³ The reader can consult the family tree to discover connections not directly identified within the stories. “Things I Could Tell You” centers on a romantic affair between two characters named Mark and Letty, in which they conceive a child while Letty is married to another man. The family tree reveals that these two characters are Chloe’s great-grandparents, the unborn child Ellie’s mother, Rachel. The protagonist of “Out of Eden” is Medora, Chloe’s 3x great-grandmother, and as previously mentioned, the only other character to have two dedicated stories in *The Shore*. “Out of Eden” shares numerous thematic and situational similarities with “Target Practice”: Medora is subject to abuse at the hands of her father; her mother disappears when Medora is a young girl; she performs a castration as an act of vengeance (albeit on her father’s prized stallion rather than on a man); she kills her father; and she is strangled (by her first husband, Andrew Day). “Things I Could Tell You” similarly sees the dynamic pattern of misogyny continued, as it is revealed that Letty’s husband, a man visible on the family tree as John Gallagher, is violent, Letty trapped in a situation of domestic abuse. Each of these are points of connection, the distinct stories bridging into a recognizable coherence.

“Rain” (Chapter III; 1992), and Ellie and Chloe both appear as secondary characters in “Boys”, in which the protagonist, Izzy, also often babysits a then seven-year-old Cabel Bloxom (as previously noted in the Introduction to this thesis).³⁴ A particular moment in “Boys” provokes an especially compelling retrospective glance in the reader: Izzy has a young Cabel Bloxom and then two-year-old Chloe sat next to each other in the backseat of her car, and as Chloe “turns [to look at] him warily”, Izzy “pray[s] that they don’t start fighting.”³⁵ The reader reconciles these children in Izzy’s car with the events of the future, in which Cabel is a child molester and murder victim, and Chloe, a victim of abuse and a murderer. Here, Taylor prompts the reader to cast back to “Target Practice”; specifically, to both a certain iteration of the recurrent pattern of misogyny in which Chloe and Cabel engage in a brutal physical fight after she finds him with Renee, and to the shocking image of a shot and castrated Cabel Bloxom in the opening scene of the story.³⁶ The stories are bridged as the reader unites these points of connection, like axons across a synapse transmitting information between cells.³⁷ Mann observes that this process makes the tension between the one and the many in a cycle explicit, in that “one may read a sentence, thinking

³⁴ Referring to the family tree, the reader is able to locate the protagonist of “Rain”, Sally Lumsden, as Ellie’s distant cousin; it is the first story to feature a descendent of Medora and Thomas Lumsden as its main character. “Boys”, however, is one of four stories in the collection to have a protagonist that does not appear on the family tree, but because a number of characters from “Target Practice” appear in this story, and because the thematic pattern of misogyny repeats, the reader is able to bridge the narrative to the rest of the collection. Similarly, the protagonist of “Porter Mountain” is a woman named Becky, the girlfriend of Sally Lumsden’s brother, Pierce, and whilst she does not appear on the family tree, Pierce, being Ellie’s distant cousin and Medora’s descendent, does. The mention of Pierce’s acquaintance named Stevo, the same man with whom Bo smokes meth in “Target Practice” is coupled with the pattern of misogyny that recurs in “Porter Mountain”, again reminding the reader of Chloe and the events of “Target Practice.” Further, the detail of Pierce’s grandfather having castrated his own bulls compels the reader to recall both Chloe and Medora, the latter of whom goes on the castrate Andrew Day in a later story, “Many Waters”.

³⁵ Taylor, *The Shore*, 97.

³⁶ A multitude of other connection points are at work in “Boys”. There is the continued pattern of misogyny: how Izzy pretends she cannot hear Ellie and Bo fighting from their nearby house, does not see the bruises on Ellie’s skin; and the image of Izzy’s partner, Donnie, snaking his hand beneath her clothes when he forces himself on her after a particular violent fight, which evokes the movement of Cabel’s hand beneath Renee’s dress in “Target Practice”. When Izzy decides to leave town and start anew, she asks Ellie to run away with her, to bring Chloe, but Ellie declines, saying Bo would hunt her down if she left, that she’d be safer staying put. The reader is by this point in the cycle aware retrospectively that this is not the case, that Ellie is indeed revealed to have been murdered by Bo at the end of “Target Practice”, the implication being that she was strangled, an act which itself links to Medora, Chloe and Renee. There are parallels between what Izzy divulges to the reader about Ellie in “Boys” and what the reader knows about Chloe from “Target Practice”: she was involved in school fights with her peers, that her father was a disinterested wastrel and her mother disappeared when Ellie was young, leaving her to raise her little sister, Ollie. The absence of Ellie’s mother (whom the reader will reconcile on the family tree as the child of Mark and Letty from “Things I Could Tell You”) and disinterest of her father prompts the reader to recall Medora’s situation in “Out of Eden”.

³⁷ Iser refers to this process as the reader filling in “gaps” or “elements of indeterminacy” in a text, in order to create meaning. Iser, ‘The Reading Process’, 285. Elkington expands upon Iser’s theory, arguing that within the context of a short story cycle, these gaps “upset reader expectations of textual cohesion and closure”, thereby prompting the reader to resolve them. Elkington, ‘WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel’s Whole Text Coherence’, 9.

mostly about the individual story, and suddenly, in the next sentence, be forced to remember a similar incident or image in [a] previous story.”³⁸ As the wheel moves forward, the network of connecting threads forms, constructed via moments of cohesion fixed in the text by Taylor which the reader then threads together to make the parts, the stories, cohere through the recurrent pattern of misogyny.³⁹ The fight between Chloe and Cabel in “Target Practice” is not only the catalyst for the murder of Cabel, which in turn leads to the subsequent revelation of Chloe identifying as his killer, but this revelation then resonates across the overarching narrative to “Missing Pieces”, directly correlating to the subsequent moment of realisation that occurs at the climax of Chloe’s final story. Because these correlating revelations exist simultaneously under the reader’s retrospective lens, subsequent readings of *The Shore* grant the reader a contextual anticipation of what is to come that enriches their reading experience. Having now established the pattern of misogyny that recurs again and again throughout the collection, Taylor ensures that the happenings of “Target Practice”, and by association, Chloe, are never far from the reader’s mind.

THE PATTERN EXPANDED: THE ACTIVE READER

In “Skirt”, the reader meets Ellie and Bo before their relationship begins, the two of them working alongside three other men fixing up old houses for their boss to sell.⁴⁰ The story focuses on one particular night when the five of them drink whiskey and play card games after work in the room of an old Victorian house they are renovating.⁴¹ After the foreman, who is named Chick, leaves, the remaining four – Ellie, Bo, Tiny and Jake – get progressively more intoxicated as the night continues, and an uncomfortable tension steadily

³⁸ Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 18.

³⁹ Although Mann is of the author-focused/formalist approach, she does acknowledge the reading experience in her discussion of the simultaneous independent and interdependence of the stories. She does not, however, engage with how the reader co-creates unity within the cycle.

⁴⁰ Another linking thread between stories, the theft of an old, handicapped toilet from the house being renovated in “Skirt”, is the same toilet a seven-year-old Cabel Bloxom throws stones into in “Boys” (and the same toilet with which I opened this thesis). Although he is not identified in “Skirt”, the toilet thief is Izzy’s boyfriend, Donnie, who stole it from the porch overnight with the intention of selling it, and it still remains on his lawn years later in “Boys”. Given the ordering of the stories and the presence of the toilet in “Boys” being such a small anecdote, it would likely not hold significance for the reader until a second reading, at which point the reader would be prompted to recall the events of “Skirt”, particularly since both Ellie and Chloe feature in “Boys”. Again, Taylor keeps Chloe’s overarching narrative in the reader’s consciousness.

⁴¹ Ellie reveals to the narrator, Jack, that the house they are renovating belonged to her grandparents, whom the reader will know from the family tree to be Mark and Letty. She divulges that she is estranged from her grandparents and has never been in the house before now, the reason being that her mother, Rachel – whom Letty was pregnant with in “Things I Could Tell You” – claimed that Mark and Letty used to physically abuse her, and that she had siblings, but her parents killed and buried them in the garden. The reader will recognize these as references to “Target Practice”.

builds, culminating in Tiny and Bo sexually assaulting Ellie in a brutal attack.⁴² Using the family tree as a guide, the reader can surmise from the date of the story (1981) and the year of Chloe's birth (1982) that "Skirt" is likely an account of our heroine's conception; a deduction that is later confirmed in "Missing Pieces". In this instance, as with the very first line of "Target Practice", the reader discerns meaning by actively participating with the clues Taylor plants within the text. This interactive dynamic of cohesion-signalling and coherence-making becomes increasingly evident as the reader moves story by story through the collection. In an essay that explores the 'transaction' that occurs between author and reader, Louise Rosenblatt observes that the process of reading is a "constantly self-revising impulse that guides selection, synthesis, and organization."⁴³ As Taylor imbeds clues within the text to indicate cohesion between the stories – clues such as providing dates with each title or the thematic pattern of misogyny – so too must the reader continually recognize and integrate these cues into the perceptions of narrative meaning, which is itself ever-shifting as new connections between the stories are made.

The pattern of misogyny established with Chloe in "Target Practice" recurs and develops, modified now in "Skirt". While it is Ellie who is the object of Bo's cruelty and Tiny's predatory behaviour, the focal event of the story is the assault, so that Chloe's conception is marred by a violence that stains her entire existence, the brutality of that night bleeding into her childhood and adulthood. We can again consider Ingram's wheel in motion, its rims the repeating elements (such as Chloe) which turns around a thematic centre (in this case, misogyny); as the elements recur in various enactments and contexts, the thematic centre expands and deepens, and the wheel moves forward in a single process.⁴⁴ As the wheel advances over the course of a short story cycle, it "often amplifies and deepens the significance of the repeated element to such an extent that it becomes a symbol."⁴⁵ Yet what Ingram does not account for is how the reader interacts with this repeating, developing pattern to construct coherence. For Luscher, the reader's "full realization of the patterns [weaving] together [interconnected] stories often evolves from several re-readings, since only after reading the whole collection and confirming schemes of coherence can [the reader] fully reconcile the parts to the whole."⁴⁶ Taking for example the thematic pattern of

⁴² On a second reading, it becomes clear to the reader why Ellie goes on to marry Bo following the events of "Skirt". In "Sometimes It Hurts", Mo and Benny talk about why their mother didn't have much choice but to stay with their abusive father, citing her lack of education and job prospects, which, coupled with having a child to care for, meant that she couldn't leave. This situation bears a striking similarity to Ellie's.

⁴³ Rosenblatt, 'The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing', 456.

⁴⁴ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 21.

⁴⁵ Ingram, 201.

⁴⁶ Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 164.

misogyny, the reader perceives the pattern on their first reading because it is ever-present in the text, recurring and developing in nearly every story.

What the reader may initially miss is the pattern's subtler tributary, an analogy Taylor offers within the stories that deepens the depiction of violence against women.⁴⁷ The pattern of misogyny is furthered by the tropes of women and men being analogous to cats and dogs, a motif which repeats in various iterations over the course of the book and takes on a collective symbolic significance as the collection unfolds.⁴⁸ It is not until "Skirt" that this subtle tributary is made obvious, with Taylor projecting the imagery into her reader's consciousness through a concentration of references to cats and dogs. Most notably, feral cats are discovered beneath the porch of the house being renovated in "Skirt", which the narrator, Jake, states, "Clawed the shit out of us"; Ellie tenses when Bo suggests that they should have nailed them to the fence instead of letting them escape.⁴⁹ When the men attack Ellie, Bo puts his hands around her neck, constricting as she "claw[s] at him, making noises like the cats [they'd] cleared out earlier."⁵⁰ And there is the image of Ellie scratching at the floor while Bo rapes her, the comparison he makes of himself to a dog being tempted by a bone.⁵¹ When reading *The Shore* for the first time, "Skirt" was the story in which the symbolism connected for me as a reader, specifically the passage in which Ellie makes distressed, catlike sounds as she is being strangled, clawing at Bo and then at the floor as she is assaulted, not unlike the cats clawing the men when they are evicted from beneath the porch.⁵² Rosenblatt's theory of selection, synthesis and organization is put into play here as a result of what Taylor seeds in the text: the reader has recognised the repetition of cats and dogs throughout the stories, has amalgamated them into a singular analogy, and structured them into a recurring pattern. The thematic impact is cumulative, the reader binding the stories together by constructing a network of associations using this repeating pattern.⁵³

Luscher refers to the coherence-making process as the reader's 'pattern-making faculties', but as Anja Müller-Wood contends in her criticism of his theory, he does not

⁴⁷ Taylor employs this analogy exclusively in stories concerning the descendants of Medora and Andrew Day, as if the females tied to it by both blood and marriage have been imprinted with the misogynistic, violent events that Medora suffered at the hands of Day and her father in "Out of Eden". Stories featuring the descendants of Medora and Thomas Lumsden, however, fare much better; the implication at the end of "Many Waters" is that their relationship is stable, built on genuine affection for one another.

⁴⁸ That Taylor uses a trope is perhaps a nod to the seemingly relentless recurrence of abuse inflicted upon the generations of women throughout this collection, formulaic in its cyclicity.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *The Shore*, 136.

⁵⁰ Taylor, 143.

⁵¹ Taylor, 145; 147.

⁵² When the cats are found, they run into the nearby woods, startled by the sound of a loud machine. The image of the cats fleeing evokes the image of Medora erupting from the house in "Out of Eden" after Andrew Day strangles her and sets her on fire, screaming as she runs to the marsh.

⁵³ Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 149.

explain what constitutes these capabilities.⁵⁴ A close reading of *The Shore* allows us to not only make explicit the process of the reader's 'pattern-making', but it also demonstrates something that Luscher does not examine, which is how the author is involved in this process. If we consider again Ellie's assault in "Skirt", the reader's coherence-making can be traced. The event of her attack in which she and Bo are variously compared to a cat and a dog – and the symbol is perhaps realised for the first time – colours all other previous occurrences of cats and dogs with new meaning. This realisation prompts a retrospective recollection of a scene in "Target Practice" in which Chloe's cat is attacked by a dog. Taylor deliberately makes this account memorable by using both an interesting turn of phrase – the cat "screams" – and dedicating an entire page to Chloe fighting the dog off; a scene which, on a first reading, might feel somewhat tangential, perhaps even gratuitous, to an otherwise concise and controlled narrative, and in this way, the scene is highlighted to the reader.⁵⁵ The mirroring of these images – Ellie taking on the qualities of a cat in distress, and the personification of Chloe's 'screaming' cat – creates a link between the two stories. This link further spurs more previously unrealised connections to become apparent in retrospect, more evident on a second reading, particularly in those stories on the periphery of Chloe's overarching narrative.⁵⁶

Iser observes that on "a second reading familiar occurrences now tend to appear in a new light and seem to be at times corrected, at times enriched."⁵⁷ What the reader may have only noted as various (and perhaps previously thought to be unconnected) metaphors and similes in the stories leading up to "Skirt" take on a new significance in the second reading, their meaning deepening to form a collective symbolism that affects both the previous occurrences and those not yet encountered. Taylor's repetition of cats and dogs throughout

⁵⁴ Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', 36.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *The Shore*, 20.

⁵⁶ Taylor variously employs this symbolism in a number of other stories within the collection. In "Out of Eden", Medora's first flush of feelings for Andrew day is described as "a sort of feline want, a purring and a pulling that she hadn't felt before"; with the added context of sexual assault in "Skirt", in which Ellie, too, is directly compared to a cat, this association takes on a quality of stark juxtaposition in a second reading, particularly since Medora is later subject to a savage attack in which Andrew nearly kills her. In "Sometimes It Hurts", a teenage Mo watches her brother, Benny, "like a cat" after he finds her having sex with a local boy (Benny, one of the only male characters who is protective and nurturing rather than abusive, is painted with the feline brush, perhaps because these are decidedly female traits in the world of *The Shore*, and it is a subtle means of conveying to reader so early on in the story that Benny is not like the other men). Invoked in these contexts of sexual encounters and sexuality, this symbolism expands and deepens through its association with the thematic pattern of misogyny, particularly in the context of the sexual assault in which Ellie is compared to a cat and Bo to a dog. The symbolism suggests that these women are prey, the men their predators. These particular symbolic iterations are likely only notable to the reader on a second reading, since the analogy is much less sustained (each of them are a line, as opposed to the entire page in "Skirt"). The first and second readings, then, reveal a cumulative layering of cohesive elements seeded in the text by Taylor for her reader to discover. Taylor, 71; 168.

⁵⁷ Iser, 'The Reading Process', 285.

the stories is developmental and intentional, designed for the reader to cumulatively recognise and synthesize into an overarching symbol – another thread with which to bind the stories together. What may have felt extraneous in an initial reading of “Target Practice”, now enriches the reading experience so that Chloe defending her cat and fighting off the dog becomes an evocation of the flashback within the same story, in which Chloe comes to Renee’s rescue, fighting off Cabel. This symbolism recurs again in “Missing Pieces”, most notably in the scene that features Chloe’s encounter with Tiny, who makes her “feel like a little girl again, dirty at the knees, just waiting for the wild dogs to get [her].”⁵⁸ Within this symbolic context, Chloe’s apprehension is deepened in the reader’s perspective to a sense of fear, and while Chloe does not yet understand the reason for her visceral reaction to Tiny, the reader connects this moment to the events of “Skirt” and the horrific way in which Chloe was conceived. So too does it prompt the reader to recollect the image of Chloe wrestling the dog off her cat in “Target Practice”, and by association, the scene in which she and Cabel fight; this in turn prompts the reader to recall the revelation at the end of “Target Practice” that Chloe killed Cabel. In this way, Taylor keeps Chloe’s overarching narrative present for the reader, which in turn leads to the dramatic climax of “Missing Pieces”. Along a similar vein, Bo’s remark about nailing the feral cats to the fence becomes more menacing in light of this symbolism, now alluding to his violent contempt for women, which further deepens and expands the thematic pattern of misogyny.

“THE FILAMENTS OF A SPIDER’S WEB”

“Missing Pieces” is the penultimate story in the collection, and like “Target Practice”, the identity of our narrator is initially withheld, so that while “Skirt” conjures the end of “Target Practice” for the reader, “Missing Pieces” invokes the beginning.⁵⁹ Chloe has travelled back to ‘the Shore’ as an adult in order to discover the true identity of her father, after having

⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Shore*, 260. When Chloe meets Tiny, she has a similar reaction to him – her stomach going cold – as she does to the dog in “Target Practice”. The reader associates this reaction to Tiny with Chloe’s inherent distrust of dogs on a second reading of “Target Practice”, in which she reveals that she “[doesn’t] like dogs. [She’s] been bit too many times.” The line occurs in conjunction with the scene in which the dog attacks Chloe’s cat, necessitating that Chloe then fight the dog off. The similar physiological reaction she has to both the dog and Tiny ties to the cats and dogs analogy: men – dogs – are dangerous. Taylor, 19.

⁵⁹ Just as in “Target Practice”, Taylor provides clues for the reader as to the narrator’s identity, enticing them to determine for themselves who it is: there is the date, 2010; the admission that the narrator has returned to ‘the Shore’ after a long absence and is relieved that no one recognises her; that she has come back now to gain some closure from events of the past, during which she had been a minor; and that Sally used to see her walking to Matthews with her sibling. The reader soon realises that all of these details point toward Chloe and the events of “Target Practice”.

received confirmation that Bo was not a biological match.⁶⁰ Her search leads her to the old foreman, Chick, then to Tiny, and finally Jake, who was there the night of Ellie's assault. Not only does Jake inform her that Ellie was raped by Tiny and Bo, which means that Tiny is her father, but she also discovers that his surname is Bloxom; her overarching narrative reaches its climactic conclusion with the revelation that Cabel Bloxom, whom she killed in "Target Practice", was her brother.

In her essay on the bio-cognitive limitations involved in reading short story cycles, Anja Müller-Wood investigates the reading process; she states that "readers are better at comprehending and recalling concrete rather than abstract information" and "superficial similarities rather than structural analogies."⁶¹ It follows, then, that the writer must make deliberate, selective choices during the composition process that will guide their imagined reader to their intended meaning.⁶² As my analysis above has demonstrated, for example, Taylor repeats concrete images throughout *The Shore* in order to compel her reader to remember them: the various repeating comparisons to cats, the litany of male characters who violently attack Chloe, and the recurrent depictions of castration in "Target Practice", "Out of Eden" and "Many Waters".⁶³

The repetition of concrete images is particularly evident in a second reading, the events of each story contextualised by the entire collection. An image of the sexual assault in "Skirt", for example, of Bo restraining Ellie, who is on her stomach, pinned beneath him, is retrospectively mirrored in "Target Practice" when Chloe and Renee go crab fishing and "net up two at once, a male as broad as the length of [her] hand and holding tight to the back of a tiny little female."⁶⁴ If the symbolism of cats and dogs is, to use Lüscher's terms, a "cable strong" link in the network, then this singular image is "thin and intricate as the

⁶⁰ Chloe's goal divulged, the reader's mind casts back to "Target Practice", a correlation forming as they recall Chloe's childhood suspicions that she was not Bo's daughter, after having learned in school that "blue eyes and blue eyes can't make brown eyes". On a second reading, this connective thread is enriched through narrative repetition: in "Target Practice", Chloe shares that Ellie had promised to one day tell her the truth about her father's identity, but after Ellie's disappearance, there was no longer anyone "to explain"; Taylor subtly refers to this line in "Missing Pieces" with, "there wasn't anybody left [...] to tell [her] why that was". Additionally, there is a sub-plot in "Missing Pieces" which revolves around reconnection: Chloe visits Bo's sister, Mo, from "Sometimes it Hurts", who apologizes for having been absent when the girls were younger; Chloe also spends time with Sally Lumsden, whom the reader will recognize from "Rain", and who invites Chloe to move back to 'the Shore'. The reader learns in "Talismans" and "Tears of the Gods", that Chloe takes her up on this offer. Taylor, *The Shore*, 18; 253.

⁶¹ Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', 37.

⁶² Rosenblatt, 'The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing', 463.

⁶³ Castration is also referenced in "Porter Mountain", but not depicted. In our interview, Taylor confirmed this awareness of her reader during the composition process, stating that she chose "concrete" images to "echo" what the reader had "read already, [and that] would keep echoing as [they] went through [each] story." Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *The Shore*, 8.

filaments of a spider's web".⁶⁵ There are a number of delicate threads throughout *The Shore* for the reader to weave through their network of cohesion. Taylor seeds various paralleling images within "Skirt" which notably link it to the two other stories that constitute Chloe's overarching narrative, "Target Practice" and "Missing Pieces". There is the way Bo "snake[s] his free hand under Ellie's bra" not unlike the image of Cabel's hand as it moves beneath Renee's dress "like a snake under a blanket."⁶⁶ The image of Bo strangling Ellie has the reader recall that he does the same to Chloe and Renee in turn. And when Bo "sock[s] Ellie in the middle of [her] back" so that all the "breath go[es] out" of her, the image is reminiscent of Cabel knocking Chloe to "the ground hard on her back, [her] air gone."⁶⁷ The predatory way Tiny leers at Chloe in "Missing Pieces" is not unlike the way he often looks at Ellie in "Skirt", and the visceral feeling Chloe gets during her encounter with him – "his voice makes [her] stomach go cold" – is reminiscent of her reaction to the dog that attacks her cat in "Target Practice", which makes her "gut [go] like a big chunk of ice, [the way] it does when [she's] scared."⁶⁸ A further series of concrete images links the scenes of peak tension in these stories. In that brutal passage when Bo rapes Ellie, he does so with his "weight crushing down on her" as if wanting to "break her hips" until he "finish[es] with a growl", "[b]lood smear[ing] his shrinking cock".⁶⁹ As the reader experiences this scene, their mind casts back to the climax of "Target Practice", in which Taylor employs strikingly similar imagery when Chloe cuts Bo's throat after the frenzied attack against her sister: sounds "bubbling out the slit in his throat, hissing red foam" before "[h]e slumps forward across [her] legs and hips", pinning her beneath him as he bleeds out.⁷⁰ The blood, along with the hoarse, guttural sounds he makes, and how his body weight traps them both at the hips, suggests there is little doubt that Taylor intends her reader to connect "Skirt" and "Target Practice". It is important that the reader make this connection between the two stories, even if only on a subconscious level during the first reading, so that the events of "Missing Pieces", and therefore the conclusion of Chloe's overarching narrative, feel justified and inevitable.

The way in which Chloe's narrative is structured creates a sense of circularity. *The Shore* embraces a return to the beginning in "Missing Pieces", both in terms of Chloe's

⁶⁵ Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 157.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *The Shore*, 143; 12. As mentioned in a previous footnote, there is also the image of Donnie's hand snaking under Izzy's clothes when he assaults her in "Boys".

⁶⁷ Taylor, 145; 12.

⁶⁸ Taylor, 261; 19. In our interview, Taylor explained that in instances she repeated cohesive images or details, she tried to vary the language in order to cast a wide net, so to speak, stating, "different [readers] will pick up on different things." Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *The Shore*, 145.

⁷⁰ Taylor, 27. This particular passage concludes with the image of blood being likened to rainfall, which the reader can connect to Sally Lumsden's weather-harnessing powers in "Rain".

journey (she has literarily returned to the setting of her childhood), and the reader's journey (the revelation that Cabel is Chloe's brother reminds the reader of the earlier revelation that Chloe killed him, bringing the overarching narrative full circle to "Target Practice").⁷¹ The stories take on a palimpsestic quality – not unlike my suggestion that our critical approach to the cycle requires an overlaying of the wheel and network metaphors – as the patterns recur, and create a layering of images and events and symbolism. While it may be more difficult for readers to recall 'structural analogies', Taylor does not shy away from utilizing narrative organisation in her layering of cohesive elements. The three stories share a similar configuration, each shaped by three similar happenings (Chloe is attacked by three males; Ellie is sexually assaulted by three men; Chloe seeks out three men who are potentially her father), with the final iteration featuring an escalation (Chloe kills Bo; Ellie's final assaulter is in love with her; Chloe discovers she killed her brother).⁷² This structural parallel is also evidenced in the withholding of the narrator's identity at the beginning of "Target Practice" and "Missing Pieces", and the double reveal at the end (Bo murdered Ellie, Chloe murdered Cabel; Tiny is Chloe's father, Cabel was Chloe's brother). These similarities indicate a cohesiveness that is particular to these three stories, Taylor signalling her reader to link them together in order to realise Chloe's overarching narrative. The repeating elements that Taylor seeded throughout the stories are themselves prominent (such as the symbol of cats and dogs) or delicate (the snaking hands), but all of them – cables and filaments – are tied to the pattern of misogyny.

THE CUMULATIVE

Ingram observes that there is a "rounding off process" that occurs in a cycle, in which the final story "attempts to draw together" the "themes and motifs, symbols and (sometimes) characters which have been developing throughout."⁷³ "Missing Pieces" features many of the characters from previous stories, variously present on the page and not, brought together for the first time; in this way, "Target Practice", "Rain", "Skirt" and "Sometimes It Hurts" are knitted together within the boundaries of a single story. The pattern of misogyny recurs

⁷¹ The final scene in "Missing Pieces" sees Chloe plan to return to her childhood home from "Target Practice" before she leaves 'the Shore', reinforcing this circularity that Taylor injects into the collection.

⁷² While Jake does not rape Ellie, he does lay on top of her and grope her in a sexual way. The escalation in this instance is a shift from the purposeful violence and degradation inflicted on Ellie by Bo and Tiny, to the intense need for emotional connection that Jake quite literally forces on her in a different kind of aggression.

⁷³ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*, 22–23.

within “Missing Pieces” in the way Tiny assumes that Chloe is a sex worker simply because she is female and on his doorstep. This pattern has carried across the entire collection, continually modifying, thematically linking the stories and enriching Chloe’s overarching narrative as the reader realises the misogyny is generational, the women before her having endured a similar kind of torment. The situations repeated, Taylor raises the question of inheritance, of the cyclicity of trauma and violence, and this in turn evokes the element of recurrence that is so inherent to the cycle’s form. Ingram’s wheel metaphor is particularly useful for considering this element of *The Shore* because its rotational nature – and indeed the circular shape of it – highlights the cyclicity of intergenerational abuse that plagues this family. In having direct and indirect references to Chloe in all thirteen stories, it is her overarching narrative that the stories point to: the events of the past, the generational trauma, all collecting as the stories unfold, leading to its climactic dénouement. Like the twanging of a strand which reverberates across the whole web, the climax of “Missing Pieces” is simultaneously the climax of the entire collection. As Mann observes, and as *The Shore* demonstrates, the “form of the cycle is particularly well-suited to describe the maturation process, since it allows the writer to focus on only those people and incidents that are essential to character development.”⁷⁴ And yet although Chloe’s story is charted across *The Shore*, the reader experiencing the pivotal moments of her life from conception to adulthood, it resists the label of a bildungsroman. This is in part because her story lacks a positive narrative arc, but also because the order in which the stories are placed in the collection are not chronological. It is precisely this nonlinear arrangement that lends itself to the author’s cohesion-signalling and involves the reader in constructing coherence.

This thesis seeks to prove that within the short story cycle, separating the author’s cohesion-signalling and reader’s coherence-making is not possible. My reading of *The Shore* has demonstrated that when applied to the same text, the unity-making processes theorised in both the author-focused and reader-focused approaches are *both* required. Where Taylor designed cohesion, seeding it within the text, the reader also realised coherence, assembling and weaving it into their own unified configuration. But it has also confirmed that viewing these approaches as isolated from one another is limiting and inappropriate, in that neither the author nor the reader solely realises unity in a short story cycle. Taylor intentionally embedded elements of cohesion within the text for her reader to find, and her reader obliges, linking these elements together to create for themselves a coherence between the stories, bringing textual unity to life between them. The processes of cohesion-making and coherence-making, much like the stories within a cycle, are not wholly separate; rather, they are interactive and cooperative, as linked as the stories they work within. Indeed, it was not

⁷⁴ Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 9.

possible to examine the workings of either Ingram's wheel or Luscher's network without being led to similarly study the other in conjunction. My reading could not analyse how the wheel in motion demonstrated the recurrent, developing pattern of misogyny without involving how this repeating pattern also forms a multidirectional, linking network; to do so would have been an incomplete examination of the unity-making process. Both the wheel and the network are each insufficient metaphors or frameworks for understanding the story cycle simply because unity does not derive from either the author or the reader alone. The pattern of misogyny is both recurrent and multidirectional, and as my analyses demonstrate, neither critical metaphor is in itself adequate enough to encapsulate both this recurrence and multi-directionality, nor the entire unifying process that they are a part of. Rather, I have shown how they are two halves of a singular process, a collaboration of author and reader in which unity is realised jointly between them. It is therefore far more productive and accurate to overlay these metaphors when examining the short story cycle, in order to truly understand how the many become a one.

CHAPTER 3: THE WRITER AND THE ARCHIVE

The examination of a short story cycle can become limited by the scholar critic's own readerly perspective. In reality, it is far more feasible to consider a text from a reader-focused approach, as this is the mode through which it is almost always experienced; even Taylor, through the very process of writing and redrafting *The Shore*, inhabits the role of a first reader.¹ And so far, my analysis of the author in the unity-making process has still unavoidably been rooted in the perspective of a reader interacting with the published manuscript. The missing piece in this discussion is the author's process of the writing and composition of these texts, though, as Kennedy argues in his criticism of Ingram's study, authorial intention "depends crucially upon details of composition history that may remain ambiguous or even inaccessible to the scholar-critic."² The British Archive for Contemporary Writing at the University of East Anglia, however, is able to provide just such an insight into the often obscured process of writing a short story cycle. Rather than relying on my scholarly assessment of the published work alone, the archive allows for an analysis of composition materials which further demonstrate the unity-making process, sometimes in Taylor's own words. The archival material "is composed of her literary papers – novel manuscripts, correspondence, notebooks and research papers", the majority of which relate to *The Shore*, with the remainder linking to her novel, *The Lauras*.³ In this way, we are able to engage with materials that normally remain unseen, materials which extend our consideration of the published text.⁴

In his essay on the literary archive as an archaeological site, Wim Van Mierlo states that the manuscripts found in an archive – what he terms the textual 'prehistory' – not only divulge the composition history of a text, but crucially "also tell us a good deal about method and craft, about aims, intentions and poetics".⁵ This thesis takes a similar archaeological approach in that it moves beyond the published text and brings into play the prehistory of *The Shore*. The Sara Taylor archive grants us access to authorial intention in terms of why and how the cycle was written, and what she wanted it to achieve. In addition,

¹ Rosenblatt states that authorial reading is essential to the act of composition, and much like the reader, involves the writer 'transacting' with the text as it emerges on the page. Rosenblatt, 'The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing', 464.

² Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, ix.

³ 'The British Archive for Contemporary Writing Collections Online | ST - Sara Taylor Archive', accessed 11 March 2022, <https://archivecollections.uea.ac.uk/st>. See: Sara Taylor, *The Lauras* (London: Random House Publishing Group, 2016).

⁴ Lisa Stead, 'Introduction', in *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive* (Routledge, 2013), 4.

⁵ Wim Van Mierlo, 'The Archaeology of the Manuscript: Towards Modern Palaeography' (Routledge, 2016), 27; 22.

it allows for an examination of process and form through its tracing of the collection from initial drafts to publication and raises questions about the influence of the literary marketplace. Importantly, it also charts the development of the text's unity and how Taylor's earliest readers (those reading pre-publication) influenced the way in which this cohesiveness occurs. The act of examining an archive is particularly suggestive of the short story cycle itself, in that

Just as individual artefacts found in a dig must be linked to other finds and contexts, the relations between the elements on the manuscript page, and the relation of that page to other pages and documents, must be established and understood. Those relationships can – and must be – sequential, but they can and will also be radial: writing often radiates out at different levels and in different directions simultaneously.⁶

There is a formal similarity to the relationships within a cycle, the interactions between unifying elements spurring links between stories that are both sequential and radial. In this way, as this chapter demonstrates, interacting with an archive conjures the multidirectional network and the wheel-in-motion, the relationships between archival materials invoking the movements suggested by both critical metaphors.

THE WRITER'S INFLUENCE

A writer's practice is shaped in part by their reading, so it is worth considering the texts which Taylor herself found influential. In an archival document titled "Senior Prospectus" (the majority of *The Shore* was written to fulfil the requirement of her BFA degree at Randolph College) Taylor discusses the texts which helped to inform her process of thinking about the story cycle form: *Winesburg Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson, *In an Uncharted Country* by Clifford Garstang and *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout.⁷

Taylor reflects on Anderson's book, writing, "This is a collection of short stories primarily linked by their common location; the stories are also linked through character interaction and interrelations. The picaresque nature of the book's protagonist, I hope, will also have a bearing on my final project."⁸ The protagonist she refers to is George Willard, who appears in various degrees throughout the collection; of the twenty-two stories, he is absent completely from only two, is mentioned in another two, and is a main or secondary

⁶ Van Mierlo, 24.

⁷ Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1993).; Clifford Garstang, *In an Uncharted Country* (Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Press 53, 2009).; Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*

⁸ Taylor, 'Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic', 4.

character in those remaining. Unlike *The Shore*, which resists the arc of a bildungsroman, *Winesburg Ohio* embraces it, George maturing over the course of the stories from a roguish, self-centred boy to a self-aware young man who understands the value of intimate connection, his journey influenced by his interactions with other characters that populate the stories. The ‘picaresque’ or roguish influence Taylor refers to is certainly present in her writing; *The Shore* is populated by protagonists who are flawed yet appealing and supporting characters who are unscrupulous but engaging. The individual stories in *Winesburg Ohio* are not only ‘primarily linked by their common location and ‘character interaction and interrelation’, but so too are they linked by a repeating theme of isolation, with many of the stories centring on relationships and connection. This thematic pattern recurs over the course of the collection with various characters and in various ways (in one example, the relationship explored is between a man and God).

Loneliness is a recurring theme of *Olive Kitteridge*, too, a collection which Taylor stated was the least beneficial for the development of her own process, having “found other means of drawing connections more compelling, [though] some of the stories in the collection have influenced my thinking.”⁹ Like *The Shore*, Strout’s book is both a story of place (in this case, the fictional Crosby, Maine) and character (the titular, Olive Kitteridge). The collection offers a portrait through varying perspectives, Olive appearing to some degree in every story, so that the result is a focused and complex portrayal of character.¹⁰ *The Shore* is more kaleidoscopic in its scope, its focus less concentrated on the life of a singular protagonist (in contrast, Olive is present as a main, secondary or peripheral character in every story) but rather, an examination of the history and genealogy that informs and shapes a family. Like *Winesburg, Ohio*, *Olive Kitteridge* encompasses different stages of its protagonist’s life, though neither of them so far-ranging as *The Shore*, which spans multiple generations.

For her own writing, Taylor found the most useful text to be “*In an Uncharted Country*, which is linked by place, theme, object, and character, but so subtly that it nearly demands a second reading in order to make all of the connections clear.”¹¹ While “*Olive Kitteridge* and *Winesburg Ohio* were also helpful, [these] mostly provided context rather than led to any direct imitation.”¹² For Taylor, *Winesburg Ohio* and *Olive Kitteridge* were useful in that they provided possible frameworks of the form, but she found Garstang’s

⁹ Taylor, 7. While *Olive Kitteridge* is united by setting, characters and a recurrent, developing theme, what Taylor may be referring to are the subtler connective elements, such as the linking structural parallels, images and objects which populate *The Shore*.

¹⁰ To this end, *Olive Kitteridge* is perhaps the most novel-like of the texts as the stories form a study of life, her loneliness.

¹¹ Taylor, ‘Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic’, 3.

¹² Taylor, 3.

collection much more valuable, stating that, “In addition to being stylistically and thematically similar to the work that I would like to produce, [it] is the first collection of short stories that is linked in a manner which I would like to adopt. The marriage of Magical Realism and Southern Literature in his work is also pertinent.”¹³ Like *The Shore*, Garstang’s collection is located in the Southern setting of rural Virginia – the city of Norfolk, Virginia, is mentioned in both – and explores darker subjects, such as abuse and addiction, that Taylor likewise does not shy away from. One of Garstang’s stories, “William and Fredrick” features inanimate objects that converse with the protagonist, William, and in another story, “The Nymph and the Woodsman”, a deer transforms into an old man. Taylor, too, explores Magical Realism in *The Shore*, with one story, “Rain” featuring characters who are able to control the weather, and another, “Boys”, in which the protagonist is visited by the ghosts of two young boys, and finally, “Tears of the Gods”, which is set in a post-apocalyptic future. Whereas Taylor focuses more on one extended family, Garstang features various families and people within the community of Rugglesville, though, like Chloe and Medora, some characters – such as Hank and Walt – feature prominently in more than one story. Though it is not technically the concluding story, “Missing Pieces” anchors Taylor’s collection, unifying it through both Chloe’s search for the identity of her father, and the appearance of several characters who had not previously interacted within the same stories. Garstang’s final story, “Red Peony”, similarly unifies the collection, with many of the assorted characters returning for a Fourth of July celebration, but the effect in this case feels closer to that of an ensemble cast, with characters from previous stories being in attendance but who have no bearing on the plot.

Further, three stories in Garstang’s cycle follow the same family and are arranged similarly to Taylor’s overarching narrative, at the beginning (“Flood, 1978” is the first story), middle (“Hand-Painted Angel”, the seventh), and end (“Red Peony”, the twelfth and final story). Like Chloe, Garstang’s character, Teddy, is the protagonist of two stories – “Hand-Painted Angel” and “Red Peony” (he is only a child in “Flood, 1978”, in which his father, Hank, is the protagonist). And like Chloe, too, Teddy learns the true identity of his father in the final story, shocked to discover it is not Hank’s name on his birth certificate, but a man he has never heard of. In discovering that Hank is not Teddy’s father, the reader is prompted to cast back to the beginning, recalling the dynamics of their family in Hank’s story. In this way, *In An Uncharted Country* also features a sense of circularity, the final story linking to the first, but the effect is much less multifaceted, the return resting mostly on linking characters. There is no hint that Hank is not Teddy’s father while we are in his point of view in “Flood, 1978”, so the revelation in *Red Peony* does not carry the same feeling of

¹³ Taylor, 5.

inevitability or intent that Chloe's does in "Missing Pieces". Taylor's use of circularity is much more powerful, fashioned from character also, but more strongly from plot and event: her lifelong search for her father; the revelation that Cabel was her brother.

The archive allows us to know what Taylor was reading and was influenced by as she wrote *The Shore*, and this permits a useful understanding of her composition process. We can trace how Taylor's overarching narrative and its three-story structure was perhaps inspired by the work of Garstang, and even the texts which she found least useful – *Olive Kitteridge* and *Winesburg, Ohio* – still provided her with a formal context with which to compose her own cycle (the recurrence of characters and theme, the use of a common setting). In this way, we can see how Taylor's reading of other published cycles is entwined with her composition process, further underscoring the roles of reader and author as being united.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The archive also illuminates a great deal about Taylor's process of writing a short story cycle. Not only can we chart the development of *The Shore* through various iterations of drafted stories, but an array of accompanying materials provides a valuable insight into the author's creation of cohesion. Taylor's Senior Prospectus catalogues her ideas for the cycle, stating that a common setting would be the primary link between stories, and that she additionally "plan[ned] to incorporate a variety of [subtler] supplementary links, using important objects, recurrent characters, and related themes."¹⁴ The elements Taylor proposes in this document ultimately form the backbone of the published manuscript's unity, and it is clear that Taylor's intention from the beginning was for the individual stories to be cohesive.¹⁵

In our interview, Taylor revealed that she wanted the reader to recognise the unifying elements, but have the links be understated enough that the reader would feel rewarded and perceptive for doing so:

I wanted to make [the connections] clear on the first reading but I wanted to make them subtle. I didn't want to [...] make a reader feel like they *had* to go back and read it all over again to be able to appreciate that, but I wanted the reader to feel

¹⁴ Taylor, 1.

¹⁵ If Ingram were analyzing her work, he would no doubt categorize *The Shore* as a 'composed' collection on his spectrum of unity, since Taylor envisioned it as a whole from its inception and the stories are decidedly interconnected.

clever when they spotted things. I didn't want it to be so obvious that they didn't get that little buzz.¹⁶

What Taylor describes is a balancing act between the explicit and the restrained, and a significant part of its success ultimately depended on arranging the stories in an order that would stimulate coherence for the reader. She had to consider how to structure the collection so that linking elements were not too obvious or too closely occurring to one another, as she worried this would render them more like reiterations than connections, and nor could contextualizing information precede the story in which it was relevant.¹⁷ Taylor required that the “stories with strong connections be near enough to one another for a reader to notice [them], without [the connections] following on each other's heels or being strictly chronological”, so that she could give the reader the pleasure of “discovering the significance of an object or place long after it was first mentioned.”¹⁸ Had the first three stories in the collection, for example, been arranged chronologically in the order “Skirt”, “Boys” and “Target Practice”, the moment of revelation in “Missing Pieces” would have been undermined because the reader would too easily realise that Tiny was Chloe's biological father (“Skirt”) and that Cabel was her half-brother (“Boys”).¹⁹ Because all of these stories are spaced apart from one another (“Target Practice” is the first story; “Boys” the fifth; “Skirt” seventh; and “Missing Pieces” twelfth), the reader is immersed in the interstitial characters and events that dilute the clues sufficiently enough to prevent the revelation being spoiled. And yet, since Chloe's three key stories are positioned strategically within the collection (beginning, middle and end) and include enough direct and indirect references in the adjacent stories to keep her in the reader's mind, when the reader does reach the climax of the overarching narrative, they are able to cast back and “[see] how [they've] travelled, [see] the pattern of the whole.”²⁰

The archive demonstrates how cognizant Taylor was of building a connective tissue between the stories, the process revealed in the numerous handwritten lists and pieces of foolscap that collectively record how Taylor crafted cohesion. There are notes that Taylor scribbled to herself, such as “Boys – mention Chloe by name to make the connection” (see fig. 6), “[limit amount of] people and [bring] back important ones”, and “setting needs to

¹⁶ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

¹⁷ Taylor.

¹⁸ Sara Taylor, ‘Introduction (A Very Rough Draft)’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), 3, Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

¹⁹ In “Boys”, Ellie directly identifies Tiny as Cabel's father. Had this revelation come after Chloe was conceived in “Skirt”, and before Chloe's suspicions that Bo was not her biological father in “Target Practice”, the reader who have made the connection that Tiny was Chloe's father and Cabel her brother too soon in the overarching narrative.

²⁰ Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 4.

connect more”.²¹ It is unclear whether these notes were made during undergraduate writing workshop sessions and reflect the suggestions of her peers, or are simply a result of Taylor’s own redrafting process, but the intention behind them is apparent: the stories must link, characters must recur, the collection must feel cohesive. Sheets of loose-leaf paper summarizing a few of the stories – some of which did not make it into the published text – include a small paragraph detailing the connective elements they feature. These are likely drafts of documents pertaining to her undergraduate degree, outlining the developing cohesion between the stories (which were at that point still a work-in-progress). Additionally, there is a table divided into three columns listing each story, the recurrent object, or characters found in each, and which other stories these elements reappear in (see figs. 1 and 2, below).²² It seems she wanted each story in the collection to connect to three others at minimum; where there are not enough connections, she has noted that more must

Story	Item	reoccurrence			
Chloe's Story	Processing plants	Skirt, Rain	Talismans	Assateague & ponies	Tears, Wallops
	Ellie	Skirt, Rain		Lighthouse, still & chamber	Tears
	Stevo	Jawbone		One more connection – uncle leo?	Dresses?
	house	Rain	Twilight	Jake	Skirt
	library	Windows		Nursing home	rain
Skirt	Ellie	Chloe's Story, Rain		One more	dresses
	Jake	twilight	Robber bride	Rooming house	Windows
	House	dresses		The storm	rain
	Stolen toilet	The boys		House & chest	medea
	Chicken plants	Rain, Chloe's story	Tamar and Judah	Tooth – as fertility object	jawbone
	Black skirt	Dresses		Chest	Medea & robber bride
	Ellie's Mother	Possession through Dresses		Need one or two more	to different stories
Dresses	Green Dress	Possession	The boys	Cabel	Chloe's Story
	Aunt Kathy's House & red floorboards	Skirt & Windows		toilet	skirt
	Norfolk	Brother love, Rain		Need two more connections	to different stories
	Nancy	Windows			
	Piano	Boys			
	Funeral photograph	Skirt			
Medea	House	Robber Bride			
	Chest	Robber Bride			
	Cletus	Dresses			
Jawbone	Pierced&Becky	Rain			
	tooth	Tamar&Judah			
	Stevo	Chloe's Story			
Possession	Green Dress	Dresses			
	Ellie's Mother	Dresses, Skirt			
	Need one more – suggestions?				
Tears	Assateague	Talismans, Wallops			
	Ponies	Talismans, Wallops			
	Lighthouse	Talismans			
	Still & room	Talismans			
	Need one, possibly two more connections	to different stories			
Rain	Nursing home	Twilight			
	House & chloe's family	Chloe's Story, Skirt			
	Norfolk	Dresses, Brother Love			
	Pierce	Jawbone			
	The storm	Robber bride			
	Mitch & Ben	Dresses?			
Windows	Nancy	Dresses			
	Library	Chloe's Story			
	Rooming house	Robber Bride			
	Mother's house	Skirt			
	Stella's	Wallops			
Brother Love	Mo	Caretaker in Twilight			
	Norfolk	Rain, Dresses			
	Bo	Skirt			
	Want one more connection	to a different story			
Wallops	Stella's	Windows			
	Assateague & Ponies	Talismans, Tears			

Figs. 1 and 2.

²¹ Sara Taylor, ‘Handwritten Note: “New Order”’ (manuscript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia; Sara Taylor, ‘Handwritten Note: “Liked the Notes...”’ (manuscript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia; Sara Taylor, ‘Handwritten Note: “Connections-”’ (manuscript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

²² There are a number of stories listed in this table that do not appear in the published book – “Dresses”, “Windows”, “Wallops” and “Twilight” – and more than do appear but under different titles. “Chloe’s story”, for example, becomes “Target Practice”; “Medea” becomes “Medora”, which eventually splits into “Out of Eden” and “Many Waters”. “Missing Pieces” had not yet been written.

be made. It is very likely that Taylor used this as a referential resource for herself in order to keep track of the multitude of linking elements already written into the stories, and to see where others were needed. The majority of the documents which demonstrate Taylor designing unity are made up of written lists and tables, paragraphs and brief notes. And then there are the imageable documents, comprised of drafts of the family tree (see fig. 4) that evoke the nonlinearity of the cycle's form, and a circular diagram so large it must be folded in on itself several times to fit within the archival box it is stored in (see fig. 3, below). Taylor has plotted each title around the circle's circumference and linked them to one another with crisscrossing chords, measuring the unity of the whole by how many other stories each individual story in some way links to. There is no accompanying outline of precisely which or how many cohesive cues each line of connection denotes, but the titles

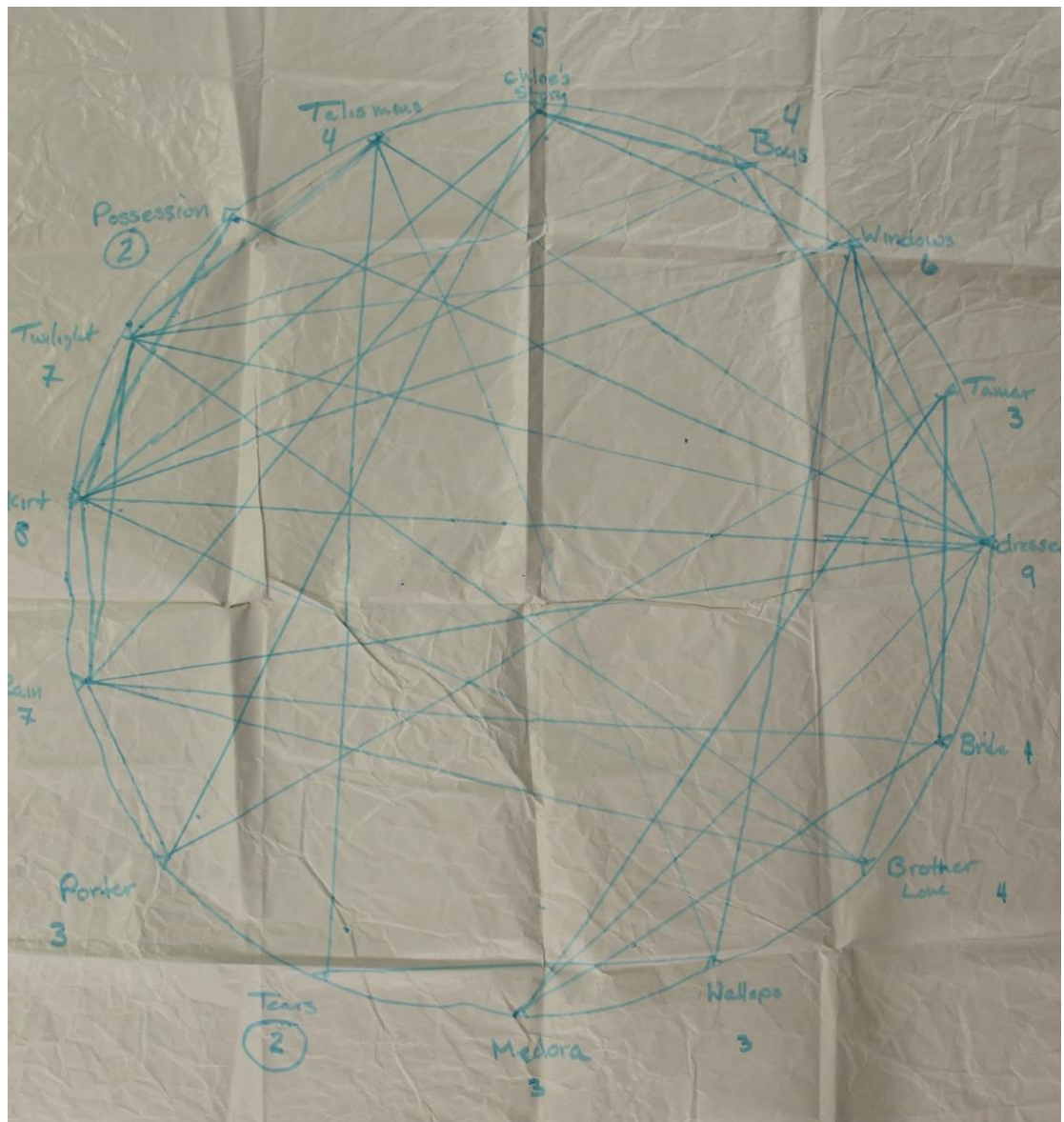


Fig. 3.

themselves act as substitutes, representing the recurrent elements found within them. The diagram concretizes what was before only conceptual, offering a tangible, visual depiction of the unifying process. We can quite literally trace the connections that Taylor has engineered between the stories. It is a material example of the critical metaphors this thesis is working with as a framework for analysis: a wheel of recurrent elements, a network of linking threads. In Taylor's diagram, processes that Ingram and Luscher only theorize are made concrete. Its very structure – a multidirectional web within a circle – illustrates the unity-making process as a joint and overlapping one between author and reader; indeed, the diagram more closely resembles the dreamcatcher or fishing net which I proposed at the end of Chapter 1 as a way of envisaging the overlaying and collaboration of the two critical metaphors. Since Taylor is her own first reader, she embodies simultaneously the roles of both author and reader as she literally maps the unity between them, further substantiating how meaning-making within the short story cycle is a singular, collaborative process.

These documents indicate that Taylor aimed for the stories to interconnect as much as possible, but it also suggests an awareness of her imagined reader in that she is conscious of providing recurring linking material in an abundance the reader is likely to catch.²³ Taylor explains her process in a document that reflects on what it was like to write the collection for her undergraduate degree, explaining that “I allowed [connections] to develop as they were inclined. As my collection of drafts grew, I began seeing subtle links between characters and places that were easily built upon; where insufficient links existed I occasionally inserted additional stories.”²⁴ Perhaps the most apparent evidence of Taylor adding stories to create more links is “Missing Pieces”. In our interview, Taylor revealed

²³ Earlier in the writing process, Taylor's undergraduate supervisor, B.A. Goodjohn, raised concerns about stories being included in the collection that did not necessarily earn their place beyond being “a deliverer of links and connections”. In her feedback for “Brother Love” (now titled, “Sometimes It Hurts”), she wrote, “my concern rests on whether or not it fits with the pieces that have been written already”. She had similar apprehensions about “Medora” (which was eventually split into “out of Eden and “Many Waters” – see the editor's letter, fig. 7), questioning “the strength of the link between this story and the others”. The message behind Goodjohn's feedback is clear: the connective tissue must be evident in order for the collection to work cohesively. B.A. Goodjohn, ““Brother Love” Supervisory Notes’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, 9 February 2012), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia; B.A. Goodjohn, ““Medora” Supervisory Notes’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, 26 January 2011), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

²⁴ Sara Taylor, ‘Intro for Senior Reading’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), 1, Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia. That she recognised and built upon unifying elements where they were insufficient suggests *The Shore* would be considered a ‘completed’ cycle on Ingram's spectrum of unity. We know, however, from her Senior Prospectus and course outline that the cycle was also ‘composed’, intentionally cohesive from its conception, to fit within the parameters of her undergraduate degree. This exemplifies Luscher's point about cycle's not fitting neatly into one kind of category, as noted in the Taxonomy of this thesis. See: Taylor, ‘Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic’; ‘Course Outline’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

that this was the final story written for the collection, and that it was done so at the behest of her agent who suggested that more be made of Chloe's narrative because the collection felt incomplete.²⁵ Nearing the end of her undergraduate degree, Taylor herself had envisioned *The Shore* "coher[ing] more as a single, overarching narrative", something which she had intended to work towards in her revisions.²⁶ Handwritten notes in the archive, too, confirm an eagerness for Chloe's return: "Bring Chloe back [and] convey what happened after Target Practice", and, "Would like to do something else near the end that brings Chloe back, as well as other characters – initial idea would be she's searching for her family and wants to know who her dad is".²⁷

"Target Practice" was the first story Taylor wrote for *The Shore*, so it is interesting that "Missing Pieces" was the last, considering their placement as the opening and penultimate stories of the collection, respectively. In our interview, Taylor stated that the first three stories she wrote for *The Shore* were "Target Practice" (formerly "Chloe's Story"), "Skirt" and "Tears of the Gods", with "the idea that those were the beginning, middle, and end of the project [...] and everything else was filled in around those. [The] stories that were kept and the ideas that were developed were the ones that work with those [original three stories] most harmoniously."²⁸ That those three stories remained in the originally conceived of position – beginning, middle and end – in the published text, indicates clear intentionality and consistency (perhaps instinctive) underlying the shifting composition process; Taylor mapped out the shape of the collection before she even necessarily understood the trajectory it would ultimately take. For Taylor, the inclusion of "Missing Pieces" changed the focus of the collection from being a portrait of 'the Shore' as a place, and redirected it to "a little girl kills her dad" and questions of "what are the social and cultural contexts in which [that can happen]", and what are "its echoes and

²⁵ This was possibly suggested in order to make the collection feel more unified and therefore likely perceived to be more marketable, something I will discuss further later in this chapter.

²⁶ Taylor, 'Introduction (A Very Rough Draft)', 4.

²⁷ Sara Taylor, 'Handwritten Note: "Purposes..."' (manuscript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia; Taylor, 'Handwritten Note: "Liked the Notes..."' The archive gives no indication of when these notes were written – whether they came after her agent's suggestion or if they are evidence that Taylor arrived at this idea herself earlier. This demonstrates that the archive is not without its limitations.

²⁸ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*. As evidenced in the editor's letter (see figs. 7 and 8), "Tears of the Gods" is thought of as the coda to the collection, whereas "Missing Pieces" is the "end of the whole". "Tears of the Gods" takes place one-hundred-and-thirty-three years after "Missing Pieces", in a post-apocalyptic 'Shore'. The plot links to the falling action of "Missing Pieces" (after Chloe learns about Tiny and Cabel), in that Chloe's Aunt Sally (the protagonist of "Rain") warns her of a coming virus that will wipe out humanity and invites Chloe to return to 'the Shore', which is safely isolated from the mainland. Although Chloe does not directly appear in "Tears of the Gods", we do learn in this story that she does indeed eventually return to live on 'the Shore'. Taylor; Arthur, 'Editor's Letter to Sara Taylor', n.d., 2.

ramifications”.²⁹ The collection’s overarching narrative, then, was the result of both the influence of an early reader (her agent) and a writerly consciousness of formal unity.

By her own admission, Taylor’s approach to writing the collection was “haphazard”, the design process a fragmentary one: part allowing the connections to develop organically, part implanting links where they were needed.³⁰ As Van Mierlo suggests, the nature of the “composition process, and the trajectory it follows, is marked as much by deviation and indeterminacy as by straight, progressive development”, and this is made evident in the incomplete or missing drafts, the half-finished family trees.³¹ In her introduction to the *Boundaries of Literary Archives*, Lisa Stead reminds us that archives are also “fragmentary and changeable – subject to growth but also to diminishment and deconstruction”.³² In this way, the archive as an unfixed space speaks to both the mutable nature of the short story cycle form, with its modifying patterns and connected yet separate stories, and to the very process of writing *The Shore*, the ebb and flow of stories added and subtracted, of rearrangement, before the book’s publication.³³

THE READER’S INFLUENCE

There are several iterations of the family tree in the archive, each in various stages of completion, which implies that Taylor was drawing them as she wrote new stories, most likely using them as reference materials for herself. On one of these drafts, Taylor has written at the bottom of the page, “[h]ow do we deal with the fact that it turns out Bo WASN’T actually Chloe’s father?” (see fig. 4, below).³⁴ The use of ‘we’ indicates she may have shared this particular draft of the family tree with an early reader – most likely her supervisor, B. A. Goodjohn, as its unfinished state and the inclusion of characters who do

²⁹ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

³⁰ Taylor, ‘Intro for Senior Reading’, 1.

³¹ Van Mierlo, ‘The Archaeology of the Manuscript’, 20. There are very few documents pertaining to Chloe-specific stories within the archive. The singular draft of “Target Practice”, for example, comprises of only the first half of the story, in a near-identical condition to the published version, while any mention or drafts of “Missing Pieces” are absent altogether. Likewise, the only draft of “Skirt” present amongst the archive materials very closely matches the published story, suggesting it is likely a later draft.

³² Stead, ‘Introduction’, 2.

³³ Not only was “Missing Pieces” later added, altering the trajectory of the whole cycle, but there were stories which did not make it into the published collection. Further, not only did Taylor rearrange the order of the stories throughout the writing process, trying to find the most suitable and effective arrangement (see fig. 5), the editor’s letter (fig. 7) demonstrates just how changeable the structure was right up until publication.

³⁴ Sara Taylor, ‘Early Draft of Family Tree’ (typescript, Norwich, UK, n.d.), Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - *The Shore*, British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.

not appear in later versions of the diagram, nor in any of the published stories, suggests that Taylor drew it during her undergraduate degree before she had a complete first manuscript.

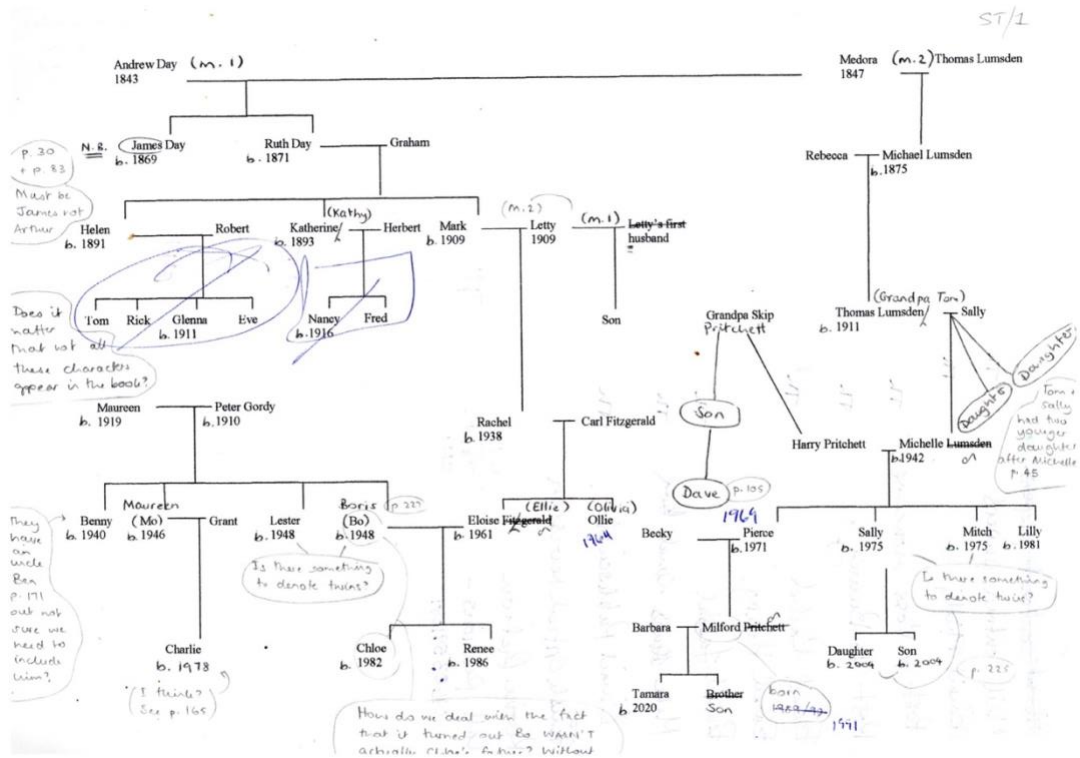


Fig. 4.

Not only does it demonstrate Taylor forming a literal network of connections, but it also evidences a direct dialogue with her reader in which Taylor seeks guidance about a crucial part of the overarching narrative that links the stories together, inviting her reader to be part of the unity-making process in a collaborative effort. Goodjohn's influence is visible in her supervisory feedback for "Wallops", a story that was ultimately cut from the collection. In it, she advises Taylor to help her reader construct coherence by identifying places by name, a technique that Sherwood Anderson used in *Winesburg Ohio*.³⁵

Although the order of the stories is a significant factor in the connective tissue of *The Shore* ultimately functioning in the way that Taylor wanted, the archive reveals how settling on the final arrangement was a challenge.³⁶ As demonstrated in fig. 5 (below), Taylor played with alternate ways of structuring the collection, including one configuration that was based on the connections between stories and another on chronology (the latter of

³⁵ Places in *Winesburg* which are repeatedly mentioned by name throughout the collection include the New Willard House, Main Street, the *Winesburg Eagle* office and the Trunion Pike, but there are also repeating descriptive similarities between the various locations: offices are filthy or musty; a veranda is decaying; a house faded. Each of these is also vacant or unoccupied in some way, which ties into the repeating theme of isolation that occurs throughout the stories.

³⁶ See: Taylor, 'Introduction (A Very Rough Draft)', 3.

which, as stated on the document, was at that point her favoured scheme); in our interview she disclosed that she even tried arranging them reverse-chronologically, though the archive does not evidence this.³⁷

Taylor writes about choosing a structure:

One of the first pieces written is the last in the collection, and one of the most recently completed is the first, with all the rest patched together in the way that currently makes the most sense to me. [... “Medora” is] the earliest story in the chronology and therefore a logical beginning. After this, the stories mostly proceed in a chronological fashion, though there are points at which I’ve manipulated the chronology slightly in order to allow the connections between pieces to play out as I intended them to.³⁸

In this statement, it is likely that Taylor is referring to the ‘primarily chronological’ ordering that is listed in fig. 5 (below), and although it was her ‘preferred’ arrangement at the time, it is implied by the way she writes of it being ‘patched together in the way that currently makes the most sense’ that Taylor was not quite convinced that this was the final

solidifying the connections and adding more lightness to balance the weight of so many morbid endings. I'll be entering an MA program in the United Kingdom in the fall, which will force me to continue writing but on a new project distinct and separate from this one; I hope to finish major revision on this project by the end of the summer and spend the next few years gradually polishing before sending it out into the wide, wide world. *Hopefully by that point I will have satisfactory titles for the pieces and the collection.*

Contents:	Primarily connection based	Primarily chronological (currently preferred)
	Medora	Medora
	Whiskey	Whiskey
	Porter Mountain	Bride -
	Wallops	Wallops
	Brother Love	Windows
	Chloe's Story	Possession
	Possession	Brother Love
	Rain	Skirt
	Talismans	Porter Mountain
	Windows	Dresses
	Skirt	Rain
	The Boys	The Boys
	Dresses	Chloe's Story
	Bride	Remembering
	Remembering	Talismans
	Tears of the Gods	Tears of the Gods

Note: I'm not really sold on most of the titles, so if anything better comes to mind...

New order	1. Revise	2. Add connections
Chloe 1992	To Chloe's story - you can see the point where they shoot rockets off... and go out into the marsh; there are little houses there	
Wallops		
Rain 1999		
Possession		
Boys		
Medora		
Porter Mtn		
Skirt		
Brother love		
Windows		
Wake		
Talismans		
Rememberance		
Tears of the Gods		
Porter Mountain		
Medora		
Need Revision Most: Medora, Brother love, Wake, Talismans, Rememberance		
Kimre - Brother love		
Matt G - Wake		
Nic - Medora		

Figs. 5 and 6.

³⁷ These lists contain stories that did not ultimately make it into the published book: “Wallops”, “Windows”, “Dresses”, “Bride” and “Remembering”. “Whiskey” is retitled to “Wake”, “Chloe’s Story” becomes “Target Practice”, “Possession” changes to “Things I Could Tell You”, “Brother Love” to “Sometimes It Hurts”, and “The Boys” is altered to “Boys”. The final story in Chloe’s overarching narrative, “Missing Pieces”, had not yet been written, hence its absence from figs. 5 and 6.

³⁸ Taylor, ‘Intro for Senior Reading’, 1.

order, and for good reason. Reading the stories linearly would have undermined Taylor's intention for the book, which was to "create a reader experience [in which] they finish the book for the first time and then immediately turn back to the beginning to read through again and see what they had missed."³⁹ It is important to note that Chloe's overarching narrative was not yet present in the collection, since "Missing Pieces" had not been written. Taylor's chief concern, then, was the reader's experience of unity. Had the stories been arranged chronologically, the reader's coherence-making would have been deflated rather than allowed to 'play out as [she] intended', rendering the reader less an active participant and more an observer; essentially, the books would have felt closer to a miscellaneous collection of short stories rather than a short story cycle.⁴⁰

Later in the redrafting process, Taylor's total restructuring of the stories allowed the connective tissue to take more precedence, and we can see Taylor prioritizing this in the notes she writes beside the new arrangement (fig. 6, above).⁴¹ This altered structure enables Taylor to make the links between stories more evident without being too obvious, the unity of the whole made richer. Crucially, it also permits the reader's experience as Taylor intended it to be, encouraging the coherence-making process that threads the stories together.⁴² This new order is very similar to the version in the manuscript that Taylor submitted to her publishers, as evidenced in a letter from her editor, Jason Arthur (figs. 7 and 8, below).⁴³ The relationship between author and reader is complicated in this respect, in that both Arthur and her agent inhabit the role of early readers, but they do so on behalf of the literary marketplace, each of them influencing the prehistory of the text. This letter reveals that it was ultimately her editor who suggested the final arrangement of the stories, writing that there was "a nice circularity in having 'Target Practice' and 'Missing Pieces' bookend

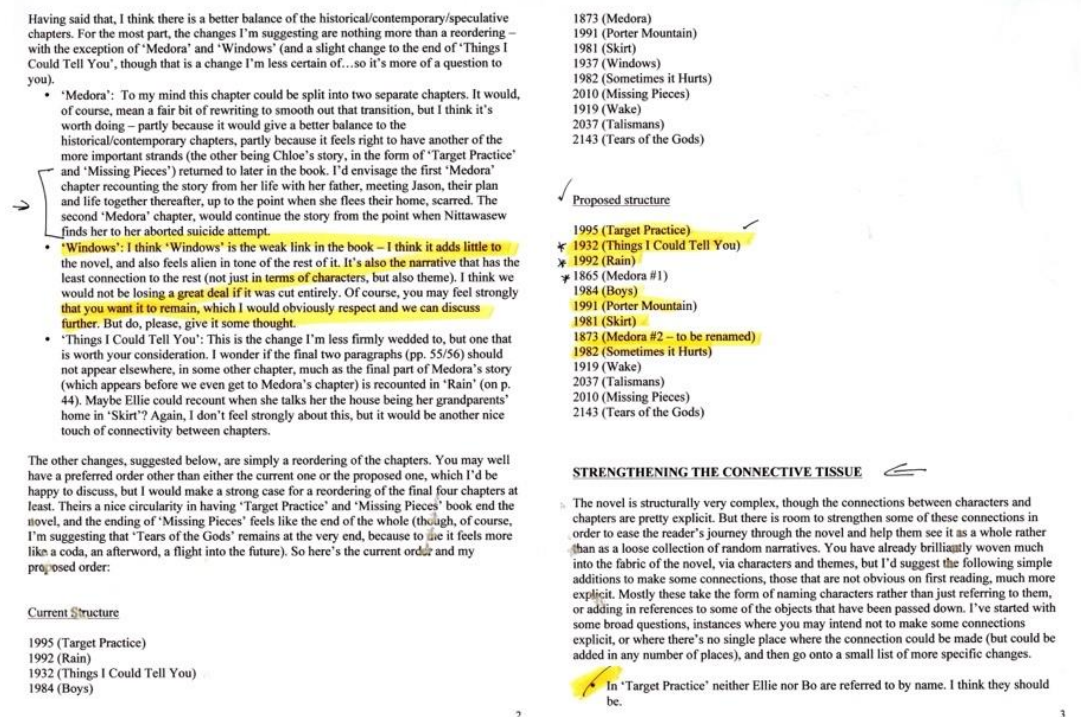
³⁹ Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*. I discuss Taylor's use of structural circularity in Chapter 2. Although not a well-recognised characteristic of the cycle, there are critics who discuss the notion of a cycle's conclusion prompting a return to the beginning. See: Lundén, *The United Stories of America*, 17; D'hoker, 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives', 2; Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*, xv.

⁴⁰ Both Luscher and Mann describe the pleasure of discovering unifying elements between stories. Had the stories in *The Shore* been published chronologically, the reader would have been largely denied this experience. It would be interesting to re-examine the published text in this chronological ordering in order to precisely determine the impact it would have on the reader's coherence-making process. Luscher, 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book', 158.; Mann, *The Short Story Cycle*, 19.

⁴¹ It is clear that the ordering in fig. 6 was more recent than that of fig. 5, because "Dresses" has been removed from the collection, and "Whisky" has been changed to its final title, "Wake".

⁴² See: Taylor, 'Introduction (A Very Rough Draft)', 3.

⁴³ There are some discrepancies between the new order and the submitted manuscript, which are evident if we compare fig. 6 with figs. 7 and 8. Both "Wallops" and "Windows" have been omitted, and some titles have been changed to their final iterations: "Chloe" to "Target Practice"; "Possession" to "Things I Could Tell You"; and "Brother Love" to "Sometimes It Hurts". The editor's letter shows that Taylor had by this point written "Missing Pieces" at the suggestion of her agent. Other than the switched ordering of "Windows" and "Brother Love"/ "Sometimes It Hurts", and the addition of "Missing Pieces", the stories remain in largely the same arrangement.



Figs. 7 and 8.

the [collection], and the ending of 'Missing Pieces' feels like the end of the whole."⁴⁴ Vitally, it is this change in configuration which gives *The Shore* its overarching narrative.⁴⁵ Chloe is transformed into the principal protagonist of the collection with this shift, the climax of "Missing Pieces" becomes the climax of the whole, and the revelations that occur – the identity of her biological father and that she killed her half-brother – take on a quality of inevitability which all the stories that come before feed into. In this sense, the early reader can be seen to have had a direct influence on the composition of the text while this was still in process, making further explicit the interaction between author and reader as collaborative within the short story cycle.

Additionally, Arthur proposes two pages of edits for the specific purpose of making unifying connections between the stories stronger "in order to ease the reader's journey through [*The Shore*] and help them see it as a whole rather than as a loose collection of random narratives" (figs. 9 and 10, below).⁴⁶ The editor's suggestions have been marked

⁴⁴ Arthur, 'Editor's Letter to Sara Taylor', n.d., 2. As previously discussed in Critical Taxonomy (and mentioned in footnote 40, above), the notion of circularity is not recognised as a central characteristic of the short story cycle, but there are critics who address it in their studies. See: Kennedy, *Modern American Short Story Sequences*; D'hoker, 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives'; Lundén, *The United Stories of America*.

⁴⁵ Taylor states that arriving at the published order was inevitable. Simply, "The original narrative structure wasn't doing what I wanted it to do, so [there is no] alternate reality in which it stayed that way." Taylor, *Interview by Sara Bayat*.

⁴⁶ Arthur, 'Editor's Letter to Sara Taylor', n.d., 3.

with a highlighter, indicating that Taylor ticked them off as she implemented the proposed edits, each mark making certain that the connective tissue be as abundant and evident as possible for the reader. These pages quite literally demonstrate a unity-making interaction between author and reader; we can see the early reader offering suggestions and Taylor actively taking them into account, using them to shape the text with each ticking off. This interaction exemplifies what the archive reveals about the collaboration between author and reader within the short story cycle, because it demonstrates how unity-making is an active process. Taylor's early readers clearly demonstrated that they sought coherence within the

- Name Sally as the landlady in 'Target Practice' – on p. 4 it currently says 'where Mr Lumsden used to live and where his kids and grandkids live now' (we learn later that Sally inherited the house after his death). At that point, Chloe would be aware of who their landlady was, even if she'd never met her.
- In 'Target Practice', should Chloe know (or later, should there be reference to the fact – from either Ellie or the Lumsdens) that the families are actually distantly related. (Though Ellie, in 'Skirt', says she never met her grandparents, does she know who they were at least, and their connection to the Lumsdens?)
- The Lumsdens' ability to conjure storms/change the weather: there are references to stories of 'black magic' at the farmhouse (both in 'Target Practice' and 'Talismans', for example) but should the stories refer more directly the particular type of magic – weather changing/storm conjuring. Also, in 'Missing Pieces', Sally's skills are not referred to at all. (On page 212, for example, Sally says 'without the causeway, we would be unreachable' – add the suggestions that 'a forensically pinpointed storm' would be all that was needed to destroy the causeway.)
- Cabel Bloxom: name Tiny as the absent father in 'Boys' (unless your intention is to have that realisation – that Tiny was a Bloxom too – not be revealed until 'Missing Pieces'), and some mention of Chloe realising in 'Missing Pieces' that Tiny must be Cabel's father as well as her own, and that she had in fact murdered her own brother.
- Medora's wooden chest: the chest is mentioned in 'Rain' ('still kept the dark wood of her medicine chest oiled'). Let's also mention it in 'Missing Pieces' (when Chloe visits Sally) and in 'Talismans' (Tamara coming across it when she rifles through the house). Might even be worth having it turn up in 'Tears of the Gods', though that be overegging it...
- Aunt Ollie: Aunt Ollie pops up a lot in passing, but we never get her story. We know she died, but that is all. Is it worth having Chloe or Ellie telling her tale at some point? Either in 'Target Practice', 'Skirt' or 'Missing Pieces'? Or 'Izzy' in 'Boys'?

(page/line)

28/8-11 This 'man and woman' – Bo and Ellie – don't necessarily need to be named, but should there reference made to the fact that they are actually related to the Lumsden family (Ellie granddaughter of one of Grandpa Lumsden's cousins mentioned on page 30)? Or is the intention that there is no knowledge of Rachel's offspring, that it is a coincidence Ellie and her family is living on their land?

28/17 'hard-luck cases' – or allude to them being distantly related, and that is why Lumsden is renting to them at next to no cost? See above and also note about Chloe's knowledge of her own relationship to the Lumsden's in 'Target Practice'.

30/8 up Mention of the cousins – show how they are related, specifically their connection to Medora, Thomas Lumsden's grandmother (whom they shared as a grandmother, but from different grandfathers).

30/3 up 'She had been a sweet little girl' – name her (Rachel)

31/1 'Her two daughters' – name them (Ellie and Ollie), unless intention is that they were lost to the family and there is no knowledge of them. See above

39/6 'Your daddy and I were talking about setting up a little distillery' – have him mention that during prohibition the Shore was home to illicit hooch making, in reference to 'Wake'?

40/last 6 lines Reference to Ellie, Chloe and Renee. See above. Even if you decide that you prefer to keep knowledge of the family connection secret, at least name Chloe or Renee (one would think that after all those years living on their land, Sally would be aware of their names) is it will ease the reader's connecting of the dots.

43/3 up 'The story of his grandmother' – name her.

57/3 'the kids you babysit' – name them

59/10 'care of her sister, Ollie'

59/14 'you don't hear her and Bo'

60/12 'Ellie's husband' – change to 'Bo'

125/3 up 'pulled up the boards' – this is the house that Mark and Letty eventually moved to, which we are told had red pine floors' (p. 51) – mention here that they are red (also, see next query)

131/7 up 'blood red from age' – see above query, no mention in 'Things I Could Tell You' that it was only the bedroom floors that were red. Also, it says here they are red from age, but they were red back in 1932, soon after it had been built. Make consistent.

181/9 'our landlady' – make more explicit that she realises Sally must have been the landlady at the time of 'Target Practice'. (On p. 187 Chloe tells Seth that she was 'our old landlady', so she does realise this.)

183/6 up Change to 'My aunt Ollie, mom's sister, died when I was a kid.'

GENERAL PAGE QUERIES

(page/line)

Figs. 9 and 10.

text: Goodjohn's questions about connectivity between the stories; Arthur's restructuring of the order and the suggestions to strengthen cohesion; and all of this bolstered by Taylor revealing that her agent proposed an additional story about Chloe to make *The Shore* feel more like a unified whole. In turn, the literal mapping of connections between stories on the numerous supplementary materials, the poetics of the text's connective tissue, and Taylor's voiced intentions of unity in documents such as her Senior Prospectus, makes evident that not only was she aware of her imagined reader, but that she was conscious to scaffold their process of constructing coherence by seeding cohesive cues throughout the text. And this makes the archive an important resource for thinking about form and composition when it

comes to the short story cycle in particular, but also for tracking the interaction between Taylor and her readers in the unity-making process.⁴⁷

Without the archive, we would not have had access to these written and other contextual materials that offer a deeper analysis of textual cohesion in *The Shore*'s compositional history, nor would we have seen for ourselves how the reader directly (Taylor's early readers – supervisor, writing workshop participants, agent and editor) and indirectly (Taylor's intention for the reader) helped to shape its unifying design, or indeed, how this unifying design was engineered. The archive allows us to see the unity-making process in action, which is itself significant, but it also permits an invaluable access to the author, who has typically been marginalized in short story cycle theory.⁴⁸ Whilst the published text is more readily examinable from a readerly approach, the pre-historical materials exist largely in the realm of the author, a space which, as Kennedy argues, is often obscured to us. The archive reveals this space, allowing for a consideration of authorial intention that is typically lacking in short story cycle theory. That the author has been largely unavailable to and silenced in critical discourse of the cycle is to its detriment, because it has disallowed a deeper understanding of the unifying forces which underpin the form. The workings of the short story cycle have consequently proven elusive and difficult for critics to precisely define, and this is made evident in the volume and variations of its taxonomies and the multiple designations it wears. That the archive grants access to authorial process allows for a richer comprehension of formal unity, and in particular within the context of this thesis, because the metaphors theorised by Ingram and Luscher to explain the cohesion-making and coherence-making processes are made visually demonstrable in Taylor's archive materials; not only that, but these materials make explicit that these processes are bound up together. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the archive illuminates how the creation of unity in a short story cycle is collaborative, realised between the author and reader in a unity-making process that exists beyond and before the published text.

⁴⁷ The value of literary archives as resources for understanding compositional and creative processes is also explored in other studies. See: Carrie Smith, *The Page Is Printed: Ted Hughes's Creative Process* (Liverpool University Press, 2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1z9n1wc>.; 'Hidden Collections: The Value of Irish Literary Archives', accessed 26 June 2022, <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/epub/10.3366/iur.2020.0445>.; Lisa Stead and Carrie Smith, *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation* (London: Routledge, 2016).; *Elizabeth Bishop and the Literary Archive* (Lever Press, 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11649332>.; Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, 'Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives', *Archivaria*, 22 July 2009, 25–39., amongst others.

⁴⁸ I discuss the avoidance of the author within the critical landscape of short story cycle theory in my introduction. See also: Müller-Wood, 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles', 32., D'hoker and Bossche, 'Cycles, Recueils, Macrotexts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective', 15.

CONCLUSION

While the key critical metaphors identified in this project – Ingram’s wheel and Luscher’s network – each reinforce apparently oppositional positions within the critical discourse surrounding the short story cycle, this project has demonstrated that on their own, each position is ultimately insufficient and that both are in fact false methods for encapsulating how formal unity is practically created. Largely, this deficiency is because the creation of unity has traditionally been viewed as a process attributed to *either* the author or the reader, when in actuality, this thesis has confirmed that in practice, unity-making must involve *both* the author and reader. In centring either/or, as the criticism traditionally has, the unity-making process has been rendered incomplete, because each approach underscores only one part of how unity is crafted. When the recurrent wheel and multidirectional network were applied concurrently to *The Shore* and traced within the text, however, this thesis revealed how these ‘separate’ metaphors were actually collaborative; where the author seeded a recurring connective cue – the images of cats and dogs, for example – the reader recognised that cue and threaded it between the stories to create an interlinking web. This interaction between author and reader illustrates that the critical approaches are two parts of the same unity-making process. The creation of a cycle’s unity is therefore not unlike the very form that it is working within: two parts which interact to form a singular method. If the cycle itself champions stories which entwine, then it is fitting that the methodology concerning this interconnective quality of the cycle is similarly intersective.

Because the metaphors individually do not adequately embody the collaborative nature of how unity is created within the text, this thesis has offered a new critical framework with which to approach the short story cycle. Rather than emphasising an either/or position, the unity-making process is more accurately both/and. A metaphor which acknowledges that *both* the reader *and* author are involved in a singular, interactive unity-making process can be encapsulated by superimposing the existing wheel and network metaphors. I have therefore proposed and demonstrated the critical usefulness of overlaying the metaphors to create a dreamcatcher or fishing net, in which the recurrent elements seeded by the author form the surrounding hoop, and the interlinking network woven by the reader make up the web or net. The possibilities of this overlaid metaphor as a framework for reading the short story cycle is demonstrable in *The Shore*, exemplified in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis by the way in which Sara Taylor and her reader jointly create unity within the text. The British Archive for Contemporary Writing materials reveal that Taylor, who herself dually inhabits the role of writer and first reader, created her own iteration of the

dreamcatcher/fishing net during the composition of *The Shore*, allowing Taylor to chart for herself the way in which the stories were interconnecting. Not only does this provide an insight into the creative process, but it also offers us physical, visible evidence of how the wheel and the network are interacting, and indeed how they combine into a singular superimposed metaphor, exemplifying the collaborative dynamic between author and reader. Further, the archival materials make explicit the interaction between the author and reader in the creation of unity, in that we are able to see for ourselves the way in which Taylor's early readers – her peers, undergraduate supervisor, agent and editor – were engaging with, and seeking unity within, the text at various stages of composition. Taylor herself was responsive to this unity-seeking (implementing the suggestions of her agent and editor) and sought out advice on textual cohesion from her reader (undergraduate supervisor). In this way, Taylor's archive provides evidence that the interaction between author and reader occurs pre-publication, while the text is still being created. This thesis has therefore established that the unity-making process is not exclusive to the published text, but rather, it also occurs within its prehistory.

This thesis contributes a new methodology with which to approach the critical landscape of the short story cycle. The method of overlaying Ingram and Luscher's critical metaphors has shown how *both* the reader and writer must be considered in the creation of formal unity, and this could be applied to any cycle. Further, the work undertaken with the archival materials demonstrates how engaging with a writer's archive is particularly fruitful for thinking about the short story cycle, and this methodology is transferable to any cycle which has an archive. Unlike the published product, which is fixed, the archive allows us to view the text in process, to encounter it in a space of possibility in which the interaction between author and reader is unmediated, and this enriches and deepens our understanding of formal mechanisms of the cycle.

I began this thesis by posing questions: What are the working mechanics of the short story cycle? What happens when the roles of the author and reader – and how they each create unity – are examined within a single cycle? And what does a critical framework for the examination of these roles look like? In response to these questions, this thesis has demonstrated that authorial cohesion and readerly coherence are not only working concurrently to create unity within a short story cycle, but that they are interacting with one another both within and beyond the published page. What exists between the author and reader is a singular unity-making process, a fishing net, if you will, with which to attempt to catch this mobile and dynamic form, its exact workings too slippery to precisely define, a form that seems to shift at will.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alison, Jane. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*. Catapult, 2019.
- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics. London: Penguin Books, 1993.
- Arthur, Jason. Typescript. 'Editor's Letter to Sara Taylor'. Typescript, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- 'Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor - A Paper Arrow'. Accessed 19 July 2022. <http://www.apaperarrow.com/2016/01/book-review-shore-by-sara-taylor26.html>.
- Brouckmans, Debbie. 'The Short Story Cycle in Ireland: From Jane Barlow to Donal Ryan', 21 April 2015. <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/1807900>.
- Clanchy, Kate. 'The Shore by Sara Taylor Review – a Southern-Gothic Delight'. *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015, sec. Books. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/18/the-shore-sara-taylor-review-kate-clanchy>.
- 'Course Outline'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- Cummins, Anthony. 'The Shore by Sara Taylor Review – Harrowing Debut'. *The Guardian*, 10 April 2016, sec. Books. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/10/the-shore-sara-taylor-paperback-review>.
- Cusk, Rachel. *The Lucky Ones*. London: Fourth Estate, 2003.
- D'Hoker, Elke. 'A Continuum of Fragmentation: Distinguishing the Short Story Cycle from the Composite Novel'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- D'hoker, Elke. 'Linked Stories, Connected Lives: The Lucky Ones as Short Story Cycle'. *E-Rea. Revue Électronique d'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone*, no. 10.2 (18 June 2013). <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/3230>.
- D'hoker, Elke, and Bart Van Den Bossche. 'Cycles, Recueils, Macrotexts. The Short Story Collection in a Comparative Perspective'. *Interférences Littéraires/Littéraire Interferenties*, no. 12 (15 February 2014): 5–17.
- Douglas, Jennifer, and Heather MacNeil. 'Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives'. *Archivaria*, 22 July 2009, 25–39.
- Driss, Hager Ben. 'Nomadic Genres: The Case of the Short Story Cycle'. *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2018): 59–74.
- Dunn, Maggie, and Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. New York: Twayne, 1995.
- Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. London: Corsair, 2011.
- Elizabeth Bishop and the Literary Archive*. Lever Press, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11649332>.
- Elkington, Kate. 'WOOL SPIN BURN: The Role of the Reader in Determining a Composite Novel's Whole Text Coherence', 2015.
- 'Entering the Prizes | The Booker Prizes'. Accessed 1 May 2023. <https://thebookerprizes.com/information-for/entering-the-prizes>.
- Evaristo, Bernardine. *Girl, Woman, Other*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019.
- Ferguson, Suzanne. 'Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in Genre Criticism'. *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de La Nouvelle*, no. 41 (1 September 2003): 103–17.
- Frank, Michael C. 'Two Worlds in One Book: Ways of Sunlight and the Migrant Short Story Cycle'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.

- Garstang, Clifford. *In an Uncharted Country*. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Press 53, 2009.
- Gilbert, Zoe. *Folk*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.
- Gill, Patrick, and Florian Kläger. 'Introduction: Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Goodjohn, B.A. "'Brother Love" Supervisory Notes'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, 9 February 2012. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . "'Medora" Supervisory Notes'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, 26 January 2011. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . "'Wallops" Supervisory Notes'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, 16 February 2012. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- Hadley, Tessa. *Accidents in the Home*. London: Vintage Books, 2002.
- Harker, W. John. 'Literary Communication: The Author, the Reader, the Text'. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 22, no. 2 (1988): 5–14.
- Hauthal, Janine. 'Unity in Diversity? Imagining Europe in Julian Barnes's Cross Channel'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- 'Hidden Collections: The Value of Irish Literary Archives'. Accessed 26 June 2022. <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/epub/10.3366/iur.2020.0445>.
- HuffPost UK. 'The Ones To Watch: Best Debut Fiction Coming In 2015', 18 December 2014. https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/hannah-beckerman/the-ones-to-watch-best-de_b_6345848.html.
- Ingram, Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century; Studies in a Literary Genre*. The Hague, Mouton, 1971.
- Iser, Wolfgang. 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach'. *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (1972): 279–99.
- Kadmos, Helena. 'Riding Waves: Representing Women's Relational Autonomy in the Short Story Cycle'. Murdoch University, 2015. <https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/27336/>.
- Kalb, Deborah. 'Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb: Q&A with Sara Taylor'. *Book Q&As with Deborah Kalb* (blog), 22 February 2016. <http://deborahkalbbooks.blogspot.com/2016/02/q-with-sara-taylor.html>.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald, ed. *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Liang, Ling. 'The Short Story Cycle in Winseburg, Ohio', 66–70. Atlantis Press, 2015. <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/ssemse-15/25841994>.
- Literary Review. 'Thea Lenarduzzi - Coming of Age'. Accessed 18 October 2021. <https://literaryreview.co.uk/coming-of-age-3>.
- Lundén, Rolf. *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. Brill, 2022.
- Luscher, Robert. 'The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book'. In *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, edited by Jo Ellyn Clary and Susan Lohafer, 148–67. Louisiana State UP, 1989.
- Lynch, Gerald. *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles*. University of Toronto Press, 2001.
- Mann, Susan Garland. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1989.
- McNamara, Danielle S. 'The Epistemic Stance between the Author and Reader: A Driving Force in the Cohesion of Text and Writing'. *Discourse Studies* 15, no. 5 (1 October 2013): 579–95.

- Müller-Wood, Anja. 'Bio-Cognitive Constraints in the Reception of Short Story Cycles'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Munro, Alice. *The Beggar Maid*. London: Penguin Books, 1980.
- . *The Lives of Girls and Women*. London: Vintage Books, 2015.
- Nagel, James. 'The American Short Story Cycle'. In *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, edited by Blanche H. Gelfant and Lawrence Graver, 9–14. Columbia University Press, 2000.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/gelf11098.4>.
- . *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001.
- Norrick-Rühl, Corinna. 'Short Story Collections and Cycles in the British Literary Marketplace'. In *Constructing Coherence in the British Short Story Cycle*. London: Routledge, 2018.
- Page, William D. 'The Author and the Reader in Writing and Reading'. *Research in the Teaching of English* 8, no. 2 (1974): 170–83.
- Plitt, Carrie, and Octavia Bright. 'Literary Friction - Generations with Sara Taylor'. *Literary Friction*, n.d.
- PublishersWeekly.com. 'Fiction Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor.' Accessed 12 October 2021. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-553-41773-9>.
- Quatro, Jamie. *I Want to Show You More*. London: Picador, 2019.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. 'The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing: Transactional Theory of Reading', 451–79. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Ryan, Donal. *From a Low and Quiet Sea*. London: Penguin Random House, 2018.
- . *The Spinning Heart*. London: Penguin Random House, 2012.
- Salinger, J.D. *Franny and Zooey*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991.
- . *Nine Stories*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991.
- . *Raise High the Roofbeam, Carpenters and Seymour - An Introduction*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Sara Taylor. 'The Shore'. *Library Journal*. Accessed 19 July 2022.
<https://www.libraryjournal.com/review/the-shore>.
- 'Sara Taylor on Multi-Threaded Narratives'. Accessed 25 August 2021.
<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2016/sara-taylor-on-multi-threaded-narratives.html>.
- Sarah's Bookshelves. 'Sarah's Snippets Book Review: The Shore by Sara Taylor', 19 May 2015. <https://www.sarahsbookshelves.com/sarahs-snippets-book-review-the-shore-by-sara-taylor/>.
- SAT, 28 Mar, and 2015 - 00:00. 'Book Review: The Shore'. *Irish Examiner*, 28 March 2015.
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/arid-20320694.html>.
- Saunders, George. *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.
- Smith, Carrie. *The Page Is Printed: Ted Hughes's Creative Process*. Liverpool University Press, 2021. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1z9n1wc>.
- Smith, Jennifer J. 'One Story, Many Voices: Problems of Unity in the Short Story Cycle'. Indiana University, 2011.
- Smith, Jennifer J. *The American Short Story Cycle*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2018.
- Smith, Jennifer Joan. 'Locating the Short-Story Cycle'. *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers de la nouvelle*, no. 57 (1 September 2011): 59–79.
- Stead, Lisa. 'Introduction'. In *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive*. Routledge, 2013.
- Stead, Lisa, and Carrie Smith. *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- 'Strange Horizons - The Shore by Sara Taylor By Nina Allan'. Accessed 21 October 2021.
<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/reviews/the-shore-by-sara-taylor/>.
- Strout, Elizabeth. *Olive, Again*. London: Viking, 2019.
- . *Olive Kitteridge*. London: Simon and Schuster Ltd, 2011.

- Taylor, Sara. 'Early Draft of Family Tree'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Handwritten Note: "Connections-"'. Manuscript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Handwritten Note: "Liked the Notes..."'. Manuscript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Handwritten Note: "New Order"'. Manuscript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Handwritten Note: "Purposes..."'. Manuscript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . *Interview by Sara Bayat*. Audio Recording. Norwich, UK, 2022.
- . 'Intro for Senior Reading'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Introduction (A Very Rough Draft)'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, n.d. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . 'Senior Prospectus Statement of Topic'. Typescript. Norwich, UK, 8 December 2011. Sara Taylor Archive, ST/1 - The Shore. British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia.
- . *The Lauras*. London: Random House Publishing Group, 2016.
- . *The Shore*. London: William Heinemann, 2015.
- . *The Shore: A Novel*. New York: Hogarth, 2015.
- 'The British Archive for Contemporary Writing Collections Online | ST - Sara Taylor Archive'. Accessed 11 March 2022. <https://archivecollections.uea.ac.uk/st>.
- The Guardian*. 'The Big Novels of 2012'. 13 July 2012, sec. Books. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/13/big-novels-2012>.
- 'The Shore by Sara Taylor | The Times'. Accessed 11 October 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-shore-by-sara-taylor-5b3xjl80n5l>.
- Toolan, Michael. 'Narrative Progression in the Short Story: First Steps in a Corpus Stylistic Approach'. *Narrative* 16, no. 2 (25 April 2008): 105–20.
- Van Mierlo, Wim. 'The Archaeology of the Manuscript: Towards Modern Palaeography', 15–29. Routledge, 2016.
- Women's Prize for Fiction. 'Publisher Information'. Accessed 20 July 2022. <https://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/about/publisher-information>.

LINKING THE CRITICAL AND THE CREATIVE

I began this creative-critical project with the simple idea of writing interconnected stories (I confess, I was unaware then that they were called anything but linked stories). As I began to compose my short story cycle, I found the form exciting and wanted to learn more about its workings. As both a writer and reader of the genre, I was struck by the perceived disunity between the two roles in short story cycle theory. I was in the motions of both processes as I wrote, redrafted, and studied published examples of these texts, and it seemed erroneous to critically consider them as noninteractive when my own experience as a writer, early reader, and reader of published cycles felt entwined. Bridging this separation in my critical thesis was a natural avenue to explore.

Both my creative and critical components have been mutually informative. Reading examples of the form and writing my own short story cycle influenced my critical thinking, as I was able to flit between the perspectives of author and reader, having first-hand experience in both. Where critics undermined the involvement of either the author or the reader, I understood why this thinking was flawed, and how their arguments might be expanded to recognise the significance of both roles. In turn, my creative work benefitted from my engagement with critical discourse on the cycle, as it gave me an awareness of the technicalities of the form – the recurring, developing patterns, its propensity for nonlinear connections between stories – and it kept the cycle’s structural adage of ‘the one and the many’ at the forefront of my writing; I would approach each story as an independent cog but always with the whole mechanism in mind (in this sense, we could say my cycle falls under ‘composed’ on Ingram’s spectrum of unity). Having sourced short story cycles for creative inspiration and framework, I was reading *The Shore* for the first time when I learned of the Sara Taylor archive at the British Archive for Contemporary Writing, and this discovery coincided with a crucial point in my research. The most impact on my creative-critical project came from this archival landscape; it was hugely valuable to witness the creative process of another short story cycle writer, particularly one whose work I admire and so thoroughly enjoyed reading. The opportunity to speak with Sara Taylor about craft and composition further spurred my writing and my understanding of the form, and her self-confessed anticipation and mindfulness of the reader’s experience is something I endeavoured to implement in my creative project.

As a way of introducing the creative I would like to return to and rethink some of the questions that drive the critical: how is the creative component of this thesis a way of enacting how the cycle functions? How might the reader interact with the unifying elements

within my creative work? How does the creative piece enable a further demonstration of how the author animates readerly engagement?

In Chapter 3, I discussed the texts which Taylor found beneficial while she was writing *The Shore* and how her reading helped to shape the composition of her creative work. My own creative practice was similarly guided by readerly experience. Alongside *The Shore*, I read a number of other short story cycles during the writing of *Hesket*, some of which resonated with me far more than others. The cycles of Elizabeth Strout (*Olive Kitteridge* and *Olive, Again*), Alice Munro (*The Lives of Girls and Women*), and Rachel Cusk (*The Lucky Ones*) were all beautifully executed, and valuable examples of what the form is capable of. Although they provided me with a useful framework, I was most influenced by cycles which featured an overarching event or a considered structure, or that were knit together in more complex and detailed ways.

One of the first cycles I came across, *Girl, Woman, Other*, was influential in how I have configured my creative work. Evaristo grouped her stories in threes, the protagonists in each of these trios directly connecting to one another (the first group, for example, feature three stories from the perspectives of a woman named Amma, her daughter Yazz, and her best friend, Dominique). I found this method of organisation helpful when it came to deciding on a final order for my stories, forming groupings of two, pairing narratives which were most obviously linked by character in order to help keep the connections between them clear for the reader. The first two stories in *Hesket*, “Isla” and “Rio”, have a very obvious link between them – in the opening story, a character, Daniel, speaks of an experience he has recently had, and then the reader witnesses him have this retrospective experience within the second story. I wanted the reader to easily make this connection in order to signal to them early on there are more connections to be made as they move through the stories, but also to alert the reader to the overarching narrative, to which the character’s experience connects.

Similar to *The Shore*, Tessa Hadley’s *Accidents in the Home*, follows an extended family and features the image of a family tree in its opening pages, though its span is much more compressed than Taylor’s, limited to three generations over a one-to-two-year period. There are incidents which occur across the stories, some small, some devastating, the effect not unlike throwing stones into a pond and seeing the consequences ripple forth. The stories are tied together by recurrent characters and a theme of domestic betrayal, the overarching event of an affair teased out between them. My stories are similarly woven together by character, theme, incident, motif, and overarching narrative. I incorporated these recurring elements within the text – along with structuring the stories in twos – to form the more evident, ‘cable strong’, links for the reader to thread between stories. In this way, the overlaid metaphor of the dreamcatcher or fishing net is made explicit in *Hesket*. There are characters who reappear as either protagonists or secondary characters, occurrences which

carry over or are returned to in other stories (such as the character experience mentioned above), and an overarching narrative which, like in Hadley's cycle, is not based on a single character's arc as it is in *The Shore*, but an event with corresponding points of connection seeded throughout the stories that the reader can select, synthesize, and organise to form the unifying throughline. Connecting the stories further is the reoccurring, developing thematic pattern of loss in its myriad forms, but also of stories – that people tell themselves, tell others, collect. A tributary of this thematic pattern of storytelling is the recurring motif of Magical Realism. These themes in turn link to the conclusion of *Hesket*, the end of the whole performing Ingram's 'rounding off process' discussed in Chapter 2, in which a selection of the linking elements that have repeated throughout the stories are brought together.

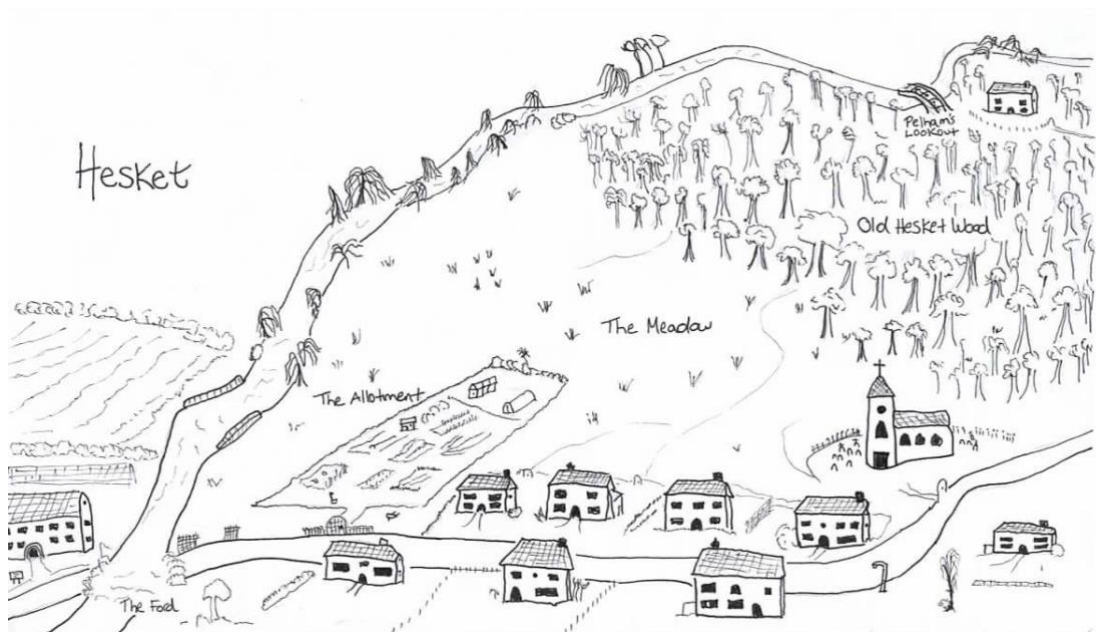
Taylor uses Magical Realism within her stories (see Chapter 3), as does Zoe Gilbert in *Folk* and Jamie Quatro in *I Want to Show You More*. In these cycles, the device is overt: Quatro writes about a woman who has visions; Gilbert's folkloric stories take place on the fictional island of Neverness, populated by mythic customs and characters, one of which has a wing for an arm, another becomes the bride of a water bull. Part of the decision-making process with my own cycle was the extent to which I wanted to play with ambiguity in connection to Magical Realism, an uncanniness that seemed at once definitely strange, but could just as easily be explained away.

More than any other cycle I have read, I found the volume and variation of the linking elements implemented within *The Shore* to be extraordinary. I was inspired by Taylor's use of the family tree to signal cohesion between the stories from the beginning and have similarly included a map of *Hesket* (like *The Shore*, my stories feature a common setting). Not only does this immediately indicate unity to my reader, but it provides a point of orientation so that specific references to the setting are more easily visualised, and the reader can position themselves and these characters within the locale as they move through the stories. I was also inspired by Taylor's use of repeating imagery relating to her overarching narrative, and I likewise seeded recurring imagery within all of my stories, though my use of it is more delicate, less heavily symbolic, perhaps because our cycles are quite different in tone. Some of this imagery connects to the overarching narrative in *Hesket* as it builds to the conclusion and its revelation, other instances simply serve to knit the stories together more. I consider the latter especially to be subtler links between the stories, fine as the 'filaments of a spider's web' and perhaps only apparent on a second reading, the unity of the whole made stronger for the reader in retrospect. In this way, the reader's multidirectional experience of the repeating patterns in *Hesket* occurs as both a physical motion (turning back to consulting the map) and a movement within the mind (connecting the recurrent elements between stories).

I have mentioned above the impact of the archive materials on my creative-critical work. Peeking behind the archival curtain, so to speak, at a successful example of the form bolstered my own compositional method and the way in which I sought to create links between stories. Influenced by Taylor, I began to make lists of the links threading my stories together and found this beneficial for keeping track of the elements I'd sown. Rather than drafts of a family tree, I drew maps of the village and its surrounding landscape in order to keep a clear picture for myself as I was writing, the image changing as the stories developed. I even created my own circular diagram, the stories written along its curvature, in order to see the network formed between them and make sure there were a suitable number of links connecting all of the stories.

This creative-critical thesis is itself demonstrable of the collaboration between author and reader in the creation of unity. Both the creative and critical components of this project were shaped in part by the feedback from my early readers. I sought their expertise as I wrote, and they offered me feedback and advice which I incorporated as I redrafted. One of my main concerns in this project was unity. I wanted this thesis to be imbued with a sense of cohesion so that the reader's experience was that of wholeness: between the stories in the creative work, but also between the creative and critical components, a singular project. My early readers – my supervisors, Dr Naomi Wood, and Dr Nonia Williams – also sought coherence. In the creative work, I seeded recurrent elements within each draft, and sometimes these were executed clearly and threaded easily between stories, but there were other instances in which the connections needed to be reinforced; the character experience I mention above, for example, was made more overt in "Isla" at my creative supervisor's suggestion. The critical component was likewise strengthened and unified, such as the connection between the literary marketplace and the taxonomy of the short story cycle, after my critical supervisor questioned the link between them. And each of my supervisors advised that I write a section which bridges the creative and critical parts in order to explain the project as a coherent whole. I view this section as corresponding to Sara Taylor's archive, in that it reveals to an extent the composition process and authorial intent behind this creative-critical work, but that it also demonstrates that the unity within this thesis is rooted in its prehistory as much as its product.

HESKET



Isla

Isla got Daniel the Werner's nomenclature poster from a museum when they'd lived in London and not been dating more than a few months. She'd bought it on impulse and then debated for hours as to whether to even give it him, because what's sexy about the classification of colour in the natural world. Of all the presents she had given him since, it remained his most utilized, his most enjoyed. Daniel was a botanical and natural science illustrator, mostly freelance commissions for textbooks or species identification guides, but also things like jam labels and artisan greeting cards. His work involved intricate diagrams of small things made big, the anatomy of a seed or bluebottle, and big things made smaller, like the various parts of an oak tree. His illustrations were delicate and lifelike, carefully considered in either watercolour or acrylic, or sometimes coloured pencil. When he worked – which was something he'd not done much of over the last year, had only recently started doing again in small bits – it was here in the lean-to, a place she wasn't allowed unless invited because recreating accurate minutiae requires concentration. This was implied by the lock on the door, which was once for keeping small fingers out of the paint when no one was looking, but these days could only be for her.

In the garden, she stood at the lean-to with the paper under her arm and cupped her hand to the distorted glass. She could just make out the fuzzy shape of Daniel bent over the drafting table, the upright structure of his easel behind him, could see the vivid squares of the Werner's nomenclature poster pinned on the wall. She knocked tentatively on the glass and waited for him to finish whatever he was doing. Long stalks of yellowed grass itched her ankles. There'd been very little rain that summer, and the lawn was still parched even though they were now in autumn and the days had steadily been getting cooler. Breath curled faintly from her mouth in the morning chill, reminding her of that game they used to play whenever it was

cold out, when they'd pretended to be dragons roaring smoke. She pulled her cardigan down over her hands and saw a small hole in one of the sleeves that she'd forgotten was there, moth eaten.

The slow scrape of Daniel's chair was followed by his pixilated face at the glass, the key turning.

"Why do you still lock it?" she said as it swung open.

"Sorry." He smiled, boyish, despite the stubble and the dark smudges beneath his eyes, which were both Imperial Purple, like the deep parts of a saffron crocus, and Greyish Blue, the back of a blue titmouse. "Old habits, love."

She peered past him, hoping for a glimpse of what he was working on for Geraldine; there was always a sample that he drew from – a leaf, a flower stem in a glass of water, a pin-mounted cricket loaned from some collection – but the room gave nothing away.

She was aware that he was waiting for her to explain the interruption, but what she'd come to tell him somehow didn't feel tangible, too appalling to possibly be real, and so she had convinced herself that she'd misunderstood, and that he'd question why she'd even disturbed him in the first place, with this article that would certainly be about nothing important. She pulled the newspaper from the crook of her elbow and held it out to him.

"What is it?"

She shook her head.

"Isla," he said. "What?"

"I must be wrong."

She watched him read it, watched his cheeks flatten, his eyebrows slope; so it was true, after all. "A housing development," he whispered, raising his hand to his mouth. The panic, the anger, all of it held in his face. "But it's our woods." He sounded dazed, faraway. "They can't cut it down."

Our. She knew that he did not mean her.

Threat hung over the village like a rain cloud: the development was all anyone talked about when they stopped her in the street to chat; Paul from up the road said that spirits on the allotment had become subdued. Rev. Eileen Wright organised a community meeting at the church, which was attended by everyone, including some residents of the neighbouring hamlets. The sale of the land felt too quiet and abrupt,

which gave it the air of being underhand; no one had known when the surveyors made their assessments. A public consultation was held for 21 days, and though residents of Hesketh refuted the proposal, the project was given the green-light anyway. The development company, Caldwell & Associates, sent round a pamphlet which promised they would not cull the entirety of Old Hesketh Wood. To build their luxury homes, they would concentrate on woodland nearest the river, leaving the other third intact as a buffer zone and for privacy, and, where possible, they would leave the most ancient trees standing on the development site, if they were structurally sound and visually pleasing. They would lay an asphalt road through the meadow for access, and eventually, within a few years, more housing and retail spaces would be constructed along it. They cited village and economic expansion as one of the many benefits, the addition of a tennis court and perhaps even, in time, a small golf course. There would still be pockets of meadow and woodland left for aesthetic appeal, though these would now be private land.

A petition opposing the project was sent round (which Isla and Daniel of course signed), citing a strain on infrastructure, increased traffic, and property devaluation, not to mention that it would be detrimental to local ecology. There were worries that the build would create noise and waste pollution, and that the loss of the woods would be historically significant too, since the original village had been located there, once upon a time.

After Isla told him about the development, Daniel took to sleeping, drifting between the bed and the sofa, as if the weight of his despondency was too exhausting to remain upright for long. After weeks of this, he made posters on sheets of A4 and showed them to Isla as she prepared a stir fry for dinner.

DEVELOPERS:

HANDS OFF

OUR WOOD!

When Isla pointed out the erection innuendo, he got annoyed and then found it quite funny, before crying on the top of her head as she wrapped her arms around him, all before the onions had softened in the pan.

She helped him tack the posters to their windows and door, and to every pole along the road and the bulletin board at the old church, at the entrance to every pathway worn into the wood, slotted them through each letterbox from the top of the village and down to the ford, where the river pooled shallowly across the road.

“We need more.” Daniel was already marching home. “They should be everywhere for at least a ten-mile radius.”

“We’ll go out at the weekend,” Isla agreed. “See if anyone can help get them up. I doubt there’ll be any rain to put people off.”

“No,” he said, “I’ll do it tomorrow. The sooner they’re up the better.”

“But it’ll take you days if you go alone. You’ve the commission for Geraldine to do.”

“I think this is the priority, Isla.” A coldness in the way he said it, and then, “Molly would be devastated; I’m sure you can understand that.”

It was the last part that stopped her. As if she wasn’t already aware, as if she didn’t feel it deeply. “I know she would.” She wanted him to turn and look at her, to see how wounding it was that he should think he had to inform her, but he only kept moving quickly onward so that she had to call after him, “Do you think I don’t *know* that?”

His pace didn’t even falter.

She would not follow him home, not right away, and sat instead against a low stone wall, her legs stretched out on the pavement in front of her like a doll.

Five years ago, Geraldine had resurrected her grandparents’ long-dead small press, Lantern Books, and published titles like, *The A-Z Guide to Norfolk*, and *The Broads by Foot: A Pilgrimage of East Anglian Rivers*. Isla worked mainly as Geraldine’s editor, while Geraldine handled marketing and online sales. Geraldine’s wife, Nat, took care of the bookkeeping and morale, which meant that she spent most of her day downstairs listening to true crime podcasts and bringing up trays of coffee or fruit salads. Isla had managed to persuade Geraldine to give the cover art commission for their latest project, *A Miscellany of Strange Norfolk*, to Daniel, had assured her that he was up to the job. It had been kind of Geraldine to agree; she knew how badly they needed the money, how long Isla had been the only one between them earning. Isla wondered in that moment if he was going to let her down, if she would have to admit this much to Geraldine, and then, loyally, despite how he’d just behaved, she told herself he’d done more with less time.

But that was before.

He used to show her his work unprompted, proud and earnest and unsure of it, and see if she and Molly could guess his colours according to Werner’s chart. The petal tip of a marigold he was working on, for example, might be nearest to what

Werner called Orpiment Orange (see also: the belly of a warty newt; an Indian cress flower), with perhaps a touch of Deep Reddish Orange (goldfish lustre abstracted; a Scarlet Leadington apple). The game wasn't limited to what was on the easel; Molly collected bits from around the garden to present at the lean-to door. Things small enough to pocket would be carefully and dutifully carried home from school or the verges, their weekend rambles. To retrieve Werner's colours from the well of her memory was an instinct Isla had not yet lost: a hedge outside Geraldine's house could be Sap Green or Wax Yellow depending on the light of day, while the postwoman's bag was Aurora Red. *Are you sure?* She could sometimes hear Molly say. *Are you sure it isn't something else?*

The pavement beneath Isla's jeans was cool enough that it felt damp, though when she put her palm against it to check, she found it was bone dry. Daniel was likely home now, printing off more posters. From somewhere near a bird was singing, the sharpness of its sound trilling in her chest. Isla closed her eyes; she didn't want to cry. How had she ended up in Hesket, a village that was only a road, and had only houses, a church, a single streetlight and a home for the elderly, but no shop or café, not even a pub? A nowhere place. It had been affordable because of its lack of amenities and squat little houses, so she'd not put up much protest when Daniel had argued it was the best kind of place for a family to be, close to nature.

But why were they still here?

"Are you dead, young lady, or just asleep?"

Isla opened her eyes. Ms Riley was peering down at her, smiling cheekily; she had long, yellow teeth like a rodent, and was small in the way that age shrinks, though this wasn't helped by the woollen coat she wore (the Pearl Grey of a gull's back), which was far too large for her.

"I shouldn't be sitting here, Ms Riley," Isla said. "I'm in the way." But even though she knew that she should move, she made no attempt to get up, only tucked her feet in toward her so that her knees were level with her chest, to make room for Ms Riley to get by.

"Nell is fine," she said. "Call me Nell." Although she was much older than Isla – in her eighties at least – there was a liveliness from her that Isla did not feel in possession of these days. "I'm on my way to visit Oonagh Moody," she announced, "Your neighbour." As if Isla didn't know. When the weather was fine, Isla often saw

Nell in the Moodys' garden next door, visiting Oonagh and Walter, though she herself lived down the road at the home for the elderly. She used to slip Molly boiled sweets over the fence, sometimes dropping them in the flower bed to be found later if they weren't home.

"That's nice." Isla nodded, and then, as an afterthought, "Have a lovely time."

Isla had expected Nell to go then, but instead she kept standing there, looking at her.

"Oonagh's not well," Nell said.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"There's something going round, I think. I'm sure she'll be right as rain in no time though." She licked spittle from her bottom lip. "Why are you sat here like this?"

"I don't know," Isla said. "No real reason."

Nell cocked her head, like a bird. "You're upset."

There was a mark of something on one of Isla's knees, mud maybe, dried onto the fabric of her jeans, and she scraped at it with her fingernail, watched as it came off in chalky flakes. She wanted Nell to leave.

"Everyone's upset these days," Nell continued.

"They're cutting down the woods," Isla said. "I think it's reasonable to be upset by that."

"If those developers knew, they wouldn't."

Isla looked up, shielding her eyes from the sunlight glaring off the ford at the end of the road. "Knew what?"

"I suppose you don't know either," Nell said. "I suppose you haven't heard about what happened at Old Hesketh."

Isla shook her head. She had heard that Hesketh hadn't always been here, along this road, that it was once where Old Hesketh Wood stood now, and she knew too, that the church and the cottage on the river beside the bridge was all that remained of the original village. But she'd not cared to find out what had happened to it, why it had moved in the first place.

"All kinds of strange things were happening back then, you see, things that people couldn't explain, that frightened them. I'm in two minds myself about what

came first, whether it was the curse that brought the witch trials to Hesket, or if the village was cursed *because* of the trials.”

Isla thought of the book she was editing, the one that Daniel was designing the cover for. In it, there were anecdotes of haunted buildings and illicit burials, a monster that lurks in the rivers. She’d read aloud an earnest section of folklore to Geraldine only yesterday, concerning a supposed witch who was buried alive in the foundations of a church, and from her wooden leg a giant oak tree now stood in the nave of its ruins. *Oh, it’s fun, isn’t it*, Geraldine said, *That sort of stuff*.

“I didn’t know there were witches in Hesket.”

“Eight of them.” Nell nodded. “All killed, of course, executed where the wood is now, on the same ground the developers are wanting to disturb.” She ran her hand down the front of her coat, as if smoothing it. “And then there was the flood, not long after. 1647, I believe it was. Destroyed the village completely, but I think it was a bit of poetic justice: they condemned those women in water and then the water got them back.” At the top of the road, the church bell began to ring out, the sound tinny and charming. “Look it up if you don’t believe me. The flood is public record.”

“And you think the developers should be told about the flood,” Isla said.

“Have there been many since?”

“Just the one, as far as I know.”

“Because maybe if there’s a history of flooding in the area, they’ll not want to build.”

“That’s not what I’m concerned about,” Nell said. “You’ve missed the point. They’re going to rip it all up and release the curse all over again.”

“Oh, Ms Riley,” Isla protested, as politely as she could. “Don’t be so silly.”

When Geraldine asked how Daniel was getting on with the commission, Isla lied and said that it was looking good, that she was excited to see where he went with it, even though she hadn’t been shown anything. She could plot his activity through the posters that materialised like a network of fungi, all over the neighbouring villages and hamlets, the nearby market town, tracing how little time he’d spent working in the lean-to by the miles he’d covered.

One night, Daniel announced that he was meeting his friends, Liam and Darius, for drinks at a pub in town, but he returned home only a couple of hours later and smelled of sweet musk, like incense or oud perfume, instead of booze. Isla had

spent the evening slouched on the sofa, half-watching whatever was on the television when he came in and sat on the coffee table in front of her, blocking the screen. His cheeks and nose were blotched pink, as if he'd been crying. She put her hands on his legs, pressed gently. "How're the lads?"

He burst into sniffling tears.

She put her arms around his waist, sitting close on the table beside him with her chin on his shoulder. It happened like this sometimes, one of them reduced, the other consoling.

"It was unreal, Isla. I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see for myself."

"What's that, then?" she said softly.

"I went to a medium," he said, "A clairvoyant."

It was a strange thing to come out of his mouth. "What do you mean? At the pub?"

"I don't know what I was expecting from it, but I just felt so..." Tears were caught in his eyelashes. "And the most amazing thing happened." He began to smile, a smile so luminous it almost looked like laughter. "She was there: Molly. I know it was her."

It was difficult to take in just what he was saying. Her mind was still processing that he'd gone to a medium in the first place, and not the pub, like he'd said he was going to. "I don't understand. Where were Liam and Darius?"

He turned to her then, took her wrists in his hands. "Listen," he said. "Molly is in the woods."

It stunned her, the way he said it, so simply and surely.

"Think about physics," he continued excitedly, the words coming quick.

"There's a law that energy can't be destroyed, it can only be transformed or transferred from one form to another. Just imagine if she's out there, waiting to be identified in a new form..."

He was rambling, animatedly trying to convince her of this bizarre fantasy. It occurred to her that perhaps she should march down to wherever he'd gone and tell that medium, whoever they were, that they ought to be more careful, that some people are vulnerable. But the more he went on, the more she understood that he probably needed this. People had believed in intangibilities for thousands of years, and these things that were not visible and, likely, not real, had somehow comforted,

and she knew that was what this must be now, comfort-seeking, because the development had dredged things up, made things raw again.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” he said, his eyes shining.

There was undoubtedly a change in Daniel since his visit to the medium, a quiet energy that had been absent now returned. He seemed constantly in motion, introspective and occupied the way he used to be by a project, and shut himself in the lean-to for extended periods.

“How’s it going in there?” she said, after a week of hardly seeing him.

“Good.” He sounded lighter than he had in months.

Emboldened, she said, “Do you think it’ll be ready in time?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do I need to ask for an extension?”

He hesitated. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Can I see it?”

He shook his head. “You just need to give me some space to work.” He did not sound impatient; it was softer than that. “I’m feeling more productive than I have in ages.” He kissed the top of her head, as if unconsciously, and the act surprised her; the spell of his melancholia had disallowed affection. She was relieved mostly, and even though his improvement was down to something absurd that he’d convinced himself of, at least his mood had shifted, at least he was working.

When the news came that the village’s petition had failed, he drew her a bath of oils and salts, and then went out as usual. She wrapped herself in her robe and went into Molly’s room. She closed the door behind her, even though she was alone in the house, and looked at all the things that once had life but now just sat there. The ear of a stuffed rabbit still had that honeyed stink from being mouthed like a dummy. The soft helmet Molly decorated with a rainbow of stickers, which still retained its shape on top of the chest of drawers, as if it had only just been taken off. *The Animals of Farthing Wood* open on the little table by the window, and childish illustrations of magpies stuck over every wall. The healthy thing would’ve been to box it up for charity, keep the sentimental bits and jettison the rest. Isla knelt beside the bed, lifting the duvet just enough to slip her head beneath. And she stayed there with her chest on the mattress for just a little while, in the place where Molly used to lay.

They'd liked to walk, the three of them, out in nature and all her sullen moods. Different ways had different names, so-called for the things seen on them. The river walk was a favourite, out the back gate and across the hay meadow, through the old woods following the water to the bridge, then back home by the village road. The pheasant walk was a bit shorter, wilder; the sugar beet walk took most of the day and was reserved for long weekends. The pig walk they did once and never again. Mostly though, it was the woods. It had often taken an age no matter which they did, because Daniel and Molly kept halting to admire and identify and discuss, their way made up of erratic deviations and long, stagnant minutes spent peering beneath overgrown green and into hollows, the high canopies above. They wore tracks across the meadow through uneven lumps of tussock grass, stretches of woodland riddled with stones and roots and spider-legged twigs. Molly was prone to falling, sudden plunges that were difficult to predict. Outside, she wore the protective soft helmet because the drop seizures were particularly hard, sparked by patterns of sunlight flashing through treetops and the high heat of summer; one had split the back of her head when she was only four and from then on, they'd only ventured out on overcast days. It was unlikely, they were told, that she'd be able to drive without being triggered from the light flaring across the windshield on a bright day, but that had been a worry for the future, far from the girl who raced through the wood looking for bat hollows and fox dens in the drizzling rain.

“Watch your feet or you'll trip,” Isla warned. “Dan, will you hold her at least?”

He might pick Molly up then, hitch her across his back as they ambled off, but inevitably she'd be let down again just as soon as something else required their attention, Isla's appeal forgotten. She didn't know when she'd agreed to let him be the fun parent, and she the stick-in-the-mud.

She made herself useful by keeping an eye out for magpies, which were Molly's favourite because she often said they showered gifts from the tree for her while she played below in the garden – bits of tinfoil, colourful little pebbles, snails, all landing by her feet. Not that Molly needed her help finding them. In her ladybird wellies and too-big coat, she'd identify birdsong with all the seriousness and aplomb of Attenborough, her amber-coloured eyes squeezed shut, listening. Isla could pick

out the truncated screech of a pheasant, like a rooster being strangled mid-crow, but all the small birds sounded indistinct to her.

“Blackbird,” Molly said, pleased with herself. “Chaffinch.”

Daniel, having been her tutor, delighted in her answers.

It was not that she was jealous; it was not that at all. Her own Dad had been more interested in his cars than her, and she was thrilled, relieved, that history had not repeated itself. She knew that she should tell them to go out alone, that it would be nice for just the two of them without her loitering in the background, cautiously, pre-emptively stoppering their fun, or trying not to look at the phone she clutched in her jacket pocket when they spoke of things foreign to her, words like *siskin* and *pipistrelle*, *lesser celandine*, but always, always, she never could.

Daniel no longer asked if Isla would like to go for walks with him on weekends, even though she’d always accepted when he did. Instead, he’d taken to going without her, leaving often without a word so that she didn’t know when precisely he’d left, or else he was already gone before she got home from work. Sometimes, she’d see him from the window, returning with something found: a leaf or flower that he’d shut himself away with in the lean-to. There were clothes, more than usual, discarded in the hamper and throughout the house, perfumed with the tang of cold air and sweat, and once, she was sure, something sweeter. Increasingly, Daniel was home long enough to wash and eat, to lock himself in the lean-to until nightfall, and then head out again, often until long after she’d gone to bed. He began to sleep in Molly’s room so as not to disturb Isla, but she lay awake anyway, imagining the kinds of specimens he was trying to source for the cover design, the photographs he was taking to work from; he told her long ago that most wildlife was nocturnal. In a morning, she’d find he’d left the back door wide open, the kitchen littered with bits blown in overnight and the tiles icy beneath her socks. A crisp, curled leaf might splinter underfoot so that she had to pick the pieces of it from her sole and flick them out the door before locking it shut. He’d claim that the lock must be faulty, or that he’d been too tired coming in late last night to remember to shut it again. *You’re letting out all the heat*, she’d scold. *Anything could come in*.

Nothing did though, strangely; not even a spider to be found.

*

Daniel's posters had been up for the better part of a month when Isla knocked on the lean-to door. The garden was unruly after a long summer left to itself, at once stunted by drought and overrun with hardy green weeds, so that it was caught between various phases of life and death. At her feet were piles of things discarded; clumps of uprooted woodland bracken, lichen-covered sticks, a small log riddled with black tails of fungus, something else small and brown, and unidentifiable with decay. He took a long time to answer, but the lamps were all on and she could see him moving beyond the warped glass. When he finally unlocked it, he opened it only a few inches, and blocked her view Inside with his body.

"What's this mess about?" she said.

He hesitated before answering. "It's what I'm working on."

"Oh?"

"They're all the wrong thing," he said. "None of them feel right yet." She knew that he had to be inspired by something to be able to fully capture it in a drawing, and it wasn't unreasonable that it had taken him longer than usual to get back into things, after having not worked properly in so long.

"What is it that's smelling?" She grimaced, nudged at some bracken with her toe. "You've not got animals in here, have you?"

He made an irascible noise. "I'm a bit busy, Isla."

"I spoke to Geraldine about the extension." She eyed the pile a moment longer, and then turned her attention to him. "She was a bit reluctant, to be honest. There's a hard deadline for the printing company; you can have an extra fortnight, no more."

"Right," he sighed. "I don't know if that's going to work."

"It needs to."

He drummed on the doorframe with his fingers.

"If you're stuck, I could take a look." She moved toward him.

"No," he said. "It's not that. It's just time."

"She doesn't want to have to find someone else."

"I'll get it done." He rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. "I will."

"You have to."

He seemed to observe her then, study her, before reaching out to stroke her cheek, his touch tender, inquisitive. "I know how shit I've been," he said quietly. "I know we need the money."

She leant into his hand, pressed her lips to his wrist.

"I've been absent," he admitted. "I don't want to let you down. That's not my intention."

"Then don't."

He gazed toward the wood, and she thought how sad he looked then, how confined in his solitude.

"Come in the house," she said. "Spend some time with me."

He rested his temple against the door, considering her request. "Alright," he said finally. "One sec." He retreated into the lean-to, closing the door quickly after him, so that she was stood out in the dark. When he opened it again, all the lights were off, and she couldn't make out anything inside before he locked it behind him.

"You've become very secretive," she said.

"I've always been like that."

"No," she said. "Only lately."

"I have a request." She saw then that he held a small bowl of blackberries. "Can you please bake a pie? I'd do it, but it'll turn out all gluey or something." He'd once made a cake for her birthday, and it had come out the oven with burnt edges and a raw, liquidy middle. "I picked them today," he said. "From the usual spot."

It had been a long time since she'd baked anything. Inside, beneath the kitchen light, she took the bowl from him and inspected the berries. "These aren't ripe yet. It'll be too tart."

"That's alright," he said cheerfully. "We're sweet enough already." And then made one of those *ba-dum-tss* noises.

Isla pulled a face. "It'd taste better if we waited."

"Please."

"Why?"

"Because I miss blackberry pie."

She knew then what this was about. In autumn the blackberries grew in large cascading thickets, and it had been one of Molly's favourite things to do, to go out and fill tubs with fruit to cart home for pie. They grew so plentifully that the three of them had often gone every weekend and returned with a bounty to make a tip of the kitchen; even Molly came to know the recipe by heart. And because Isla missed blackberry pie too, she rinsed them in the sink.

She made the crust first, and then mixed the berries with sugar and flour, and spooned them into the base. Instead of a lattice top, they cut shapes out of the leftover dough, because that was what Molly used to do – clouds and flowers and rabbits with long ears.

It was, admittedly, not her best pie. The filling was too sharp; the crust pale. Neither could have more than a small piece. “I’m out of practice,” she apologised.

“I think it’s wonderful.” There were small flakes of pastry caught in his stubble. He put the rest on a shelf in the fridge.

He called her at work the next day. He sounded out of breath, incensed. “There’s people in hi-vis, ripping out bloody trees.”

“Already?” Her mind flashed briefly to Nell and the things she’d said, but just as quickly, the thought went from her.

“Did you know they were going to come this soon?”

The question, his accusatory tone, annoyed her. “How would I? I know as much as you do.” It sounded like he was outside, ever so slightly out of breath. “Don’t go over there,” she said.

He must have sighed then, because the line crackled loudly. “I have to go,” he said, and hung up.

At home later she went out to check on him, worried that the start of the woodland cull might have reignited his despair, but the lean-to was dark. Above, ribbons of electric orange and pink crossed the sky, and she stood at the back gate and looked out over the meadow to see the last moments of sunset. In the distance, she saw Daniel walking to the woods and went after him, letting the gate slam behind her as she shouted his name. Ahead, the woods were silhouetted against the dusk and Daniel was soon swallowed by their shadow. A bat swooped in front of her, angular and skittish, and she hesitated. The light was quickly disappearing. She’d not find him in the dark.

On the walk back to the house she needed her phone light to navigate the meadow, filled as it was with animal burrows and grassy mounds. She might not have seen the dish had the light not glared on the white enamel. Tucked just beneath the meadow-side of their hedge was the pie dish, empty except for globs of blackberry now hardened where it had oozed out of the pastry, Veinous Blood Red. There were marks in the filling, like a scrape of teeth, the rest of it licked clean.

*

She decided that she would make another pie, a better pie, one that was properly cooked and sweet so that he didn't leave it out for the animals. She would deliver it to the door of the lean-to, and maybe she would tell him its colours, and maybe, in return, he would let her in.

At the edge of the woods, she could see where the clearing of vegetation had begun; there was a pile of brushwood and scrub, branches laden with crab apple among them, and left in their place were sockets of loose, empty earth. It looked unnaturally barren, like a baseball pitch, in amongst all this wild. Because it was the weekend, there was no one there to see her quickly fill her pockets with fruit not yet ripe enough to pick; it felt such a waste to leave behind, when it was perfectly good and alive, to rot or be somehow destroyed.

The sight too awful to linger any longer, she took the path to where the blackberries grew. A few days had done them good, though they were not as abundant this year, not with the drought. Many of them were still the colour of a wine stain, but some were soft and darkly plump, and inked her fingers. The air smelled smoky, like someone had lit a stove fire, and of autumn, damp loam and sweetly rotting leaves, and her face cradled by the coldness of it – how long it had been since she was there! To come out on her own had felt perhaps too vulnerable a thing to do, but now, among the familiar trees and winding paths, she felt buoyed by it, and she breathed in this new, crisp air, and it seemed to dispel the feeling she'd held in the whole of her for such a long time, like a swallowed and stagnating howl.

She prolonged the walk back by visiting the Grand Oak, so named by Molly for how great and bulbous it was. She found again the pond, the small clearing, but the hawthorn Molly used to pretend was her castle wasn't where she'd thought it had stood. She left the path in search of it, picking her way through the wilder parts of the undergrowth, skeletal branches hooking her clothes. When she found it, half-hidden behind some overgrown holly, it was heavy with red haw berries and yellowing leaves, and at its base, sat among the spongy leaf-litter was a cage trap, large enough for a fox, and there, at the back where the bait should go, was a padded soft helmet, covered in stickers as iridescent as fish scales. She stared at it, at each carefully applied shape: a scattering of small colourful hearts, a blue dinosaur and a cartoon mouse, a scratch-and-sniff strawberry ice-cream cone.

She felt bewildered then, like a fly hitting glass.

She could not make sense of what it was she saw, knew only that she felt a intense sense of betrayal – its exact cause and contours obscured by shock – and that Molly’s helmet did not belong there, in the cold and lonely wood.

She seized the cage and shook it, wrestling with the spring-loaded door until the helmet was out, and then threw the trap as hard as she could only to for it land unsatisfyingly on the spiny branches of the bush and hang there, askew, just above the ground. She tucked the helmet into her jacket and wondered, horrified, at how many other bits of Molly he had scattered in order to – what?

Anger propelled her home, and she shouted his name all the way up the garden path and at the lean-to door, but he didn’t answer. She rattled the handle, yanked and kicked at it, before bashing it with a rock until the door whined open. The light inside was dim, the room musty and still. It looked so different than it had the last time she’d been in, no longer neatly organised, but a shambles. There were papers strewn all over – on the walls, the floor, every surface – what looked to be lists and hand-drawn maps of Old Heskett Wood. There were things he’d collected, bits of bark and bones and feathers, the rotting body of a toad, the tiny, curled foot of a bird, and pinned to a cork board were wilted flowers and moss, tufts of fur in browns and reds. And everywhere, there were his paintings, less considered than she was used to seeing from him, more frenzied and abstract, half-finished, collaged over every wall. She approached one, a rendering of a tawney owl, and there, written beneath in Daniel’s hand, *eyes – lightest brown wing feathers*. A large X had been drawn over the owl, and all around were more crossed out images: *fur of a common weasel; the cap of a birch polypore fungus; the nut of a mature acorn*. There were dozens and dozens in various hues of brown, and as she followed them around the room she read each aloud like an incantation, searching for some vestige of meaning, some way in which they could possibly be the commission for Geraldine until she reached one of the largest paintings, a hare that stared back at her, and there, circled again and again, its distinctively amber eye, *the irises of a hare*, and she understood with such a swift and undeniable clarity that it wasn’t inspiration for the cover design he’d been hunting for, but Molly, that the pie, the helmet, had both been bait to try and lure Molly home, and all that time he’d spent in the woods alone, he’d been involved in a kind of searching and collecting and categorizing, that he’d constructed a nomenclature of their daughter, as if he really thought he’d find her out there

before the woods were gone instead of doing the commission like he ought to, and now she'd have to come clean to Geraldine.

The picture of the hare tore as she pulled it from the wall.

She gathered as many as she could hold and carried them into the kitchen, shaking, as she searched the drawers for a lighter. Sparking the flint, she held it to each one at the sink, held it so hard that her thumb stung, and watched as they caught and burned into nothingness. And then Daniel was at the back door wearing only a tee-shirt despite the cold, just as she ran the tap to start flushing the ash away, and he was holding a leveret – a young hare – wrapped in his jumper, incandescently happy at its oversized and clumsy ears, its thickly velveteen fur, and she could smell the warmth of it as he approached, sweet and delicate like hay, and it was darling like her and had the honey-puddled eyes of her, but it was still just a wild thing.

Rio

The room was dark, except for the moonlight spilled on the floor in front of the window, and the pillar candles and tea lights arranged in the centre of the circular table. It was a small room, one of two downstairs in a house that neighboured an old church and was filled with ornate furniture. Its decor, at least, must have made it easier to create the right atmosphere on nights that Madam Celia conjured the dead.

She did this for a living, the conjuring thing.

Which is why Rio was sat in a wobbly old armchair in the dark, about to observe a séance. “I’ll have to use my phone as a light so I can see when I jot things down,” she said. “I hope that’s okay.”

A brief silence, and then Madam Celia cleared her throat. “I thought you were recording?”

“I am.” Rio held up the phone perched beside her on the chair. “The notebook is for nuances.”

“Ah.” Madam Celia sounded approving. “My work is all about nuance.”

Sat there, in the candlelight, Rio could understand the allure of this kind of thing, the prospect of the supernatural, the spectacle of the occult; there was a reason why Victorian parlour games had become so popular.

“What normally happens during a séance?”

“Oh,” Madam Celia said casually. “Communing with the dead, maybe a spot of levitation.”

Rio’s instinct was to laugh.

“No,” Madam Celia said, whimsically. “That wasn’t a joke.”

She held a stick of incense over a candle to catch, then began wafting it around the room.

Rio noted this down.

Madam Celia must have been keeping an eye on her, because she said, “I’m setting the scene, so to speak. My granny always said it’s all in the details, anyone good at their craft knows that.”

“Was your granny a clairvoyant, too?”

“A stage actress.” Madam Celia was only in her late thirties, a decade or so on Rio, but styled herself like someone much older. “She spent some time playing Miranda in *The Tempest* at the Maddermarket Theatre.” She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose.

“What does she think of this?”

Madam Celia exhaled loudly – “Of what?” – and then inhaled a second time.

“What you do.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she gazed coyly at Rio before speaking. “Why, she’s disappointed that I didn’t follow in her footsteps and become an actress.” And then she waved the incense around her head, humming something sprightly but unidentifiable.

Rio made a note: *Eccentricity = performance?* “Have you done any acting?”

Madam Celia stood the incense in a small cup, pride evident in her voice as she said, “I was raised in the theatre.”

When Rio had arrived earlier, Madam Celia gave her quick a palm reading in between stories about her life as a soothsayer, which was, she said, what people like her were called back in the day. Like Mother Shipton, only with less desolate cave and more clunky, dark wood furniture, which made the room feel cramped and gloomy.

Madam Celia draped an orange shawl across her shoulders, and Rio noticed her tucking the Primark label out of view.

“Have you ever worked with actors?” Rio said.

“In what sense?”

Rio considered how best to ask without offending her. “Like for effect, maybe.”

“Is that what you think I’d do?”

They regarded each other in silence. Rio was used to people being evasive. It was something she encountered all the time in her line of work (people don’t usually want to admit to anything embarrassing or devious to a journalist), but also at the poker games she frequented at the Fortune Casino in Norwich. Poker was a game of non-disclosure. She had to pay attention to fleeting changes in body language, to minute fluctuations of facial expression, and as a result, she’d learned to read people quite well, or so she’d thought; she’d been in a losing pit for some time now, even

though she was doing everything right. It struck her that sitting around a séance table would be not unlike sitting round a poker table: an exhilaration at the unknown, at the possibility of what might happen, at the fantasy of leaving with everything you'd hoped for.

Rio wrote, *Madam Celia keeps her cards close.*

There was a soft knock at the door. The dull rapping of Madam Celia's shoes as she hurried round the table and out of the room. Rio leant forward so that she could see the boxy kitchen, faintly illuminated by the streetlamp outside. The shadowy figure of Madam Celia stood a few moments with her hand on the doorknob, perhaps to create suspense. When she swept it open, she did so with a flourish, startling the curly-haired woman wearing glasses on the other side. The woman, in her early twenties maybe, smiled nervously. "Hello. I'm here for..." She squinted past Madam Celia and into the dark of the house. "Are you Madam Celia?"

"What's your name, luv?"

"Oh." The woman touched her glasses. "Fiona?"

Fiona was one of three due tonight. Rio had seen the names scrawled beneath a partial shopping list when she arrived: *loo roll, eggs, stilton, fabric softener, Fiona, Daniel, G. Alexander*. Which made five of them for the evening; like the five cards in a hand.

"This way, please." Madam Celia walked – glided – into the back room, so quietly that Rio wondered if she'd removed her shoes. "Don't mind the journalist in the corner."

Rio waved.

"A journalist?" Fiona said.

"Oh, it's not a big deal, really." Madam Celia's voice dripped with faux modesty. "Just a human-interest story, isn't that right?"

Actually, it was the 'East Anglian Eccentrics' column that had been running longer than Rio had been alive, which highlighted an unusual person in different parts of Norfolk and Suffolk; this week, her options had been either Madam Celia or a man who claimed to commune telepathically with crabs in Cromer, but Rio didn't need to reveal that.

"Really?" Fiona seemed impressed. "Like Louis Theroux?"

"It's for the Norfolk Times," Rio said.

Fiona frowned sympathetically. "I'm sorry." And then, as if in compensation, "You can put me in it if you want. I consent."

Rio took down her details.

"I can sense that she's perhaps a little sceptical of my abilities," Madam Celia said. "As all journalists are, of course. But she'll believe by tonight's end." And then she threw the curtains open wider, flinging them dramatically, to reveal that the house was nestled in the crook of an old churchyard, its crumbling gravestones visible from the window, and beyond them, the emptiness of an open meadow half-bathed in moonlight.

"Wow," Fiona said appreciatively.

Four knocks at the front door, and Madam Celia left them squinting out at the shadowy tombs, some so ancient-looking they were jutting at odd angles, like witches' teeth. Rio thought of all those people that had been entombed beneath them for eternity and were now just skeletons, lying there pointlessly in rows, probably long forgotten by anyone living judging by the state of them. The graveyard would probably be the most authentic part of the evening.

"Do you think they're real?" Fiona said.

"This way please." Madam Celia's voice floated in from the other room. "It is Daniel, isn't it?"

"So," Rio said. "How did you find out about Madam Celia?"

"Instagram," Fiona said. "You?"

"Google."

"Of course," Madam Celia was saying, as she entered the room. "I saw you putting up those posters last week." She gestured vaguely in the direction of the road.

"Yeah." The man called Daniel had inky shadows beneath his eyes. "The development. It's outrageous."

Madam Celia nodded politely, made agreeable noises as he talked animatedly about the proposed plans and the ecological impact the development would have and the increased strain on local amenities. Fiona watched them from the window, her posture expectant, as if waiting for an introduction. Daniel was still talking as he pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "But mostly," he said. "What kind of monster wants to get behind the destruction of the environment, you know? What kind of psycho?"

“You feel quite passionately about it,” Madam Celia said. “I can sense that you’re a very passionate person.”

“Yeah, well my daughter was—” He seemed to catch himself then.

He’d just given Madam Celia something she could use.

“Mm?” Madam Celia pressed.

“It’s a really special place to us, that’s all.”

Rio knew all about tells from the nights spent at poker, had come to learn how some of the other players gave themselves away; one regular, Simon, would adjust his position if he had a good hand, shifting ever so slightly in his seat, as if in preparation to lay his cards triumphantly on the table.

“They’re doing that sort of thing in Honingham, too.” Fiona sat beside Daniel. “There’s a motorway or something? I don’t know.”

“That’s the Western Link.” Daniel removed his coat and hung it off his chair.

Fiona did the same. “I suppose it’ll relieve congestion? That it’ll boost tourism? That’s what they’ve said.”

Daniel was shaking his head. “Don’t believe what they tell you.” He checked off his fingers: “Destruction of the environment, rising costs and increased carbon emissions. Their campaign is a scam.” He leaned toward Fiona, quite intently, and said, “I hope you’re protesting against it.”

Fiona looked over at Rio and then again at Daniel.

“Write a letter to your MP,” he implored. “Rally your neighbours. Do whatever you have to do, but don’t do nothing. This is *actually* important.”

Fiona looked a bit stunned. “Definitely.” She nodded slowly. “I will.” She gestured to Rio, perhaps to redirect his attention. “She’s a journalist.”

“A journalist?” he said.

“She’s writing a profile on Madam Celia.”

He stared at Rio, baffled. “If you’re after a story, why don’t you look at the development?”

Rio felt embarrassed then; the eccentrics column was not the worthiest of work. Perhaps she could turn this particular assignment, a fluff piece, into something more compelling, take the chance to unpick the magic trick and expose the ruse.

Madam Celia was suddenly at Rio’s side, squeezing her shoulder as she said, “Would you like some tea?”

Rio quickly covered her notebook with her hands. “Thanks.”

“This way then,” she said in a sing-song way, and then swept out of the room.

Rio followed, grateful to remove herself from Daniel’s disapproving glower.

In the dark of the kitchen, Madam Celia pulled Rio close. “In the interest of full disclosure,” she whispered, “I want you to know that I recognise that man. Daniel. I’m aware of who he is, I mean.” Madam Celia smelled faintly of lavender soap and stale coffee. “He’s my neighbour,” she continued. “At least, he lives in the neighbourhood, a few houses down; not that I see him regularly. But I wanted to let you know, so you don’t think I’m a phoney. I read his palm at the spring fête last year, and I’m sorry to say I sense that’s why he’s come now. I knew it as soon as I saw him.”

“And why’s that?”

“Her presence is so strong in the room already.”

“Whose?”

“Ah.” Madam Celia held up her finger. “I don’t know her name yet. I don’t know any details at all, only that there’s a female spirit attached to him. Beyond that, I haven’t yet tapped into. That’s what the session is for.”

“He said he had a daughter,” Rio pointed out. “Past tense.”

“And you think I’m making assumptions, picking up on clues to use to my advantage.”

Rio tried to be diplomatic. “Maybe subconsciously.”

Madam Celia began pulling an assortment of drinkware out of the cupboard, including a gin goblet and a large mug shaped like a cauldron that said *witches brew* in glow-in-the-dark writing.

“What did you predict at the spring fête?” Rio asked.

“Read,” Madam Celia corrected. “I *read* hands. And actually,” she said sadly, “It was the same thing I intuited for you.” She patted Rio’s arm. “What a coincidence.”

When Madam Celia had given Rio a reading earlier, she’d studied her palm the way someone would a menu.

“Hm,” Madam Celia muttered to herself. “Hmm.”

“Anything interesting in my future?”

“Your life line is pretty good.” She pointed to the line rounding Rio’s thumb. “Clear and unbroken, which means a long and healthy life. Breaks on the fate line, which is this long one running from your middle finger to your wrist, indicates important changes will occur. And there, bridging the head and heart lines—” She traced the small curve with her finger. “A loss.”

“Loss?” She’d planned on going to the casino after tonight’s séance was over. “What sort of loss?”

“It doesn’t give specifics.” She shrugged. “A loss. But you’ve a triangle on Mercury, look.” She pointed to the lines etched below Rio’s little finger. “Success in your career.”

A classic shit sandwich, Rio thought. She was determined that she would not lose any more of her money. Her run of bad luck had been uncanny: she’d played textbook games, yet consistently the most unlikely cards would come up and beat her hand, which was entirely maddening. Her frustration had made her rash and take chances she shouldn’t have, and this had only made her lose *more* money. It was alarming how quickly the debt had racked up; she was now in it for thousands, all on her credit cards. Yet she couldn’t stop herself going, compelled to return time and again to take her chances, in the hope that she could possibly win and get herself out of the mess she was in. Thinking about it gave Rio a horrible sensation in her stomach, as if it were coiling in on itself as tightly a snail’s shell. “How accurate is palmistry?”

“Worried about your fate?”

Rio withdrew her hand. “I saw a church next door. Interesting choice of location for someone in your profession.”

“The church people own this house. I think the vicar has taken it upon herself to keep an eye on me, make sure I’m not doing anything unsanctimonious.” The thought of this seemed to offend her. “I suppose that I can’t complain though; rent’s quite cheap.”

“She doesn’t use your services?”

“I doubt she even approves,” Madam Celia said. “Which is rich, because her job is just a dressed-up version of mine, as far as I’m concerned.”

Rio checked her phone to make sure it was recording. “Where did you learn to do this kind of thing?”

“Palmistry I learned; the rest is a gift I was born with.”

“Who taught you? Did you have a mentor?”

Madam Celia gave Rio an assessing glance, as if deciding whether to divulge her hand so early in the game.

“Off the record? I found a book in a Sleaford charity shop for 99p called *Hands and How to Read Them*.”

“And you believe what was in that book is real? That palms can predict the future?”

“Of course.” But there was something in the way she said it, too earnest, too pitched, that betrayed it was a lie.

In the darkened kitchen, Madam Celia turned to peer at the illuminated oven clock. “We’re just waiting for one more before we can begin.”

And then, as if she’d summoned it herself, another knocking, sure and loud.

“Speak of the devil,” Rio said.

Madam Celia wagged her finger playfully. “It’s speak of the spirits in this house.” She hurried to the door. When she opened it, the streetlamp outside shone in like a spotlight.

There was a bald man in a bowler hat, with a carefully groomed Dali-esque moustache, jeans, and a protruding stomach wrapped in a shiny maroon waistcoat; the effect was similar to fancy dress, like a half-arsed Dr Watson costume. He appeared to be waiting for Madam Celia to speak first, raising his eyebrows quizzically at her, as though she’d been the one to knock on *his* door.

“Mr Alexander, I presume?”

“Indeed that’s me.” He said this with a sort of curtsey, the light gleaming on his smooth skin. “G. Alexander.” He emphasized the initial, like he wanted her to probe further.

Madam Celia obliged, if only to move things along, maybe. “G?”

“Correct.” Then he smiled at her, close-lipped and tightly narrow, as if he were holding in a mouthful of water, and didn’t elaborate.

His amusement struck Rio as arrogant, and Madam Celia must have thought so, too, because she didn’t usher him inside like she had the others. Rather, she seemed suddenly apprehensive. “Tell me, Mr Alexander, have you ever done anything like this before?”

“Once or twice.” He winked at her, drumming his fingers on his waistcoat.

For a long moment, Rio wasn't sure that he'd even be let in, wondered if perhaps the two of them would just go on observing one another on the threshold like that, but finally, Madam Celia stood aside. "The others are in the back room."

"Then I suppose I'd better join them." He strode past her then as if he'd been there before, confident – no, cocky, the same way Rio felt if she managed to bluff her hand and make someone fold.

When Madam Celia shut the door, the swing of her arm was forceful, the motion of it wafting Rio's hair.

"Ooh look," Fiona exclaimed from the other room. "One of the candles has just gone out by itself."

In the dark, Madam Celia appeared to fix her shawl. "Please go ahead," she said. "I'll bring your drink through in a minute. Is nettle tea okay?"

Rio returned to the armchair in the corner of the room. The others were all sat round the table, bathed in a soft candlelight that gave the contours of their faces ghoulish shadows. Daniel was still talking about the development, his voice hushed now, punctuated by long silences which Fiona appeared to have given up trying to fill. G. Alexander scrutinized the room, smirking at the gravestones as if they were tacky decorations.

Madam Celia appeared and placed the witch's cauldron by Rio's feet as Fiona eagerly pointed out the extinguished candle to her.

"Mm." Madam Celia nodded. "The spirits are making themselves known. We can take that as our cue to begin." She took the seat nearest the window, the graveyard behind her a suitably dramatic backdrop. "Our connecting with the spirits depends on each of us being open to receive anything that might occur this evening."

G. Alexander smoothed his waistcoat.

"*Disbelievers*," she said, looking quite pointedly at everyone except for G. Alexander, "Weaken the energy that's required of the session, making it much more difficult for the spirits to come through. It's imperative that everyone be open to whatever happens here tonight." She straightened in her seat, an air of poise about her. "Now, palms flat on the table, eyes closed, all of you, and breathing deeply." She inhaled theatrically through her nose.

The incense Madam Celia lit earlier was still heady in the room, and it lingered at the back of Rio's throat.

"I want you all to quiet your minds and concentrate your energy."

They sat in silence this way for a few minutes; occasionally Madam Celia made a noise – a sigh or an *mmm* – as if tasting the room for otherworldly sensations. “Can you feel that? The shift that’s occurred?”

Fiona nodded.

The room felt unchanged to Rio. She had a sip of nettle tea. It was bitter like spinach and tasted the way hay smelled.

“The spirits are ready,” Madam Celia announced solemnly. “You may open your eyes.”

Fiona peered over her shoulder looking vaguely alarmed, as if she were expecting to be confronted with ghosts floating leisurely behind her. Even Daniel glanced quickly around the room; G. Alexander, however, looked only at Madam Celia, his face expressionless.

“Oh!” Madam Celia held up her palm with the kind of dramatic flair that looked as if it had been honed in front of a mirror. “There’s someone here who wants to make themselves known.” She pressed a finger to her temple as if in concentration. “Go on,” she said to the room at large. “They’re very quiet, it’s difficult to – yes, that’s right. Come closer, my dear.” She paused for effect. “I’m getting an M-something.”

Daniel’s chair creaked as he leaned forward.

“Marcus?” Fiona said then. “Is it Marcus?”

Rio caught a flicker of something in Madam Celia’s face – a look of surprise, perhaps – before she nodded. “I feel a tragedy connected to him? There’s a sadness?”

G. Alexander watched the table with a spellbound interest, as Daniel sat back again and looked down at his hands.

“He was involved in an accident, and no one survived. It’s been so difficult for my family. My aunt–”

“Please, only ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers,” Madam Celia said. “The death, it was quite shocking.”

Rio thought this was a likely bet.

“Yes,” Fiona said.

“His presence is very strong now; it’s becoming more powerful.”

And then, a loud bang, like a heavy book being thrown to the floor, and the room was suddenly tense with frightful excitement, everyone – even Madam Celia –

wide-eyed and staring, surveying the room. Rio could not be certain where the sound had come from; perhaps there was someone upstairs. “Can he do that again?” Rio said.

“Can you do that again?” Madam Celia asked the room.

Silence.

For a few moments there was nothing, and then a strange buzzing, like a vibration.

“Oh my God!” Fiona shrieked. “The table!”

The table was rattling. Madam Celia threw her head back, eyes closed.

“Yes,” she exclaimed, “We’re listening.”

From the armchair, Rio could see beneath the table if she slouched, and she shone the light of her phone toward it, hoping to reveal the subterfuge. But Madam Celia’s legs were not touching it, not even close; it simply appeared to be a table, moving by itself. The possibility, that she should witness something incredible and inexplicable was preposterous to Rio. But watching the spectacle occur, she could not help but believe that it was real; it was happening, after all, in front of her eyes, and she could not deny that. It *was* unexplained. It *was* incredible.

Adrenaline lurched through her, the feeling unpleasant and transporative: leaving the casino, overwhelmed at having lost again and her debt swelling beyond control, and how could she possibly pay it off on her kind of wage?

The table stilled abruptly. Madam Celia began to nod, as if listening to a disembodied voice. “He wants you to know that the presence you feel sometimes is him.”

“Yes,” Fiona smiled, overjoyed. “I knew it was.”

Madam Celia has perfected the art of a knowing look.

“He cares very deeply for you. You had a bond.”

“Yes.”

“He says he’s watching over you.”

Fiona sniffed. There were tears in her eyes.

“He wants you to tell your aunt that he’s watching over her, too.”

Fiona’s expression changed then. “My aunt? That doesn’t...” She shook her head. “But she was driving the car. She died with him.”

G. Alexander looked positively delighted.

Despite the error, Madam Celia did not falter. “A miscommunication. My ability as a conduit is only as strong as the energy in the room.” She raised her fingers to her temple again. “He’s correcting me...” She inhaled through her nose, sighed it out of her mouth. “That’s right. He’s with your aunt, but he’s protective of you both.”

“Oh.” Fiona said this flatly. “Can I ask him something?” She wiped at her face. “Can I ask where he left the key?”

“The key?”

Fiona stared at her. “The key.”

Daniel coughed quietly. Rio could feel everyone dissecting the silence, could feel the doubt begin to settle disappointingly in.

Madam Celia is being tested.

“Hm,” Madam Celia said awkwardly. “Hmm.”

“If I may,” G. Alexander said. “As an international clairvoyant, I’m concerned by what’s going on here.” He looked at Fiona and then at Madam Celia. His face was stern, serious. Rio was about to ask what he meant by ‘international clairvoyant’, but he continued, “It’s obvious you can’t answer that question.”

Madam Celia mouthed wordlessly at him, like a fish gulping air.

His chest was puffed out, now that he had the floor. “You can’t ask something so specific.” He was speaking directly to Fiona now. “That’s just not how it works. I can see Madam Celia is trying her best not to fail you, but spirits don’t just communicate in that way; you can’t interview them. This isn’t an interview.” He looked at Madam Celia, who only gawked at him. “Madam Celia?” he pressed. “Do you agree?”

When she did speak, it was slow, cautious. “Yes. That’s right. I’m – I’m only a channel for the world beyo—”

“We’re vessels for information to move through.” He said this quite passionately, demonstrating it with a forward motion of his hands.

“I’m sorry.” Fiona looked mortified. “I didn’t mean to come across as combative.”

“It’s alright,” he said. “If you didn’t know then I won’t hold it against you.”

“I didn’t.” She looked at Daniel, perhaps hoping for some support.

Madam Celia began to blink rapidly. “Excuse me,” she said. “This isn’t how I conduct my sessions, actually.” She sounded flustered. *Madam Celia can’t believe*

this is happening. “I think things have got off track. I think we should all re-focus. Let’s everybody close our eyes and concentrate.”

The candles in the middle of the table flickered.

G. Alexander held up his hand. “A moment please, Celia,” he announced. “There’s someone else here with us who wants our attention.” He gestured just over his shoulder. “Do you sense them?”

“*Madam Celia,*” she said.

It’s important that she retain authority in the room at all times.

He glanced at her, with something like impatience.

“I really think—”

“Perhaps they’re not coming through for you?” he said wryly. And then, to Daniel, “Some of us are blessed with stronger gifts than others.”

Madam Celia snorted. “I beg your pardon?”

Who is G. Alexander?

“Can I ask,” Rio said. Everyone turned to look at her. “Why are you here, Mr Alexander? Was it your intention to hijack Madam Celia’s séance?”

Madam Celia began nodding furiously.

“Goodness me, no,” G. Alexander appeared scandalized. “I moved nearby recently and saw her services advertised in a Costa. I suppose I just wanted to check out my competition, but my intention, of course, was only ever to observe.”

Madam Celia scoffed.

“I have the greatest respect for you.” He said this insincerely, as he reached across the table to touch her hand, but she snatched it away.

“What’s the hell is happening?” Daniel demanded. “This is utterly ridiculous. It’s a circus.”

Fiona was nodding, her hands at her face.

“I can assure you my sessions are never normally like this,” said Madam Celia.

Rio could hear the distress in her voice, and to a degree, felt sorry for her.

“Quiet, please.” G. Alexander suddenly straightened in his chair, alert, like a dog on scent. “There’s a child here.”

“Get out,” Madam Celia said. “Get out, now.”

Daniel stared at him. “What?”

“I’m getting the letter M.”

"I mean it," Madam Celia cried.

"Let him talk." There was a strange look on Daniel's face.

Fiona, clearly confused, said to G. Alexander, "Do you mean Marcus?"

"No. It's..." G. Alexander closed his eyes, as if intently concentrating, and then, "You, sir!" He clasped Daniel suddenly on the shoulder. "It's you!"

"Molly." Daniel said this like a statement of fact, rather than a question. "My daughter."

G. Alexander nodded and smiled, delighted, as if someone had just whispered something amusing in his ear. "She's a lovely little girl," he said. "Quite funny. And very interested in things, very curious about what's going on around her."

G. Alexander was hedging his bets. It felt to Rio that the whole evening was based on chance, throwing something out into the dark just to see where it landed.

"She's very sweet-natured isn't she," G. Alexander said. "Very playful. She likes being outside and, that's right, I'm getting music, like birdsong? There's lots of birdsong."

Daniel seemed stunned. "We liked to identify birds."

"And I'm getting – I'm getting a smell, like soil."

"Yes." Daniel's voice caught; his hands were shaking.

It all suddenly felt grotesque. It was obvious that Daniel was bereft and that this had made him hopeful – blindly so – that something might come of this farce, and even more clear to Rio, was that his desperation was being taken advantage of. It felt immoral, to just sit there and watch this unfold, but then, Rio's job was to get a story, and that meant observing rather than involving herself.

"I'm getting a real sense of love. A very deep love. The two of you were a unit. You were attached at the hip."

Daniel began to cry.

"She wants to speak to you directly," G. Alexander said. "She wants me to channel her."

G. Alexander is raising the stakes.

"What?" Madam Celia's voice was tight and sharp. "Are you sure she doesn't just want to relay a message instead?" No one at the table was listening to her.

"Is Marcus still around?" Fiona asked. "Aren't we still talking to him?"

“I can only channel one spirit at a time, my dear,” said G. Alexander.

“Mr Alexander,” Madam Celia said sternly. “I have to insist that you don’t.”

If he heard her, then he pretended not to. He stretched his arms out on the table in front of him, placing his palms on either side of the half-extinguished candles, and then he closed his eyes and began to pant like a dog.

“What’s happening?” Fiona was alarmed. “What’s he doing that for?”

“This is *my* session.” Madam Celia sounded harassed. “These people have come here for *my* help.”

He only panted louder, chin tipped to his chest. When he began to groan, Rio felt the hair prickle on her arms.

“Hey,” Madam Celia said loudly.

No one at the table so much as looked at her.

“Hey!” She leaned across the table and shook G. Alexander’s arm. He fell silent, swayed slightly in his seat.

“Is he in a trance?” Fiona whispered.

His head jerked up, and he began to slowly retract his hands along the table; the movement was juddery, his palms sticking slightly to the surface. He opened his eyes. For a moment, only the whites were visible. Fiona made a strange, sickened kind of noise, as his eyes began to roll absurdly in their sockets.

G. Alexander started to flutter his eyelids, as if coming to. Madam Celia, looking utterly repulsed by the spectacle of it – *Madam Celia does not like to be upstaged* – got suddenly to her feet, pushing the chair forcefully out from under her so that it clattered to the floor. Daniel and Fiona looked at her. “It’s Molly,” she cried, holding her fingers to her temple. “She’s saying it isn’t working. The energy in the room isn’t – it isn’t strong enough.”

Madam Celia is taking back her throne.

G. Alexander faltered; his fluttering slowed to blinks. Despite being in the throes of a possession, annoyance was clearly visible in his face.

“She’s feeling weakened,” Madam Celia said. “She has to leave.”

“No,” Daniel was rising from his chair. “Wait, I want to know if she’s alright. I want to know why I can’t feel her around me like she” – he pointed at Fiona – “does with that man.”

“His name is Marcus,” Fiona said.

“She’s just *gone*,” Daniel sounded despairing. “It isn’t fair.”

“There!” G. Alexander leapt dramatically out of his chair, knocking into the table as he pointed out the window, the remaining candles snuffing themselves out so that the room was swamped suddenly in deepest shadow, and as he did so, Rio got quickly to her feet to see what he’d been looking at, and didn’t notice her phone fall directly into the cauldron of tea, submerged entirely.

“Oh my God,” Fiona said.

It was completely dark outside by then, so dark that even the nearby gravestones were no longer visible. Out in the distance was a light, a singular glowing orb floating low across the meadow, luminous and slowly meandering.

“A spirit,” G. Alexander said, with something like astonishment, as if he couldn’t quite believe it himself.

Madam Celia must have been facing the window as well, because she said, “It’s heading to the woods.”

Daniel turned and ran out the front door, presumably to follow the orb, leaving his coat slung on the chair.

“Do you think he’ll catch up to it?” Fiona asked. “It’s quite far away.”

“You know,” G. Alexander said, “I doubt it even matters if he does.”

Whereas the others seemed in awe of what had occurred, Rio found herself irritated. It wasn’t that she’d been let down by the evening – she’d not expected to be convinced, not really. It was, she realised, Daniel that had bothered her, his futile hope, his desperation, and that she understood keenly why he had come here. How many times had she returned to the poker table, driven there by wilful irrationality and a longing for her fortune to change? How many times had she banked on a wholly unknown and undependable future because there was nothing else?

She moved closer to the window and watched the shadowy figure of Daniel running out into the dark, and in the far distance, the orb appeared to grow momentarily brighter, before it disappeared as quickly as if someone had flicked a switch.

Nell

Nell had always longed to steal the kingfisher.

She was alone in Oonagh's front room with the door shut, sat on the loveseat and still in her woollen coat, which was far too long for her, too wide in the shoulders; it gave her the air of a child playing dress-up, though she was soon to be eighty. But it was a practical coat, one she'd had nearly twenty years, with large pockets containing any strange assortment of things – sticky plasters and pens, for example, a small tub of Vaseline, tealights, a pack of cards. There were so many people milling about the rest of the house – people Nell didn't know – that the back door had to be kept open for them to spill out into the garden, and because it was autumn and the temperature was cool despite the drought, Nell had decided to keep the coat on.

She could still hear Judy buzzing around the kitchen, her voice both loud and muffled at once, making pleasantries and offerings, as if this were a party and it were her house. It annoyed Nell; *Judy* annoyed Nell. She'd spent a tedious hour watching Judy faff, unwrapping yet more cellophaned dishes of food that people had brought in condolence, even though there was already too much out and it would be better kept in the fridge for Walt, for later, or put into the chest freezer for use in the ensuing days and weeks and months of adjustment. Judy, like everyone else, had kept cloyingly close to Walt, which meant that Nell could not say the things she wanted to him, things that she meant sincerely and wanted to express in private. And when she could no longer bear Judy trying to make her do things – *Nell, would you see if anyone needs a drink?* – Nell had retreated to the living room, where it was far less isolating to be, than it was out there with all of them.

Nell did not particularly care that she was being antisocial. She could not even hazard a guess at how many times she'd sat in this very spot with Oonagh next to her, angled toward a bookshelf that was stuffed to its edges. Oonagh had often said that she collected evidence of a life lived well. There were souvenirs and trinkets, vases of flowers Oonagh had dried from the garden, paintings she'd done of the places she'd

visited: Cornish cliffs; a Japanese pagoda framed with actual cherry blossoms from her trip; a pastel-hued village in Santorini. There was an ornate coffee table from some far-flung market, an antique writing bureau in the corner that had once belonged to someone apparently impressive but whose name Nell didn't recognise, and more lamps than were necessary, all of them covered in various patterned fabrics that she'd collected on her travels and somehow matched to colours in the rug. Nell slid her stockinged feet over it now, thick-piled and soft.

And then there was the loveseat. Oonagh had reupholstered it herself, years ago now, as Nell kept her company. It would have been a somewhat unremarkable afternoon (it was the unremarkable afternoons that Nell would miss the most), the hours of chitchat punctuated now and then by the sound of the staple gun, as Oonagh attached a new red damask to the back of the loveseat. But then Oonagh had gone and stapled her finger to the frame, and screamed, hysterical – overreacting, really – and Nell, hardly thinking at all, quite calmly fetched a small pair of pliers from her coat pocket and yanked it out. And Oonagh, holding her bleeding finger above her head, laughed at the unexpected revelation that Nell of all people had been walking around with pliers in her pocket for no reason at all – *pliers? What on earth are you carrying around pliers for!* – laughed so hard she'd cried. Nell, who couldn't see what was so funny, thought Oonagh must have been in shock; she'd left the pliers with her, just in case it happened again.

Nell's flat was nothing like Oonagh's house, was not colourful and warm, or even very full, did not feel how a home ought to – welcoming and cosy – the way this did, which was why Nell had always insisted they get together here. Nell could not decorate a room the way Oonagh could, did not have the same eye or know-how, had not travelled and accumulated things to fill it with. She'd tried, picking the odd ornament up when she was out shopping, but it wasn't the same; they didn't feel like Oonagh's things, which always had a story attached to them – a flea market haggle for instance, an ancestral connection – and this gave them a certain presence in the room.

Of all the things in the living room, it was always the kingfisher that captured Nell's attention. It was a piece of taxidermy about the size of her palm and positioned to look as though it were perching on a branch. Oonagh had found it dead years ago, she said, at the nearby river, just lying on the bank serenely, as if it had simply given in mid-flight to land perfectly there on the grass. Oonagh had been so moved by its vibrance, its perfect beauty, that she'd had it stuffed. It always

managed to catch the light from the sun or a lamp, making electric its blue and orange feathers, giving it an appearance closer to coloured glass or a brilliant jewel, than a bird found in Britain.

Nell had always thought it got lost tucked away on the shelf as it was, minimised by everything else around it. It deserved more; its loveliness ought to have been celebrated instead of confined to the corner, half-forgotten with the rest. It occurred to her then, with a sharp and morose understanding, that she would probably never be here again, amongst all the things that felt as if they were her own. Since she'd heard the news of Oonagh's death, Nell felt as if she were in the centre of a large balloon which would burst every so often, sudden, and shocking, and letting in a piercing sadness; it did that now, and she was glad that she was alone.

Nell caught a whiff of burning cigarette; someone nearby was smoking, perhaps even inside. Oonagh had hated that smell, would've hated it being in her house, stinking her things. She thought with some surprise that perhaps Walt might not mind it. But then, she didn't know him with the same intimacy; Nell had been *Oonagh's* friend.

Nell got slowly to her feet, bracing herself ungracefully against the seat cushion, and went to the kingfisher. She'd decided long ago that it looked like it was pointing toward the river, the way its back was so straight, and its beak so sharp and like a compass needle. From so close, she could see the imbrication of its feathers, see each barbarous fibre of its plumage.

Then Nell did something that she had always wanted to: she stroked it. The feathers were like silk beneath her fingers, cool and smooth, but coated with a finely granular dust from having sat, untouched, for so long. And then, not quite by impulse, she took the kingfisher firmly in her hand, fingers wrapped around its little body, and pulled hard. It came off the branch more easily than she'd expected, and she paused, not entirely certain what she'd done and why. She looked at it – there were thin wire posts sticking out from its neon feet – and then put it into her coat pocket. Nell felt a swell of adrenaline and left hurriedly, out the room and through the front door, walking as quickly as she could, her head instinctively downward, both from caution (the path was uneven) and from the acute sense that she had done something thrillingly illicit. It was not until she turned to close the gate behind her that she saw a young man standing in the front garden by the living room window,

and the fluttering that was already in her chest became compounded by the unexpected sight of him, so that an involuntary whimper left her.

Perhaps he felt badly for startling her because he said quietly, "Alright?"

His tone, his expression, were of impassive inscrutability. Surely, he'd seen nothing of interest in the last couple of minutes. Nell stared at him. He wasn't wearing a coat, despite the chill in the air, and as he shivered slightly, she noticed he was holding a lit cigarette. "I hope you put that in the bin when you're done with it, and don't just drop it in the plants."

At home, Nell removed the kingfisher from her pocket as if it were still alive, careful not to snag its feathers on the coarse woollen fabric and ruin them. She wiped away the dust with a damp cloth before she'd even taken off her coat, and then set the kingfisher on the kitchen windowsill to dry. The walk back home had been short, only five minutes down the road, but she'd felt she couldn't reach it fast enough, that behind her lay a vague sense of threat from her encounter with that man. Riverside House was on the outskirts of the village, beyond the ford and the allotment, and was a very large and very old building that had at one time been a workhouse for the poor and needy, but was these days independent living for the elderly. Despite the age of it, her flat was lacking in character, the renovations undertaken to transform it in the sixties having rendered it sterile, and all the rooms small and painted a dreary magnolia. But it had lovely light in the mornings, and it was on the top floor, which meant less of those ugly handrails screwed into the walls, and long red emergency cords hanging in every room, like in the flats on the ground floor where they put all of the people that they wanted to keep an eye on. In the safety of her little home, she felt calmer, surer in her anonymity. The man didn't even know who she was, didn't even know her name.

When at last she sat at her table, sipping her tea gratefully, she realised that she had not said goodbye, and wondered if Judy might call later, asking why she'd gone so abruptly. She'd have to feign nausea or a migraine, and say she'd come home to lie down. In fact, she felt sure that Judy would call. Nell's mother had been the same, made it her business to know everyone else's. They hadn't been able to afford a television – not many people in their area could at the time – and Nell suspected this was her mother's form of entertainment. Nell had always thought of her mother like a border collie: brighter than most dogs, but destructive if their

minds weren't stimulated enough. She had not been a cruel woman, but she'd been critical in her opinions and careless with how she shared them, and she had often made Nell feel inadequate. She'd regularly compare Nell to other girls of a similar age, girls who were always better in some way, sometimes under the guise of aspirational self-improvement, and others a visible irritation that her only daughter was deficient in some way. But usually, thankfully, her focus was on sniffing out gossip, however small, amongst friends and neighbours. Oonagh, having heard about Nell's mother after too much sherry one night, said she sounded like a right bitch, to which Nell had cackled, returning to it again and again for the rest of the evening, unable to picture her mother without the narrow, pointed face of a border collie.

After an hour in the sun, she could feel the heat of the day held in the kingfisher's feathers, and she appreciated the feeling of it in her palm, pleasant and reassuring, as if it were still warm-blooded. Its feathers were glossier, now they weren't covered with a layer of dust. It was a shame about the wire posts though, protruding from its delicate feet. It meant the kingfisher was unable to stand, and they detracted from its diminutive magnificence. They were not something she could get rid of herself (she had never gotten her pliers back from Oonagh) and so she phoned down for Paul, the handyman, who brought his tools up with him an hour later.

"Bit far from the river, isn't it?" he quipped, holding it up and turning it in his hand like a precious stone (even though Nell had made him wash his hands before handling the kingfisher, he still had crescents of dirt beneath his fingernails).

She was surprised that he knew what it was.

"Well sure." He snipped one of the posts and it ricocheted against the wall. "Me and my boys see them all the time when we're fishing."

"Is that right," she said. "Maybe I should go down there myself. Maybe I should take up birdwatching."

"They're too quick. By the time you'd raised your binoculars they'd be halfway down the river. It's a bit like watching for lightning and blinking when it hits."

"I've never seen one alive," she said, thinking aloud.

"I'll tell you what," he said, snipping off the other post. "Their feathers aren't actually blue at all, they're a dull brown. It's just a trick of the light." He picked the errant pieces of metal up from the floor and put them in his pocket.

“Well,” she said, impressed. “I didn’t know that.” She’d never given much thought to Paul. She’d seen him, weeding the rose beds outside or repairing cornicing in the entryway, and though he’d been in her flat before, to stop a leak beneath her kitchen sink, she’d not once considered that he might, like her, appreciate beautiful things.

“It really is a lovely creature,” he said, admiring it as he handed it back to Nell.

“Yes,” she said proudly, “It is.”

When he’d left, she placed it on the shelf that she’d prepared. Because its feet had been made to curl around a branch, she had to lean it against a Tuscan-inspired tile that she’d bought from a homewares shop in town, to stop it falling over. Positioned among the ordinariness of her possessions – the tile, a small potted cactus that made her think of the Arizonian desert but actually came from Tesco, some razor clam shells from a Norfolk beach (Gorleston-On-Sea or Sheringham, probably) – it looked odd, incongruous in its beauty, and she was discouraged that it hadn’t immediately elevated the rest of her things, and was sure that were it the other way around, had any of her possessions been transplanted to Oonagh’s home, they would have become transformed, made lovelier by their proximity to Oonagh’s belongings. *They’re just things*, Nellie, Oonagh had been fond of saying as she showed off something else newly acquired, *They don’t mean anything, really*. Nell had always found it a bit insincere and placating, thought she’d never said so.

It was strange to think that only a couple of hours before, she’d been at her friend’s wake. It wasn’t yet teatime, but Nell decided she would get into bed, and drew all the curtains against the last residue of daylight. It took her a long time to drift into sleep, sure that Judy would call to talk about poor Oonagh, and the sudden noise of the phone would startle her, and she spent the hours somewhere between there and awake, pulled repeatedly from the drowsy current of slumber by the shrill two-noted whistle of a bird.

When the telephone did ring the following day, it was not Judy, but the vicar, Rev. Eileen Wright, asking if she might come round that afternoon for a quick visit between meetings. She did this every so often, and while she didn’t ever say it was because she thought Nell might be a bit lonely, Nell knew that it was the unspoken reason, and was always grateful (if a little resentful) of the company. Nell went to

church every Sunday, though if she were being honest, she wasn't particularly fussed by the sermons, which were always in some way about being good to one another. Really, she went because of the people that made up Rev. Wright's parish, who were pleasant and sent get well soon cards to her if she wasn't feeling well, and because there was always a few of them who lingered after for a natter, always someone complaining about something in one of the neighbouring hamlets. And she liked Rev. Wright, who organised quiz nights and movie nights, and lectures at the church when the weather was warm enough to sit within its cool flint walls. Sometimes Oonagh, who hadn't gone to church as regularly as Nell, would attend these events with her, and they'd whisper asides to one another, giggling disruptively.

When Rev. Wright arrived, Nell made sure that her guest was sat facing the kingfisher, the way she had always done at Oonagh's, when she'd had to admire from a distance what she coveted. She wondered if Rev. Wright would feel the same once she saw how lovely the kingfisher was, even though vicars were presumably not allowed to feel envy. Perhaps Nell would let her hold it, if her hands were clean and she was careful with its feathers. Nell had fashioned a branch out of rolled up paper for the kingfisher to perch on, its bright little toes eternally grasping. It looked alive, now it was standing up independently, unaided by the tile.

Rev. Wright had a kind, inquisitive face, two or three decades younger than Nell and plump-cheeked, with a small mouth that unfortunately did not hide her crooked eye tooth. She was sat with her hands clasped together on her lap, as if she were waiting to sing a hymn in a choir.

"Would you like any tea?" Nell said.

"I can't stay long at all today, I'm afraid." Rev. Wright looked apologetic. "But how are you, Ms Riley?"

"Oh fine," Nell said, "Fine." She looked at the kingfisher, hoping the vicar might follow suit. And then (because she could not forget her manners, no matter how excited or impatient she'd become), "And you?"

Rev. Wright sort of shrugged, as if she didn't know how she was. "I suppose I'm very well, thank you." She still hadn't looked across the room.

"Apparently they've stopped the development," Nell said, making conversation. "So that's good, isn't it?"

"Yes, well," Rev. Wright said. "*Paused* it, for now. Too many injuries on site. They claim they're doing everything by the book, but of course they'd say that.

They've to wait for a Health and Safety investigation before they can start it all again, so fingers crossed they're shut down somehow."

Nell was about to blame the spate of injuries on the curse, but stopped herself; she didn't know if a vicar would appreciate curses, or if it was in some way blasphemous to try and engage her in that kind of talk, and so instead she just said, "It's been quite a drought, hasn't it? Unusual?"

"We've had prolonged summers before."

Nell looked pointedly at the kingfisher again, trying to direct Rev. Wright's attention. "I expect people think it's because of climate change."

"As opposed to what?"

Nell hesitated, again unsure if she should bring up the curse in present company.

"I ran into Linda on my way in," Rev. Wright said. Linda was the care home manager; Nell had little patience for Linda, who was always smiling, even if there was nothing to smile about, so that it seemed forced, put on for show, and she talked to the residents as if everything was exciting news. It was all very infantilizing. "She's such a lovely woman," Rev. Wright continued. "I respect how much she cares for the residents here. She has a great deal of concern for your wellbeing, you know, what with everything you've gone through lately. It's good she's around to look after you."

"I look after myself," Nell bristled. "I've told her that I'm getting on alright."

Rev. Wright smiled benevolently. "Of course you are, Ms. Riley."

If only to change the subject, Nell said, "Did you know that kingfishers aren't really blue?"

Rev. Wright seemed thrown by this question. "The birds?"

"Only I found one."

"You found one?" She said this uncertainly. "Where?"

"Town," Nell lied.

Rev. Wright considered Nell a moment, her head cocked. "You know, I saw Walter Moody this morning."

Nell could hear the shift in how the vicar spoke, the higher tone, and she had the uneasy sense that something was coming.

"He was..." Rev. Wright paused, sifted for the word. "He was troubled."

"Well," Nell said, "His wife has died."

“Yes,” Rev. Wright said patiently, “But we were speaking about you.”

She felt suddenly wrong-footed, as though she had been lulled falsely into this meeting. Out of the corner of her eye, a sudden small movement, no more than a twitch, caught her attention, and she spun to look at the kingfisher; it was sat inertly on the shelf.

“He said you just sort of vanished yesterday,” Rev. Wright continued. “His grandson saw you leave quite abruptly.”

There was a horrid sensation in Nell’s ribcage, like a great big fish thrashing on land, desperate to get back into the river. She was conscious of keeping her face placid, unimpeachable. “Is that who was standing outside?” She had quite forgotten about him in the time since she’d left the house, which felt an erroneous, cavalier thing to have done, now that she was sitting here, unprepared.

“I’m sure you can understand that Walter is quite upset at the moment.” Rev. Wright put her hand on Nell’s forearm. “I’m sure that you are as well. I’m sure that’s why—” She glanced then, finally, at the kingfisher, and it was clear in that moment that she’d been *avoiding* looking at it the entire time she’d been sat there with Nell, that she knew exactly where it had come from.

The sense of mortification Nell felt was sudden and intense. She wondered, briefly, if she might be sick on herself.

Rev. Wright quietly cleared her throat. “Walter wants to see you.”

“Is that what he said?” Nell’s own voice sounded distant to her. “What about?”

Rev. Wright squeezed her arm gently. “I’m awfully sorry it’s been such a flying visit, Ms Riley, but I’m meeting a couple about a christening in twenty minutes.”

Nell walked in a stupor to the front door, Rev. Wright trailing behind her, saying something – perhaps about coming back again soon – that Nell could hardly register, for the way her mind was spinning. Rev. Wright touched Nell’s shoulder, and then was gone. As Nell walked into the living room again, she clocked immediately that the kingfisher was gone as well, missing from its paper perch, and her fears came rapid-fire and tumbling, that the vicar had taken it, that she was on her way to return it to Walt, proof of Nell’s treachery, and she gripped the back of the chair, panic kicking wildly at her until, in a moment of intense relief, she saw it plainly on the floor, only fallen.

*

Over the next few days her mind winged in erratic loops. She could picture him – Oonagh’s grandson, Jack – vividly, lingering with his cigarette, watching her through the glass. She’d not recognised him from the pictures framed about the house, had not realised he was so old as that now. He’d probably gone inside after she’d left and told them all, announced to the whole wake the crime she had committed. Perhaps that’s why Judy hadn’t called her yet (she couldn’t bear the thought of *Judy* having this over her!). Perhaps no one wanted to associate with her anymore. Walt would no doubt be angry, furious. As she went on like this, unendingly returning to the encounter in her mind, regret – no, it was stronger: shame – began to tarnish the kingfisher. She could no longer easily admire it the way she had for so long. It seemed to take on an unpleasant quality overnight, coloured now in a grotesque kind of disgrace. Even when she sat reading or in front of the television, there it was on the shelf, the kingfisher and its implications, on the fringes of her awareness. She felt its shiny black eye looking out into the room, felt its dissecting stare. More and more from her periphery, she thought that she caught its small body shudder, and there were times immediately after these incidents that she picked up the phone to call Oonagh, remembering only as she was dialling how the kingfisher had been procured in the first place and, worse, that it would be Walt who answered anyway, Walt who knew of her treachery. And each time, came the realisation that really, now, she had no one else to tell things to, with Oonagh gone.

Sometimes she found the kingfisher again on the floor; on one occasion it was in the middle of the room, as though she’d caught it mid-way to the door. She moved the small cactus, domed and spiky, in front of the kingfisher to stop it falling from the shelf. However it was that the kingfisher had been stuffed must have made it unbalanced, or perhaps it was because of how the feet were positioned, her makeshift branch not a good enough perch.

When she decided that she’d spent too much time in her own company, that it was making her unreasonable, playing with her head, she phoned downstairs for Paul. He said that he was just about to get on with clearing the gutters, so she made up an excuse that one of the LED lightbulbs in her flat needed changing, even though they were meant to last years, and he said that it was a good thing she’d caught him before he’d gone up the ladder.

She showed him into the kitchen. He flicked the light switch on and off, and saw that it was working. She waited as he tried the hallway switch behind the wall, and then, turning, tried the bathroom opposite.

“Which one is it then?”

“I’ve made you a cup of tea.”

“Oh.” He appeared surprised. “Oh, right.” Then he picked it up – “Cheers” – and took a sip, but it was scalding still, and he winced, putting it back down on the table.

She pushed the plate of shortbread towards him.

“Go on then,” he winked. He gestured to the bedroom and said with his mouth full, “Is it through there?” Crumbs fell to his shirt.

“Can’t you sit for a bit?” she protested. “You’re not in a rush, are you?”

But he was already in the hallway again, and she rose, following him.

“Full on day today, Ms. Riley.” He tried the bedroom light, watched it flick on and then off. “I’m installing some new shelves in the utility room once those gutters are done.” He walked ahead of her, and tried the living room light, which was of course working.

“I didn’t realise you were quite so busy,” she said apologetically.

He looked at her, momentarily blank. She thought he might be cross with her for wasting his time, but it was worse: he smiled pityingly. “I can at least finish my tea,” he said, his voice overly sweet, consoling. And then he stooped to pick up the kingfisher, which she hadn’t noticed was again on the floor. This time, the cactus she’d positioned to keep it from falling had been knocked off too, jettisoned from its plastic pot to land by the sofa, a spray of soil across the carpet. “I’ll get this cleaned up first.”

She took the kingfisher from him reluctantly. It seemed to stare coldly at her from its beady little eyes, the glass clear and black, and in it, a minute face looking back at her, and just as her heart leapt at the sudden thought that it was Oonagh she saw, she felt an impossible movement of feather at her thumb and flung the kingfisher to the floor again, recoiling.

“Are you alright, Ms. Riley?”

“I—” But as she stared at it, unblinking, watching how still it was, how motionless after all, she realised that it must have only been her pulse beating hard

through muscle and skin, and that the image she saw was only herself reflected. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Concern was clear in Paul's face.

"Clumsy me." She said this as airily as she could manage, though her voice betrayed her. She thought perhaps that she should smile, that she should pick up the kingfisher and make a joke of what she'd just done. But she felt too averse to the thought of touching it again, still disturbed by her unexpected repulsion, that she could do nothing but apologise to Paul, who continued to stare worriedly at her, before leaving the room.

She could not throw it away, not when it had belonged to Oonagh.

She was in the shower later, the water clattering over her, when she heard a noise against the bathroom door. It was dull but forceful enough that the door knocked against the frame. Startled, she thought perhaps Paul had forgotten something and let himself in.

"Hello?" she said.

Another pushing at the door.

She covered herself with the shower curtain (there was no lock in any of the resident's bathrooms in case someone slipped and fell, and needed assistance to get up again) and stepped out from under the water so that she could listen better.

"Hello?" she said, louder.

A scrabbling noise against the door as it moved again, and a quiet fretting sound like the flipping of a book's pages.

Like the flapping of small wings.

"Go away," she cried, "Go away, you horrible thing!"

The sound became more frantic, as if it were battering itself against the door, determined to get in and tear its claws into her skin, peck her open.

And then, quite abruptly, it stopped.

She turned off the shower, and as she wrapped herself in a towel, found that she was trembling. She tried to calm herself. Of course the kingfisher couldn't really be outside the door; how ridiculous to think so! The disturbance she'd heard had only been the sound of the water hitting the shower curtain. In all probability that was it, nothing more. But logic was quick to turn on her, mutinous and unwieldy, and she wondered if the curse had brought the kingfisher horrifyingly to life, or

worse, if this was retribution for what she'd done: if Oonagh was haunting her. Steeling herself for what she would find beyond the bathroom, cautiously, Nell opened the door. There was nothing there.

She ventured slowly down the hall to her bedroom, heart thumping, fearful of making too much noise, in case she drew its attention to her again. It could be hiding anywhere, waiting for her.

But as she passed the living room, she saw it there on the shelf, behind the newly re-potted cactus, just as Paul had left it.

When the solution came to her, fully formed and with such a lucidity, she wondered if it had somehow been communicated to her. The kingfisher didn't want to be there, in her flat; it wanted to be returned home. Before the absurdity of the idea could take hold, she threw on her coat, and put the kingfisher again in her pocket, and went. In the lobby, Paul and Linda were standing together, talking in hushed voices; it must have been a serious conversation because, for once, Linda was not smiling. And as she passed them, she was certain she heard Paul say something about a bird, was sure they gave her furtive glances, and the sinking feeling which trailed out the door after her was that soon enough, they'd move her to the ground floor.

Outside, the sun was bright and high, and glaring down at her. She entertained, briefly, the idea of pushing the kingfisher through the letterbox and leaving without a word, like a coward, but she knew that she could not. She wasn't sure what exactly she'd say, but she would tell the truth and apologize. It was important that she not allow herself to consider the consequences, or she knew that she wouldn't go through with it, and so she tried to focus instead on her surroundings. The ford was shallow as always, more of a wide puddle than anything, and she crossed it hurriedly, didn't care that it splattered her ankles with water. She walked past all the yellowed lawns, dry and dead with their cracked brown earth and wilted, shrivelled plants, crisp piles of shed leaves, and the houses, all of them quaint in their own ramshackle way, all of them different from one another, and parked cars lined up in a row along the road. Every few feet there were posters protesting the development that would see most of the woods replaced by new housing. When she got to the gate, she hesitated only momentarily, before opening it.

"Nell?"

She turned. Walt was getting out of his car.

“There you are,” he said. “I was wondering when I might see you.” He walked to her, keys dangling in his hand. “Are you coming inside? I want to talk to you.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I can’t come in.”

He looked at her hand on the gate, and she removed it quickly, self-consciously, and reached now into her pocket; better to get it done swiftly.

“Mind yourself on that.” He gestured to the gate and then showed Nell his palms. “I keep getting splinters from it. Got another one this morning, a big one. I haven’t been able to remove all of it either. You can see where it’s still there, look.” He moved his hand closer to her. “I don’t suppose you’ve brought any more of those pliers with you.”

“No.” That he was joking surprised Nell. “No, I’d left them with Oonagh.” She was holding the kingfisher at her side, her fist closed tightly around its little body, so that only its long dark beak was visible, protruding from between her fingers.

“I know,” he said. “The little magpie kept them on her dressing table. I always thought it looked a bit funny, having them next to her perfume bottles. But you know how she liked to collect a story.” He smiled happily at the thought of her. “I can get them for you if you like. Are you sure you won’t come in?”

“No, I...” Instinctively, she raised her hand, so that the kingfisher was between them both. “Walt, I—”

He suddenly clasped his hands around her fist, the act startling and insistent. “You know, she always admired your ability to surprise her. She’d say if someone were to look at her friend Nell and didn’t know her, they’d be in danger of thinking she was just another old lady, like her.” He said this kindly, smiling still.

She was aware, vaguely, of the kingfisher’s claws, sharp against her fleshy palm, of a trembling sensation coming from the kingfisher or from her own hand, she was not sure which.

“I’ve always known how much you’ve admired Oonagh’s things.” His hands were hot and encompassing, and he held to her, to the kingfisher, a few moments more, before letting go. “Please come round again soon, won’t you? I make a very good cup of tea.”

*

It was a longer walk than Nell was used to, but she took her time, careful on the uneven path, until finally she reached the river. The sun hit sharply on its mirrored surface, reflecting the light into her eyes. She steadied herself against a willow's trunk and reached into her pocket, and then swung her arm and opened her hand, so that the kingfisher was thrown out and far into the river, and as it arced into the water that shimmered with the current and the sun, like so many pieces of glitter, its wings seemed to spread in a brilliant blue flare, ochre belly stretching and rising, and Nell, who could not help but to blink at the glaring light, was not sure if what she'd seen was right or true, whether the kingfisher had gone under and left only ripples on the surface, or had indeed beat away, up toward what was left of the vibrant blue sky, until it was nothing at all.

Jack

The rowan tree at the end of the garden had been steadily dying for some time. Its cankerous grey bark was peeling like a scroll, revealing wood so blackened in places it looked to have been charred by fire, and its trunk was riddled with fungus in brackets of tough grey shelves and soft-looking folds of yellow. Jack's granny, Oonagh, had loved that tree, had spent so many summers reading beneath its creamy froth of blossom or watching the blackbirds feast on its scarlet berries in autumn, and since she was now gone, his grandpa Walter had refused to cut it down. And so it'd stood there, creaking loudly in the slightest wind, full of decay and ready to topple at any time, until finally Jack took his chainsaw to it while Walter was at the allotment, and that was that. All that remained of it was a stump.

"It was dangerous," Jack explained guiltily at the kitchen table. "Next strong wind would've had it." He showed him a piece of the wood to demonstrate just how crumbling it was, but Walter, sullen, only eyed the cup of tea that Jack had set in front of him. Jack moved the wood closer, trying to show him the way it fell apart when he flicked at it with his fingernail, but stubbornly Walter looked instead at his own hands, which were still filthy with soil from the allotment (his grandpa's hands always seemed to be this way now, soil-coated, unwashed). It was a petulant, childish thing to do, turning away like that, and Walter's behaviour surprised Jack. It was true that since Oonagh's death, Walter had become more withdrawn, which was why Jack was round two, sometimes three, times a week now, but this – his brooding – was something he'd never seen before. Jack put the piece of wood on the table. Even though he knew the answer, he asked the question anyway. "Are you in a mood with me now?"

After a silence, "No."

"Because it seems like you are."

More silence.

“I was only helping.”

“Helping?” Walter sounded incredulous. “Helping!”

“You couldn’t have done it yourself.”

“I didn’t want it doing in the first place.” Walter’s voice was louder now.

“And I don’t appreciate you sneaking around behind my back.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“I think it is, actually.” And then Walter stood and walked angrily out of the room, leaving his cup of tea untouched.

It was an overreaction. To blame Jack for an old tree being rotten was unreasonable. He’d expected, when Walter came home, that he’d be at least a little appreciative once the shock had worn off. Jack could’ve shown Walter the growth rings, how old it was; impressive, actually, for a rowan to get to that kind of age.

After a moment, he heard Walter on the creaking stairs, and thought, in a flash of annoyance, that he was going up there to sulk. He tipped Walter’s tea down the sink, and wiped specks of soil from the tabletop with his palm; Oonagh hadn’t been able to abide dirty surfaces. But lately, Jack had noticed coatings of dust on the wood furniture and lamps, rings of pink scum around the faucets and drains, spilled food crusted on the kitchen counters.

As Jack rolled himself a cigarette, he wondered if perhaps Walter was only pretending to be upset about the tree. Walter had always played tricks, like painting the bar soap with clear nail varnish so that it didn’t lather, or sellotaping the bathroom tap to make it spray water all over whoever turned it on. Jack, of course, did it back. Once, when Walter and Oonagh were on holiday, Jack turned everything in their house quite literally upside down. *Why can’t you two just say I love you, like normal people*, Oonagh had lamented. But now, Walter remained taciturnly upstairs, and Jack soon gave up on the theory that his mood was a just a game.

Outside, it was beginning to rain, the mizzling sort that whirled in the air like mist. He hadn’t brought a coat with him. It’d been a cool but exceedingly dry autumn in Hesketh so far, so much so that even rain so pitiful as this was a welcome sight. He contemplated searching the house for a waterproof, but that would only waste time; the light hours were less now that the days were shortening, and the debris still needed clearing from the garden, the logs chopped into firewood.

He found the axe in the shed, heavy-headed and old, and held it at his side while he smoked, knocking the butt of it against his leg. From the end of Walter’s

garden, by the little fishpond blanketed with weeds, he could see where the heavy chipper truck had worn snaking tracks from around the back of the allotment and across the meadow to the edge of the treeline, flattening the parched yellow grasses. The truck would be back in the next couple of days, now the Health and Safety Executive had concluded its investigation, and everything would be starting up again.

He'd heard about the things that had happened, the unusually high number of freak accidents, arborists with years of experience being seriously injured even though the site was supposedly well-organized and tidy. There'd been an unusually high number of trees splitting as they were being felled and then falling in unexpected directions, almost crushing people who'd been properly stood well out of the danger zone. One man's chainsaw had kicked back and lacerated his neck, and he'd very nearly died. Someone else had broken their back when the branch anchoring their rope somehow tore away from the trunk, so that the lowering rope, climbing rope, and arborist were pulled with the branch as it fell to the ground. And there were so many more near-misses that people began to wonder if the whole thing wasn't jinxed; a number of people quit. The developers wanted construction underway quickly because of all the fuss from the village, and Jack was just one of a number who'd been subcontracted to pad out the remaining team responsible for clearing the site. His contract was beginning in just a few days. They were to remove two-thirds of the woodland's trees and feed them into a banshee, which was what he called chippers on account of the horrendous noise they made. It was his understanding the chip would go to the parish council (or parish traitors, as Walter called them).

Jack felt badly about the whole thing, didn't understand why the new homes couldn't just be sited on the meadow alone instead of ripping out perfectly good woodland, but who was he to say where things should be built. He'd not told Walter about the job yet; wasn't sure how, considering. *Don't those idiots know about climate change?* Walter said, when the development had been given the go-ahead. *Whoever they are, they're unconscionable, cutting down trees that are older than all of us in the name of profit. I don't normally wish ill on anyone, but...* Jack finished his cigarette. It'd been years since he'd even been in those woods.

After nearly an hour, swinging and striking and wrenching the axe free again, his arms were tiring. He could smell the damp wool of his jumper and the faint

metallic tang of his own sweat, heat radiating from under the collar. The rain was so fine that it clung to Jack, and the wool had acted like a sponge, absorbing each infinitesimal bead. Walter appeared, wearing Oonagh's polka-dotted plastic raincoat, a bit tight across his stomach and short in the sleeves, so that a good two inches or so of his thick, hairy wrists were exposed. Walter handed him a jacket, the proper waxed kind, and without a word began moving some of the smaller branches onto a pile. This was not, Jack knew, forgiveness, but rather his grandpa's uncompromising need to make himself useful.

Even though Jack had already been out in the rain too long for the coat to do much good now, he put it on anyway (not to do so, he felt, would have come across as childish). As he tugged it over his shoulders, he caught the faint scent of Walter's cologne, lemony and clean. He'd known that smell his entire life, and it provoked in him a sensation of geniality and ease, and tender memories of languid childhood summer holidays and years of Christmases that were cheerful and loud and boisterous, which was why it shocked him then, that he realised Walter no longer smelled of this cologne and hadn't in some time, that at some point after Oonagh's passing, he'd stopped wearing it. A sudden and profound sense of sadness overcame Jack then, the intensity of it astonishing, so that he felt the need to turn away and look up at the sky behind him, to let it pass unnoticed. He'd never liked to cry in front of anyone, not even when he was a child and he'd hidden behind the sofa to do it, furiously wiping his face to make himself stop. Standing there now, waiting for his eyes to clear, he knew that his grandpa was watching him because he could no longer hear the vinyl swish of Oonagh's plastic jacket as Walter piled the branches. It was obvious what Jack was doing, surely, but Walter said nothing. He found things like this – sentimentalities, displays of emotion – unbearable from a man in a way that he did not from a woman; Jack's dad said it was a consequence of his generation. When at last Jack turned round again, Walter, as if compelled by some chain reaction, continued with his task as though he hadn't stopped at all, gathering and piling, and looking only at the wood.

An hour later, the mizzle had cleared and the dark, woollen clouds passed overhead like a train, onward to other parts of Norfolk. When, soon after, Jack set to digging up the old stump to add to the log pile, he did not expect to find tangled there in its latticework of roots, so many pieces of bone. Things had been unearthed in his

grandparent's garden before – old tools, cloudy glass bottles of many shapes and colours, a grey granite plinth in what was now the flower bed and given new life as a nightstand – and so at first he'd assumed the same again, that the row of flat, prong-like fragments caught within the matting of clod and root was just another crumbling garden fork. Jack had pushed at the stump, rocking it like a loose molar so that there came the dull snap of fine root and hiss of falling dry soil onto the metal spade wedged beneath, and then came a thud, something larger hitting the spade – the old garden fork, he'd presumed – and as he stooped to retrieve it, he realised instead that he was looking at a segment of ribcage, that the gnarled knots of wood below were vertebrae, and he saw then the profile of a jaw lodged near the bottom right with its incomplete row of teeth still intact, and above that, the partial rounding of a skull, a portion of its eye socket visible and packed with earth, and he shouted then, hands leaping reflexively from the stump like a startled cat as he shunted it away sharply, the root ball lifting a little higher so that the bones seemed to judder alive and find one another, as if clambering from the ground to meet him.

“Bloody hell!”

“What?” Walter said. He was raking leaves at the top end of the garden.

Jack swore again, louder.

“Did you find a slow worm?” Walter put down the rake and walked over.

“Because it's not a snake, you know. It's just a lizard without legs.”

“No,” Jack said. “I don't know. It's a person. Bones.”

“Oh.” Walter peered into the hole. “Look at that. How long do you think it's been there?”

“We should call the police.”

“No.” Walter waved his hands, dismissively. “No way.”

“We have to tell someone. We can't just ignore remains.”

“No.” Walter was shaking his head. “You've made enough mess for one day. Your poor granny, all the work she put into this garden, I'm not having some bozos come in and ruin it even more, turning my home – Oonagh's home – into a crime scene. And for what? Some bones that'll turn out to be ancient anyway. Out of the question.” He turned to Jack then, jabbed his finger at the air between them. “Don't you dare go behind my back again.”

“Again?” Jack said.

But Walter only turned away from Jack and looked at the bones. "I mean it," he said quietly, bitterly. "You've done more than enough damage already."

It struck him that his grandpa somehow already knew about the development job, that Walter's behaviour today was all because Jack had let him down in working for the enemy. A feeling then, that he'd not had in a long time: it was as if he were a boy again about to be scolded for a prank gone too far maybe, but Walter was preoccupied with the bones, and nothing came.

The bones were undoubtedly very old, had been underground so long that they'd taken on a patina similar to the soil around them, more brown than white. They were at least as old as the tree that had grown on top of them, which was, itself, centuries in age; he'd found the growth rings so numerous and so concentrated that in places one faint line could not be distinguished from another. All the police's efforts then – all that destruction Walter was afraid of – would likely be for nought but acquiring remains the police could do nothing with, and that might sit in a bag forgotten on a dusty storage shelf until someone eventually, pitilessly, got rid of them. It would do no one any good to report the skeleton, and the longer they stood there in thick silence like that, the clearer Jack came to understand that he would not tell anyone.

It didn't take Jack long to rebury the bones, carefully replacing the stump and packing all the excavated soil back around it. He washed the dirt from his hands after, glancing out of the upstairs bathroom window as he did to seek out what was left of the tree. From this height, the top of the stump looked like an eye peering from behind a spy glass, with its blackened, rotten centre radiating out gradually into paler wood, the way a pupil sits within an iris. He half-expected it to blink, for the centre to rove around, drinking everything in.

On the darkened drive back to his flat in Norwich, his mind circled the thought of Walter knowing about his new contract. Someone at the allotment had found out, maybe, had approached Walter, outraged; he wondered whether his grandpa had defended him, if he'd explained that at the end of the day it was a job and Jack needed to work, and all the while feeling sick at the betrayal. It was only then that he realised he'd left his chainsaw behind at Walter's house, but he was nearly home now, and he didn't want to face his grandpa's mood again today.

*

The morning after, Jack was still in bed dozing – a little hungover from a night at the pub and debating whether he could be bothered to make himself breakfast – when his phone rang.

It was his grandpa.

“I think your granny is upset,” Walter said. “I think the tree has upset her.”

“Huh?” Jack sat back down on the bed, rubbing at his temple. “What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but.” Walter was speaking too quickly, the words skipping over Jack without sinking in. “I saw something I didn’t think was possible; it was incredible, really. And then I found a total mess downstairs this morning.”

“Can you slow down? Say it again.”

“Will you just please come round?”

On the drive, Jack debated whether this was one of his grandpa’s more elaborate tricks; last year, Walter pretended for the better part of a week that he’d bumped his head and turned French. He reprogrammed the TV in French, ate only baguettes and French cheeses when Jack was around, and spoke only in French to him over the phone (though this hadn’t lasted long because his grasp of the language was limited to a few tourist-centric phrases learned on holiday, so he resorted to French-accented English, influenced heavily by Inspector Clouseau).

When Jack arrived, Walter was waiting outside for him, holding some weeds plucked from the bed beside the door, their tendrils of fine roots hanging from his fist. “There’s coffee.”

Jack followed Walter inside. Everything looked just the same as it had the day before. “You said there was a mess?”

Walter pointed to the silver picture frame from the little hallway table that held a photograph of the family; Jack was just a boy in it. “The glass is gone,” he explained. “It was all over the floor when I got up this morning.” He sounded much calmer than he had on the phone, his voice flatter, as if he’d rehearsed what he was saying. “At first I thought maybe an animal had got in because the back door was wide open. You know how temperamental that latch is if I forget to lock it. There was soil all over the place, and bits of the garden blown in everywhere. The kitchen was a state, all the cupboards and fridge open, things strewn about— ”

“The fridge?” Jack said. “What animal was opening the fridge?”

“Well that’s the thing.” Walter continued into the kitchen. “I don’t think it was an animal, actually, because then I remembered what happened in the middle of the night.” He looked as though he were trying not to grin. “You aren’t going to believe this.”

Jack understood that this was Walter’s version of a peace offering: he’d pull Jack’s leg and then they could have a laugh together without having to address yesterday’s tension. It was a way to recalibrate things. The glass from the picture frame had probably been removed and stowed safely in a drawer somewhere. “Go on, then.” There were grounds of instant coffee waiting in two cups on the counter. Jack switched on the electric kettle, and it stirred noisily to life.

“Oonagh visited me.” Walter was smiling openly now. “I know how nonsense that sounds, I get it, but she was sat on the end of the bed while I was sleeping.”

“In a dream, you mean?”

“I saw her,” he continued. “It was dark, of course, and I wasn’t really awake, but I knew it was her. I could just sort of feel it, you see.” He said this self-consciously. “At first I thought maybe I was dreaming, but I’m sure now that I wasn’t.”

“You saw her ghost then?” Jack leant against the counter. “That’s what you’re saying?”

“I suppose it is.” Walter held up his hands, as if in disbelief. “I know how it sounds,” he said again, “But it was nice, actually.”

The kettle clicked off, and the hot water dissolved the coffee grounds.

“What do you think about that?” Walter said.

“If it was a nice experience, then that’s good.”

“You think I’m an old man losing my marbles.” Walter blew his coffee to cool it down. “But tell me this then: how did the house get in such a state if I just imagined her?”

Jack looked pointedly around. The only new mess to speak of was a dusting of soil near the sink, but that wasn’t unusual these days, since Walter was often at the allotment.

“Well,” Walter said, “It’s been tidied now, anyway. But it was Oonagh letting me know she wasn’t happy that her favourite tree has been cut down, you see, by making a tip of things.”

“Granny hated a mess though,” Jack said.

“Exactly,” Walter said, as if this proved his point.

“Well I’m glad.” The coffee was beginning to make Jack’s stomach sour. He wanted something to eat and to spend his day in front of the TV. He could get himself a takeaway for lunch on the drive home. “My chainsaw,” he said. “I forgot it here yesterday.”

“Did you?”

There was, Jack thought, something sly in the way he said it, and he knew that the prank was not yet over. “Alright. Where have you hidden it, then?”

“I haven’t,” Walter said. “I haven’t touched it.”

Jack searched outside first. He looked in the shed and among the wood they’d piled behind it, beneath the bushes and the back hedge, as if it were years ago again, and he was on a hunt at Easter. Walter trailed behind Jack while he looked in the kitchen cupboards and under the stairs where the Hoover and the tools were kept, behind the sofa in the living room, in the wardrobe upstairs and beneath the bed, and in the boxes in Oonagh’s old sewing room.

“I give up,” Jack announced. “Where is it?”

“It’s wherever you put it.”

“Come on,” he said. “Just tell me.”

“I don’t know where it is,” Walter insisted. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

He could see that Walter was tense.

“It didn’t just vanish into thin air.”

“You don’t think...I mean, the back door was wide open this morning. Maybe someone—”

“What? Stole a chainsaw and left everything else?” And as he said this, it occurred to Jack that perhaps Walter wasn’t playing a trick at all. If he knew about the development job, then he might have got rid of it. He’d been upset enough that he could have taken the chainsaw down to the allotment and given it to someone there, or maybe he’d have driven into town this morning and dropped it at a charity shop. But if Jack began making accusations, Walter would only get defensive and agitated, and it would only be a repeat of yesterday; far better to play along and feel things out that way. “If it’s stolen,” Jack said deliberately, “I’ll have to report it to the police.”

“Well.” Walter looked at the sewing table, seeming to contemplate this. “I suppose you will, but I don’t know what evidence they’ll be able to find. I’ve already cleaned up the place.”

Walter’s unhelpfulness irritated Jack. “So it’s just gone? It’s *actually* gone?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you. And quite frankly, I’m more concerned that I’ve been broken into.” Walter calmly crossed his arms. “So, actually, I think if you don’t phone the police, then I will.”

Jack was sat in the back garden, worry calcifying in his body. He couldn’t work without his chainsaw, but he hadn’t the money for another one, not at the professional grade he needed. He’d have to wait for the insurance to come through, which could take weeks, when he was due to start work in only a matter of days. But even with a police report to support his claim, he’d have to argue for compensation because it had been taken from his grandpa’s house; he’d only recently been reinsured and the policy had been worded very specifically about his tools having to be kept at a business premises or his own private residence, or else the claim would be void.

When it had become clear that Walter was definitely not in possession of the chainsaw, alarm, coupled with Jack’s hangover, had churned horribly acidic in his empty belly, and made him sick (though he’d brought up only a dribble of bile). Walter said that Jack looked *awfully green about the gills*, and insisted he get some fresh air to bring the colour back to his cheeks, while he fixed him something to line his stomach.

Jack lifted a cigarette shakily to his mouth now, the nicotine both soothing his nerves and making his nausea worse. Walter emerged from the house. He handed Jack a plate of plain toast and wafted at the smoke drifting thinly from the cigarette, so that it was duly put out, crushed beneath Jack’s shoe.

After a long silence, Walter cleared his throat. “I’ve had a thought. Maybe it wasn’t your Gran who visited me last night. Maybe it was the intruder I saw.”

Jack palmed at his forehead, sweat still clammy on his skin. “That’s disturbing.” He was finding it difficult to eat. His mouth too dry, so the toast had formed an unswallowable clot he held in his cheek.

“Well,” Walter gestured at the stump, “Maybe it was whoever that is, under there.”

“What?”

“I mean, it’s not so much more unbelievable, really, than Oonagh stopping by, is it? There was certainly *someone* with me last night.” Walter scratched his chest, as if absentmindedly. “Think about it. I bet that skeleton has spent the better part of centuries stuck beneath the weight of that tree, caught in its roots, unable to move. Like being in a prison. It was probably bored stiff. It probably had nothing to do but listen that whole time. Can you imagine? Years will have passed with nothing but the sound of rain drumming on the ground above, the distant wind or the crackle of soil freezing in winter, the gentle trickle of water seeping into the earth and being – what’s the word? – *effervesced* up the tree, and all around the slow burrow of roots and mycelium, the scrape of things tunnelling. And it must have been lonely, you know, terribly lonely. All that time with only some worms, maybe the odd earwig, or a mole colliding with its skull, and faint voices coming and going overhead, completely oblivious to it stuck down there. What an existence.” He shook his head, as if he couldn’t believe how sad it was.

When Jack was a child and easily bored or distressed, Walter used to distract him from a tantrum by suddenly, loudly, beginning to talk about a boy like Jack who was going on an adventure. He would say it to the room at large, as if it wasn’t directed at Jack at all, as if he didn’t even intend for Jack to hear it, which somehow made it all the more enticing, so that Jack would be helpless to its magnetism, distracted by it to the extent that he soon disregarded whatever else he’d been doing and listened with rapt attention. It was a power that Walter had continued to wield, this consolation-making, this soothing, even as Jack grew into young adulthood and no longer needed it. It was obvious that this was what his grandpa was doing now, unable or perhaps unsure of how to comfort in any other way. But Jack was not a child anymore, and this was not some juvenile outburst.

“And then imagine its shock,” Walter continued, still looking only at the stump, “When one day there was suddenly a great vibrating racket that travelled all the way down the tree and resonated through its bones, and as the sound got louder and closer, the roots that had wormed through the skeleton’s ribs and eye sockets, its pelvic bone, began to pulse, and then the packed soil began to lift, and the tree became lighter and lighter until finally it was hardly any weight at all. And then, after centuries without disturbance, a spade slicing across the righthand side of its ribcage, and the splitting of roots gone soft with decay, and for the first time in who

knows how long, the sunlight, dazzling and warm on its bones, blinding even. It might have been a relief when the stump was replaced again, and all that soil packed around it.

“Of course the stump was much less heavy now, but I imagine it was still a struggle to get out from under it. Maybe it could only move its thumb bone or half its left foot. It would’ve been quite laborious, bit by bit, it having to excavate its way out. How impatient would you be, after all that time? Finally, late last night, it must have had just enough room to leverage against the stump and push, hinging it back like a trap door. Freedom! And then do you know what it probably did? It probably got slowly to its feet and stood victorious over that stump – which had for so long, really, been its gaoler, lying dead now at its feet. It was probably curious enough to run its fingerbones along the wood, and feel the ridges carved into it from the chainsaw. It probably thought those marks were from a row of scraping teeth. And it would’ve been difficult, walking again after so long, one small step after another, cracking stiffly with every movement, and grass tickling between the small bones of its feet. Imagine it being confronted with itself after that kind of time, reflected in the dark glass of the kitchen window; it probably stood there a while, marvelling. And then at the door, it must have used its thinnest finger like a key, catching the mechanism on the tip of its bone and turning until it clicked.

“It would’ve been such a long time since the skeleton was inside a home, so it probably decided it was going to enjoy itself and have a good nose around. I mean, I know it *did*, because I found the mess. It knocked all the tins from the cupboard shelves, poured out oats, and bags of flour and sugar, and unravelled wax paper, upturned the fruit bowl so that all the apples rolled from the counter. I had to take them to the allotment and put them in the compost this morning. And then, while it was doing all that, it must have heard a noise from upstairs—” At this, Walter made a loud snoring sound. “And that’s how it’ll have found me. Which was when I’d have mistaken it for Oonagh, because I was all bleary-eyed from being woken up in the middle of the night. Who knows how long it sat there, watching me; I wonder what it made of me, you know, my living form and such. It probably recognised my voice as I snored. I mean, I’d have been its most constant companion over all these years.

“The stairs were worse going down, I imagine; they certainly are for my creaky old bones these days. And there, by the front door, is where it’ll have noticed

the chainsaw. Though it wouldn't have known that's what it was, of course. To the skeleton, it was probably a very strange looking thing indeed, a box the size of a small chest, with a protruding tongue, and sharply pointed triangles all around the edge. It'll have been thinking what a puzzling object it was, might have touched the metal teeth and thought they were like the teeth of a key. *Hang on*, it'll have thought, *a key?* The *key!* Its liberator! And I bet you, the skeleton picked up the chainsaw, and as it spun round that's when it hit the table – which sent the picture frame flying – and back down the hall it went with its prize, out the door into the garden. And as the birds began to rouse, it returned to lie again beneath the stump with what it had found, because it was likely thinking to itself that a key is quite a handy thing to have, should it ever find itself trapped for so long again. Who can blame it, really. Poor thing was probably in need of some security, some assurance after all that time. I certainly don't mind that."

"Well I do." Jack had been sat there quietly listening with growing agitation to this silly fiction, and all the while each nonsense detail provoking in him even more frustration, even more anger.

Walter looked at him; it was clear this was not the reaction he'd expected.

"Do you understand that I can't work now?" Jack said. "That I've just lost weeks of pay, and you tell me a fairy tale like it's not actually a big deal? Like it's not important to my life? Can you see why that's insensitive?"

"It wasn't meant to be."

"But how is that supposed to help?" Jack challenged.

Walter looked out across the meadow, perhaps so that Jack couldn't see how stung he was. When at last he acknowledged his grandson again, he said flatly, "I can't help you the way you want me to. I can't lend you any money."

"You *won't*," Jack corrected, "Because of the development. Because you know that I had a job starting there and now I can't do it, and you're happy about that."

Walter got slowly to his feet, still looking ahead, as though he would not allow himself to meet Jack's eye. "I didn't say I was happy," he said quietly. And then he turned and walked inside the house, leaving Jack with nothing but a useless story.

Emir

Emir had already been at the allotment for hours, arriving in the earliest morning and the quiet, before the birds had even begun to stir. It was a precise business, collecting saffron, one that required tweezers, a bowl, and patience. The crocuses blossomed at dawn and wilted as the day progressed, and the stigma had to be plucked one by one just as the flowers were beginning to open. If he harvested too early, the stigmas wouldn't be developed enough; too late, and they'd be shrivelled. It was his grandmother, Nazanin, who'd taught him it was best to pick before the sun came up. He'd been sent to spend the summer with her when he was twelve, during his parents' divorce.

He didn't understand Iranian, and she didn't speak English, but gradually, the feelings of affection and close connection that passed between them transcended language, and came so easily and surely it was as if it had been buried within their shared DNA, waiting only for a season of their prolonged company to emerge, luminously and in full bloom. What he remembered most of those weeks now was warmth in all of its incarnations, and the distinctive aroma of saffron as Nazanin cooked rice on the little stove by the window that overlooked her small garden. She had been affection personified, her faraway home a haven from his parents bickering, and from the unpleasantness of such a permanent and wounding upheaval of their life together. But the time came too soon for him to return to England ahead of the new school year. His grandmother wept at the airport (and it *was* weeping, more desperate than crying), as she kissed his head over and over, not wanting to let him go, and the smell of her hair, like cooking spices, like saffron. He'd tried his best to console her, communicate his promise to return, but without knowing the words it was nothing more than a series of ineffectual gestures. He couldn't have known that he'd never get the chance to see her again after that. But he recognised traces of her

now in the saffron crocus – the solace of their aroma, the vibrant beauty in their colour – and in this small way she felt alive to him again.

Sunrise over the allotment had been a layer cake of turquoise beneath a creamy electric orange, the softest pink, and then, edging the horizon, the most intense yellow sun, before the sky seemed to become one large cauliflowery cloud, all blush and mauve and lovely, and by the time Paul and Mr Thatcher had arrived, the sky was bright and Emir had a small bowl of fiery red saffron, ready to be taken home and dried. Norfolk, he'd discovered, was a surprisingly hospitable place to grow saffron, on account of it being the driest county in the U.K. This year, in particular, had been exceptionally hot and without rain, and the allotment had seen a glut of produce: tomatoes ripening on the vine and more courgettes and runner beans than anyone knew what to do with; heat-loving crops abounded, like cucumbers and sweet corn and peppers and aubergine; Jules even managed to grow melons. But Emir had heard it forecasted that the dry spell was ending, that rain would arrive soon (there'd been a taste of it only recently, though it had been more a mist than a proper rain), and he hoped the weather would instead continue to cooperate a little longer, so that he could harvest every morning until all the crocuses had finished with their flowering. The bulbs were susceptible to rot if the ground wasn't kept dry, and a substantial enough rainfall might damage the delicate purple flowers before the saffron was fully developed. He placed the his harvest on the small potting table in his shed, and then went to check on Myrtle.

Myrtle was Hurley's tortoise. She was kept at the allotment and allowed to wander round and munch on everyone's greens when she wanted to stretch her legs; some people had built tiny Myrtle-proof fences round their plots to keep her from eating their lettuce. She'd been hibernating in an old cardboard box since before Hurley's death, and Emir had been putting rocket leaves in there just in case she woke up, because she preferred pillaging that over mixed salad; there were now sad, wilted piles around her shell. He wondered sometimes if she would know that Hurley had died when she eventually stirred, and if she'd miss him. He wondered if tortoises were capable of grief.

He joined Paul and Mr Thatcher at Paul's plot. Paul made them all tea using the camp stove he kept in his shed and passed around a packet of chocolate digestives. It was Emir's understanding that Paul had made himself the unofficial head of the allotment some years back, when he set out a circle of white plastic

chairs like Arthur's Round Table, making his plot the place to gather for a cup of tea; he'd even fashioned a barbecue out of an old washing machine drum. Paul asked how the saffron was coming along and Emir shared his worry about the rain, and then they all complained about British weather doing the opposite of what was wanted of it, while covering themselves with biscuit crumbs. Mr Thatcher pinched some tobacco from a tin and stuffed his pipe. He insisted that people call him Mr Thatcher instead of his first name, Richard, so Paul liked to call him Dickie or sometimes Ritchie Rich behind his back. Not because he *was* rich, at least not that Emir knew, but because he always wore a tweed gilet, and slacks tucked into his brand-name wellies, and he was the only person they'd ever seen who actually used a smoking pipe.

Emir looked over at Hurley's growing space, at the neat rows of winter vegetables still in the ground. "What's going to happen to his plot?"

"Well." Paul sat back in his chair. "The council'll give it to the next person on the list."

The allotment itself wasn't very big, only twelve half-plots measuring 5 poles each in size, and because it was the only one between Heskett and the nearby market town – which was where Emir himself worked as a primary school teacher – there was always a waiting list.

"They'll inherit a good crop then," Emir said.

"Council comes and bulldozes the lot, so it's a blank canvas for the next tenant."

"But that's wasteful."

"But what about his things?" Mr Thatcher said. "His tools?"

"His personal effects," Emir added.

"Council takes what they want, destroys the rest."

"Can they do that?" Emir said. "Can they just *take* things?"

"I've seen it happen before."

"But that's outrageous." Mr Thatcher took a drag on his pipe and puffed, "If that's not robbery then I don't know what is."

Paul shrugged. "Robbery or not my friend," and then he held up a biscuit to show them all, and put the whole thing in his mouth, "it's how the cookie crumbles," he said.

"What should we do? Hide his things from the council?"

“And do what with them?” Mr Thatcher said.

“Use ’em,” Paul said.

“But then aren’t we just taking his things?” Emir said.

“It’s either us that does or the council.”

“Jones here has a point.” Mr Thatcher gestured emphatically at Paul with the stem of his pipe. “A damn good point. Why should the council, who didn’t even know the man, steal his tools? Hurley would want them to go to the people he knew.”

“That’s right,” Paul got to his feet, dusting bits of biscuit off his clothes. “He’s got a brand-new petrol rotavator in that shed over there. Very expensive. Something he knew I couldn’t afford on my salary, but he was telling me just before he died that I should get one, so I think he’d probably want me to, ah, make use of it.” He nodded at Mr Thatcher, “And I know you’ve had your eye on that tumbling compost barrel.”

Mr Thatcher coyly placed the pipe between his teeth. “I can’t deny it.” It was as close to giddiness as Emir had ever heard from him.

“I think we’re all forgetting his family.” Emir said. “What if they want his things?”

“They’ve no idea what he’s got,” Paul said, dismissively.

“So you think,” Emir said. “But we’ve got no way of knowing what they know about.”

“Listen, he wasn’t particularly close with them.” Paul had picked up his garden hoe and was now leaning on it as if it were a staff. “I highly doubt they even knew he had a plot.”

“He told me once that he grew peas for his daughter; she’d have known.”

“Sure,” Paul said this as if it was information he’d already had. “But the *rest* of them.”

“Well,” Mr Thatcher said slowly. “I’ve personally never seen anyone here with him. Have you?”

Emir shook his head, no.

“And we know that he lived alone.”

“And his daughter lives in Lincolnshire,” Emir countered. “It’s not far.”

“I thought she lived in Leeds,” Paul said.

“I’m sure Hurley told me once his brother lives out west,” Mr Thatcher said.

“What about the ex-wife?” Paul said.

“She’s Polish, I think.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Emir said.

“Brexit. They’ve got to leave, don’t they.”

Emir assumed this was a tasteless joke, but then Paul looked awkwardly, apprehensively, at him.

Mr Thatcher saw Paul looking at Emir, and said, “What’s the problem? I’m stating a fact.” And then he too looked at Emir.

It occurred to him that each of these men expected something from him, a reaction, even though Emir himself was from originally Sheffield, and his parents were not Polish.

Then Paul gestured at Emir with his hoe, as if to say, *I’ll handle this one, mate*. “Look, she obviously doesn’t live here in Hesketh or we’d have seen her, so moving on then.”

“Well in that case,” Mr Thatcher said, “It seems to me that it’s unlikely the family will be aware of exactly what Hurley owned with regards to his plot. And it therefore seems to me also, that they won’t know if there’s anything missing, should they come to clear it out.”

“If they come,” Paul said.

“If they come,” Mr Thatcher agreed. “And we know that the council will arrive regardless to pillage poor Hurley’s belongings. So I think we *all* know, really, what the best course of action to take is.”

Paul said, “I was actually just about to suggest that myself, but thought I’d let you continue, ah” – he made a rolling motion with his hand – “Onward and that.”

“What about Myrtle?” Emir said.

Mr Thatcher quipped, “I doubt she’ll care.” And then guffawed at his own joke.

“Pop her in the meadow?” Paul suggested.

“But the development’s started up again,” Emir said. “What if she gets crushed by a falling tree or a digger?”

“The council will probably give her to the RSPCA,” Mr Thatcher said. “Sorted.”

The thought of Myrtle living out her days in a miserable cage without any grass beneath her feet or rocket to munch felt to Emir like an unkindness. “I’ll take

her,” he said. “I’ll take Myrtle.” He could show her to his class, perhaps build a lesson around her once they were finished with their foray into local history, which was mostly dull, truth be told, apart from the witch trials, though he’d had to gloss over most of it for the kids, particularly the bit about how the accused were stripped naked in front of a jeering mob, and thrown into the river with their thumbs bound tightly to their toes before being hung by the neck until dead.

“Fine.” Mr Thatcher said. “I think that’s it settled then. We’ll reallocate Hurley’s stuff. I’ll take the compost barrel, Jones will have the rotavator, and the tortoise has a home with you.”

“Hold on,” Emir said. “I mean, those tools are probably worth hundreds of pounds.”

“I agree,” Paul said. “We don’t do this unless it’s equal.”

“Fine by me,” Mr Thatcher said. “You’ll just have to take something more valuable than, Salami.”

“*Salmani*,” Paul corrected. Emir appreciated this, because it was uncomfortable and, he felt, could come off a bit snobby to correct someone himself.

Mr Thatcher held up his palms. “What do you need?”

“I don’t know.” Emir looked at his plot. “I just need it not to rain, I guess.”

“So have the greenhouse,” Paul said.

“Excellent idea, Jones,” Mr Thatcher said.

That Emir should come into possession of a greenhouse filled him with a sudden enthusiasm, like a timelapse of a tight bud blossoming eagerly into an open flower. It would not cover all of his crocus, it was not so large as that, but it would save a good amount from ruin if it chucked it down, and that was enough. “Alright,” he said. “It can go directly on my plot.”

“Brilliant.” Paul struck his hoe against the ground, as if it were a judge’s gavel. “Now it’s *properly* settled. A rotavator for me, compost barrel for Mr Thatcher, and Emir has the greenhouse and custody of Myrtle.”

“What about everything else?” Mr Thatcher said.

“We should share it with the others,” Emir suggested.

“Correct,” Paul said, as if Emir were on a game show. “We divvy it up. We’re not greedy.”

“Listen,” Emir said. “If we’re going to take Hurley’s things, then I think we at least have to pay our respects to the man.”

“Honour his memory.” Mr Thatcher nodded. “Good idea. Classy.”

They all agreed it was the right thing to do. Paul sent out a text to the allotment WhatsApp, so that the other plot holders could not accuse them of leaving anyone out: *Dear cultivating comrades, an informal service will be held in memory of our sadly departed friend, Hurley, today at 11am (regrets for the short notice). Tea and biscuits provided.* Simon, of Simon and Geoff, responded first, asking if Paul could clarify what he meant by ‘service’, because that implied the vicar would be there, which would not be very informal. Paul answered that Eileen would *not* be there, and that all he’d meant was they were just going to say a few words in Hurley’s memory. Simon replied that, anyway, they couldn’t make it. Walter also said he couldn’t go because he was still dealing with an issue at home, as did Jules, who was away in Somerset, and Helen, who explained she’d have appreciated more warning because neither she nor her third husband, whose name no one could remember, could come now. Mr Thatcher wrote that he’d most definitely attend, though his RSVP was for show more than anything, since he was of course already there. The others didn’t respond at all, which Paul told Emir privately he found inconsiderate.

The three of them sat at Paul’s plot and made small talk about rainbow chard and the horrors of tomato blight until the appropriate time was finally upon them.

“Well then.” Mr Thatcher checked his watch. “I don’t think anyone else is bothering. How shall we do this?”

Paul shrugged. “I suppose we just go round and say something nice about him.”

“Is that it?” Emir said. “I thought it would be more of an event.”

It was, Paul had to admit, a bit pathetic.

“We could bury something in his place,” Mr Thatcher suggested.

“That’s an idea,” Emir said. “It might feel a bit less...sparse.”

Emir looked at Paul, who was bouncing his leg in a restless way. “You lot’ve read my mind because I was just thinking that myself,” he said. “I was just about to say it.”

And that was how they’d decided on the Brussel sprouts, because Hurley himself loved to eat Brussel sprouts and was the only person on the allotment other than Walter to actually grow them. They cut the largest stalk from his plot and chose

a suitable place next to his greenhouse, because Emir had often seen Hurley standing in that spot, gazing proudly over what he'd grown while remarking on how neat and weed-free he kept it.

After months of drought, the ground was dry and hard, and difficult to pass a spade through. Even Paul, who was the largest of them, and was himself shaped like a spade, had to stamp repeatedly on the blade to get anywhere. Paul had insisted that because he was the one who'd called everyone there, he should dig the hole himself, which meant Emir had to stand watching uselessly in prolonged silence until Paul had made it symmetrical enough. Mr Thatcher held the Brussel sprouts, which were longer than his arm with dozens of tight globes winding up the stalk, and large floppy leaves that hid most of his face and torso.

When enough time had passed that the silence began to make him feel self-conscious, Emir gestured to the sprouts and joked, "I suppose it looks a bit like him if you squint."

Mr Thatcher tutted. "This isn't the occasion for clowning, Salmon."

"Salmani," Paul said.

When Paul finally announced that the grave was ready, Mr Thatcher carefully laid the stalk, tucking in its leaves like a shroud so that nothing poked out. Paul removed his flat cap, the sun reflecting off his balding head. "A damn good grower, Hurley. His heirloom tomatoes never split; not a single one in all the years he grew 'em. He was the king of tomatoes."

"Hear, hear," Mr Thatcher said.

"I only wish I'd asked him what the secret is." Paul threw in a clump of soil.

Emir thought it was probably just enough sun and fertilizer, like everything else. "Hurley..." he hesitated. He tried to think of something suitable to say but found himself unable to recall in that moment any interactions with Hurley at all, couldn't think of anything other than the fact that he was standing there, dumbly, saying nothing, as though all his thoughts had evaporated completely, and so he only said, "He was very kind and a very good grower. And he was very good to Myrtle." Then he threw in his dirt, and it sprayed across the sprouts.

Mr Thatcher stepped forward, clearing his throat. He then delivered a ten-minute monologue about the various interactions he'd had with Hurley at the allotment, some of which didn't sound like they'd actually involved Hurley at all,

particularly the anecdote about aubergines. When at last he scattered his clump of soil and crossed himself, Paul and Emir filled the grave in.

Then it was decided that, because the council could turn up at any time, it was best if they got Hurley's things all sorted then and there.

It was an odd sensation, being in someone else's shed, which was so unlike his own and so particular to Hurley. Above all, Emir could not stop thinking that he was standing in the shed of a dead man, rooting among his things, things that until recently Hurley himself had touched, as if the items themselves held part of Hurley and were in a way alive with him, like some strange entity. It felt clandestine and a bit electrifying, not least because he was there to disturb, to strip it of everything. He wondered, as he piled a hose and various small tools into a crate, if this were actually what Hurley would want, to be separated and scattered amongst them like this. When Nazanin had died, Emir was the main beneficiary in her will. He was, by that point, in his teens and had been shocked to learn that what little she'd had went to him, with only trinkets left to his uncle and father, and nothing to his cousins, who were, understandably, upset with him, even though he was just as bewildered as everyone else. But more than anything, he'd felt an overwhelming guilt. It had been him that she'd chosen, that she'd bestowed her life to in death, and what had he left her with, other than a broken promise, a duty unfulfilled?

In his periphery, a shadowy figure in the back corner of the shed made him freeze, made his skin prickle unpleasantly. It was tall and dark and alarming, and it felt to Emir that any second it would reach out a horrible arm and seize him. But then Paul appeared at the door, and the spell was broken, and he turned and saw that the spectre was nothing more than a raincoat hanging by its hood.

"Bit spooky in here, eh?" said Paul.

"What's the hold-up?" Mr Thatcher said, from outside.

"Nothing." Emir lifted the crate of things he'd collected. "Just getting organised."

Mr Thatcher made an impatient noise. "Well let's get on with it."

As they emptied Hurley's plot, it occurred to Emir that they must have looked like ants, darting back and forth, their arms laden with netting and tools and watering cans.

Geoff, of Simon and Geoff, showed up about ten minutes in. “Simon only just mentioned about Hurley’s thing...” He trailed off at the sight of Mr Thatcher, coming out of Hurley’s shed with a stack of seed trays and adding it to the large pile they’d accumulated. Paul explained about the council.

Geoff took the wheelbarrow and incinerator.

“Walter could probably do with some of the pea canes,” Paul said. “And the cold frame, bless him.”

They left the horticultural fleece folded thickly beneath a pair of expensive Japanese secateurs at Jules’ plot and carried the raised beds over to Helen’s. Paul also took the trowels, so his two boys didn’t have to dig with their hands if they came along with him. He said the others didn’t deserve anything because they’d ignored his message.

“What about all these vegetables?” Mr Thatcher said. “Seems a shame to let them rot.”

So they took those too, pulled all the leeks and cabbages until there was nothing left in the ground. Paul distributed these evenly amongst them, like a king giving hand-outs to peasants.

“No sprouts for me, thanks,” Emir said. “But I’ll take one of the leaves for Myrtle.”

“Poor Myrtle,” Geoff said.

Myrtle hadn’t stirred from her hibernation despite the commotion around her. Emir carefully moved her cardboard box from Hurley’s shed to his and set her next to his bowl of saffron; there was hardly enough room on the potting table. He draped the large leaf across her shell like a blanket, then closed the box again. He would earn his new greenhouse by taking care of her. He’d go into town tomorrow and buy some straw to help keep her warm, and when she awoke, whenever that might be, he’d see if she might like a thread of saffron to eat. He felt regretful that he’d not been able to think of anything to say about Hurley earlier, that he’d not given him a decent goodbye. They’d had numerous conversations, some quite long, but even now he could not recall what a single one had been about. Brussel sprouts, maybe.

Geoff knocked on the doorjamb. “I’m off,” he said, and then continued to stand there. “That’s a nice old greenhouse you’re getting. Hurley made it all himself, actually, the year he got his plot. Cut the metal and glass to his own specifications and everything, so it’s one-of-a-kind.”

“Really?” Emir felt a bit guilty then, that he’d not even really looked at it before, that he didn’t even realise Hurley hadn’t bought it from a garden centre.

“Course it’s a bit rusted now.” Geoff leaned in and said, quite conspiratorially, “If you ever want to part with it, let *me* know first, okay?” He peered round the outside of the shed at the others. “You should probably get back out there. Things are getting a bit heated.”

Emir looked through the little shed window. It was clear Paul and Mr Thatcher were having an animated discussion, because Paul was waving his arms around, gesturing at the greenhouse and then pointing over to Emir’s plot. Mr Thatcher was shaking his head, smoke billowing as he drew continuously on his pipe. In his hurry to get outside, Emir nearly knocked his bowl of saffron to the floor, which made his heart lurch, and he moved it as far from the edge of the table as Myrtle’s box would allow.

There was a thick pane of glass, thicker than he’d expected, now propped against Emir’s shed, and one missing from the side of the greenhouse.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Paul was saying, “To do all that only to move the thing a few yards.”

“You *cannot* just pick up a greenhouse and move it,” Mr Thatcher said, the pipe clenched between his teeth. “It simply cannot happen.”

“Maybe not any great distance—”

“No distance. There is no distance in which it can be done.”

“What’s going on?” Emir said. “Why are you both so red?”

Mr Thatcher looked at Emir as though he wanted to smack him. “I AM. TRYING. TO EXPLAIN TO JONES. THAT ONE CANNOT JUST” – he mimed picking something up on the left of him and then putting down on his right – “A GREENHOUSE.”

“Well obviously we won’t just” – Paul mimicked what Mr Thatcher had just done. “Obviously we won’t do that. But it doesn’t make sense to spend all day taking it completely apart and then rebuilding it when it’s only just going right there. No sense *at all*.”

“Okay.” Emir adopted the same diplomatic tone he used on the nine-year-olds he taught when they were squabbling. “Let’s just all calm down and think for a moment. I’m sure there’s an efficient and safe way to do this.”

“Listen,” Mr Thatcher said, “I know exactly how to deconstruct and reconstruct this. It’ll take no time at all if I direct every—”

“Here we go,” Paul shouted. “I *knew* it. You’ve wanted to run the show all day.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” bellowed Mr Thatcher.

“You can’t stand that I’m head of the allotment.” Paul jabbed a finger at him. “You’ve been itching to usurp me and now you think you’ve got your chance, eh, Dickie? Shame on you for exploiting the death of poor old Hurley for political gain.”

“How dare you!” It was Mr Thatcher’s turn to jab now. “You *aren’t* the head of the bloody allotment! There *is* no bloody head of the bloody allotment!”

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Emir said. “We are.” He did not actually have a plan. “Going to...we’re going to deconstruct the top half of the greenhouse, and then move the bottom half as one piece. There.” He crossed his arms, hoping it might make him appear like he knew something about what he was suggesting. “Compromise.”

“Excuse me?”

She’d appeared as if from nowhere. What struck him first was just how pale she was; he’d never seen anyone so pale as this woman. And this, combined with the fact she wore a long black dress that looked sort of Victorian, had him consider, for the briefest moment, the possibility that she was a phantom. He might not have been the only one, either, because Mr Thatcher’s pipe fell right out of his mouth.

“I’m looking for Leonard Hurley’s space.” She tried to arrange her long, styled hair over one shoulder to keep it from ruining in the breeze, but pieces of it were coming undone and blowing into her face. “I’m his daughter.”

Emir was fairly certain that he heard Mr Thatcher whisper, “Well, shit,” as he retrieved his pipe.

For too long, none of them said anything else. The shame of what they’d done shrouded Emir with a swiftness he’d not experienced since teenagerhood. What were the chances that after three weeks of nothing, someone would come looking for Hurley’s belongings the same day, the same hour, they were taking them?

“He might have gone by Len?” she offered. “The council said it’s plot C, but none of them are labelled.” She gestured around the empty allotment, frowned expectantly at them.

Paul cleared his throat a bit too loudly. “Yeah, that’s, um, that’s this one right here.”

She looked at the newly emptied soil, at the three neat piles of sprouts and leeks they had set aside, and at Hurley’s shed door, wide open. And then she looked at all of them, gathered at Hurley’s greenhouse with its missing glass panel, and at the conspicuous mound of dirt near Emir’s feet, which was of course where they’d buried the token of Hurley.

It was clear that she was trying to make sense of just what she was seeing, but Emir could not bring himself to say anything to help her, too stunned by their rotten luck and his guilt.

“Whose is this plot?” She pointed toward the pane of glass leaning against Emir’s shed.

He thought perhaps that none of them would answer, that they would all stand there, mute and dumb and staring until finally she left. But then, out the corner of his eye, he caught a movement toward him from Mr Thatcher, and he knew that he’d been betrayed.

“And who are you?” she asked Emir.

He stepped forward, extending his hand, as he mumbled his name.

She hesitated, but stretched her arm out toward him without moving her feet, leaning in so that she could reach his hand briefly, before straightening again.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” he said. “I’m really very sorry.”

She nodded. “Did you know him well?” The cheery façade had slipped from her.

“Sort of,” Paul said. “I mean, he was here all the time.”

This seemed to be the wrong thing to say, because she scowled and looked around again. “What’s going on here?”

“We had a memorial for him,” Emir said. And then, because he thought she’d appreciate it, he added, “We would’ve invited you, but we didn’t know how to contact you.”

“I’ve been at his house for the last two weeks,” she said curtly. “So you can’t have tried very hard, can you.” And then she put her hand to her mouth and looked to the ground, and made a noise, like a hiccup or a sob. Mr Thatcher moved as if to soothe her, but she held up her other palm to stop him. When she spoke again it was with a weary exasperation. “So you didn’t know him very well but you had a

memorial.” She was shaking her head. “Sounds about the same as me then.” She said this bitterly, more to herself than to them. “I don’t know.” She looked at Emir with disbelief, could not seem to stop shaking her head. “I don’t know what I’m doing this for.”

Emir saw clearly that there was anger in her face, but more than that, he recognised the acute and tremendous pain that trails profound loss like a dread phantom.

“He mentioned you,” Emir said then. “He talked about you a lot actually.” That last bit was in fact a lie; Hurley had not been much of a talker at all, now that Emir really thought about it, which was probably why he’d not been able to recall anything Hurley had said. The conversations they’d had tended to be one-sided, and Hurley usually expressed his opinion in the form of grunts or sometimes laughter, which Emir remembered had been a distinctive and peculiar kind of laugh, because it sounded a bit like yowling cat. The woman was staring at him, perhaps deciding whether or not to believe it, so he took a chance and made a guess. “Said he grew peas because you liked them.”

Her face softened a fraction. “We grew them together when I was really little. I never saw much of him after that actually; I don’t think he was interested when I was a teenager.” She must have realised then she was sharing intimacies that she perhaps wanted to keep private, because she looked away. She inhaled sharply and held it, and when she let it go again, it came out jagged. “This whole situation is just so...” She pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose and closed her eyes, as if willing herself not to cry. “I didn’t even know he liked tortoises, but there’s a massive stack of tortoise books at his house that now *I* have to deal with, that I have to take to donate somewhere. *And* there’s figurines. *Figurines*, for God’s sake!”

Emir could, at least, explain this. “Myrtle.”

“Mm?” She sniffed. Her nose had become pink at the end, and there was a clear stream of snot running into her mouth, but she didn’t bother to wipe it away.

“His tortoise,” Mr Thatcher said.

“What?”

“Myrtle,” Paul said. “His tortoise.”

“What tortoise?”

And then, because she looked even more confused, Emir said, “He has a tortoise called Myrtle.”

As strange look came over her then, and she said slowly, "Myrtle is *my* name."

"Well," Mr Thatcher said awkwardly. "That's...interesting, isn't it."

"I don't understand." Myrtle-2 put her hands to her head, bunching her hair in her fingers. "What does that mean? Why would he do that?"

"I don't know." Emir wondered if he should get her some water, but some people were funny about drinking the water that came from a garden hose.

"Oh my God," she said, more to herself than to them. "He called it *Myrtle*?"

Emir looked at Paul, who shrugged, and then back at her. "Do you want to see?" he said.

They all crowded into Emir's shed, which was not an easy thing to do considering its size, and he opened the large box that held the tortoise.

Myrtle-2 peered in at Myrtle-1, blinked hard a few times, and let out a wail. "Oh no," she sobbed, "Is it dead too?"

"She's hibernating," he said, "She's asleep."

"*She*," Myrtle-2 whispered. She wiped her face on her sleeve. "Why's she got a leaf on her?"

Paul and Mr Thatcher peered quizzically into the box.

"We'll leave you two alone," Emir said, and ushered the others out.

They gathered again at Paul's plot, the three of them.

"It is weird," Paul said quietly. "Naming his tortoise after her like that, when he didn't have much to do with her."

"That's what I was just thinking," Mr Thatcher said. "I was just about to say that."

"I don't think it's weird." Emir slid lower in his chair, so that his neck was resting against it. "People name things after people who're important all the time."

Paul put the kettle on.

Geoff came hurrying across the allotment then, waving his hand at them. "Simon's only just told me," he shouted. "The wally! Apparently the daughter's here clearing out Hurley's house. Says he knows 'cause she asked him when bin day is."

They gestured frantically, all of them, that he should stop shouting, but he must have mistaken their furious waving to mean that they couldn't hear him, because he only continued, louder now. "Do you think she'll come here? Will she want his incinerator?"

When he reached them, they explained in furtive voices to him about Myrtle-2 and how she was now in the shed with Myrtle-1.

Geoff looked mortified, and whispered, "Do you think she heard me?"

Paul, who was aiming a teabag at a mug like he was at a beanbag toss, hissed. "I don't see how she couldn't."

"Some people think of their pets as children," Mr Thatcher mused. "So in a weird way that could make them like step-sisters who have the same name."

Emir thought that was a strange thing to say.

When Myrtle-2 emerged, she was carrying the cardboard box. It was clear she'd been crying again because her eyes looked puffy and heavy, like the eyes in medieval paintings.

"I'm going to go now," she announced. "I'm taking Myrtle."

"Oh," Emir said. It made sense, of course, it was right that she should have something. But in truth he'd not thought about the possibility that he might lose Myrtle-1, and he felt a sadness at the tortoise's sudden departure.

She stared at them all, before looking again at Hurley's pillaged plot, and then left as abruptly as she'd come.

"Well that's a relief," Mr Thatcher said, after she'd closed the gate behind her. "I thought she was going to kick off."

"As soon as we've had this cuppa, we should get the greenhouse moved and be done with it before anyone else can come sniffing around," Paul said.

"Agreed. Got any more digestives?"

The biscuits were passed round.

Geoff took one, and said, "I don't think she even noticed I was here." He sounded a bit hurt.

There came a sudden, violent noise then, as the greenhouse collapsed in on itself, the glass shattering as panes collided and exploded into fine pieces, and the rusted metal frame bending horribly and sounding for all the world, Emir was sure, like Hurley's yowling laugh.

The knocker on Hurley's front door was a brass trowel, and Emir struck it against the peeling green paint three times. He'd got the house number from Geoff shortly after the Myrtles left the allotment, and then walked over, standing now on the step next

to an autumnal tangle of plump rosehips and yellowed leaves. He didn't wait long before the door swung open, and Myrtle-2 stared at him, confusion plain on her face.

"I forgot to tell you that Myrtle loves to eat rocket," he said. "The tortoise, I mean."

She only squinted at him, and said, apologetically, "You've told me your name..."

"Emir Salmani," he said. "I brought this for you." He held out the little bowl from his shed. "It needs drying before you can use it."

She peered into the bowl. "What is it?"

"Saffron," he said. "Picked this morning."

"I see." She took it from him, more gently than he'd expected her to, as if she recognised it as something precious. "I didn't know you could grow that here. I thought it was only in the Middle East."

"It's very settled in this climate, actually." He cleared his throat self-consciously. There were boxes piled in the room behind her, swaths of newspaper discarded on the floor. "In fact, it's been cultivated in England for hundreds of years."

"Is that so."

"The conditions just need to be right."

"Like growing it in a greenhouse, for example?" She raised her eyebrows at him.

He felt his cheeks go red, cleared his throat again. "That fell down, actually."

She looked at the bowl in her hands – he wondered, wildly, if she might throw it at him – before considering him again. "Well, I suppose I should say that I'm sorry for your loss then, Mr Salmani." And quite unexpectedly, there appeared a lopsided smile on her face, and she let out a loud *ha!* clearly amused at what she'd just said.

"Would it be weird if I said goodbye to Myrtle the tortoise?" he asked.

"Would you mind?"

She seemed to think about this, before she stood aside and let him in.

Finn

On nights the moon was round and brilliant, and the sky yawned silver-blue and cloudless, Daddo led them across the hay meadow by torch light, navigating hollowed wells of animal burrows and great clumsy knots of tussock grass. Daddo said the best time for fishing was at night under a bright moon, because fish have the double misfortune of being allergic to the sun and half-blind.

“That’s how come you see little bubbles on the surface sometimes,” he said. “It’s the fish sneezing.”

Even Hardy fell for that one.

Over time, Finn had come to realise that the real reason they went out in the dark was because Daddo wanted to keep whatever they caught for the frying pan instead of letting it back into the river like they were supposed to. If the biting was good, they’d land bream or roach, or even a perch if luck was on their side, and cook the fish for breakfast with a squeeze of lemon; and if it wasn’t, carp or tench, which tasted muddy even with a crusting of salt flakes and parsley. Daddo used to joke that angling was his mistress but stopped after the divorce, and started saying instead that it was his one true sweetheart. He’d named Hardy for the reel that caught him his first fish, and Finn for the fish, because it was more palatable than naming him Brown Trout. Hardy told Finn that that had been one of the *real* reasons why their mum upped and moved to Suffolk – because she hated their names so much – and for months, Finn believed him.

But then today Finn asked Daddo why they didn’t just have regular names, and the story was let slip, and Daddo grounded Hardy for lying. The two of them shouted at each other in a way Finn hadn’t seen before, in a way that seemed to surprise Daddo, too. Hardy had plans with his friends, he said, and didn’t think it was his fault that Finn was such a gullible baby, which only grounded him for longer, because Finn pretended it had hurt his feelings. Daddo went for a walk to

cool off, and when he returned, he said that the night air made him feel better, so he decided they were all going to get out and go fishing, even though they had school in the morning, and the moon was only waning. The meadow rustled dryly as they walked in silence by the light of Hardy's phone torch, the grass scratching through Finn's socks; Daddo had predicted rain every day this week so far, but he was yet to be proven right. When they reached the boundary of Old Heskett Wood, they skirted the edge of the development site, following the tall chain-link fence that had been put up to keep everyone else out. With the trees gone, Finn could see right to the river, glinting out of reach in the dark. Keeping the manmade clearing on their left, they made their way along the fence until the site came to an end. They settled finally at the bridge where the moon shattered across the water, and aimed for pieces of it glinting in the slow current as they cast their lines out into the night. The best place to fish was here, at Pelham's Lookout, though it wasn't really called that. Arthur Pelham was a man who lived in the cottage overlooking the bridge, living in geographical isolation from the rest of the village, and naturally there were stories about him: that he had a cauldron in which he made potions, or was really an eccentric millionaire who preferred the appearance of poverty, that he was in the witness protection programme.

The three of them sat quietly for a little while, with only the sounds of the trees shivering around them and the rustling of clawed animals in the undergrowth.

"Bats are out," Daddo said. "Over the river, look."

Finn was not afraid of the gaunt shadows darting and swooping to disappear again into the trees. Instead, it was the way the clouds washed continually over the moon, extinguishing the little light it offered and plunging them into a deep darkness that spooked him, and the alarming way it made every noise feel louder and nearer and more unknowable, how Pelham's cottage seemed to watch them in the dark.

"I bet carp," Hardy said, his voice cracking in that way it had recently started to. His reel clicked as he patiently inched in his line, hoping to tempt a bite. "Maybe a roach. But tonight feels like carp."

"Don't say that," said Daddo. "We've left that kind of talk at home." Daddo was superstitious about manifesting undesirable fish; if it was said aloud, it would come true.

"Roach then."

"We'll get perch," Finn said. "Hardy'll get a carp."

Perhaps because Hardy had already jinxed them and their luck was now irreversibly set, Daddo sighed and said, “As long as none of us pull in an eel. Bland as shite.”

When they were younger, Hardy made up a game called The Eel King, which had them puffing out their cheeks and moving their arms slowly as if they were swimming underwater, even though they were only in the living room. It usually involved Finn being caught desperately between rocks – which were actually just sofa cushions – awaiting certain death at the jaws of a giant eel until Hardy came to his rescue, wrestling madly with the creature – the armchair cushion – in order to save his little brother, before freeing him and swimming with Finn around the room until they finally reached his boat – the coffee table – and then the two of them would sail off in search of adventure together. Hardy was no longer interested in The Eel King because he was at secondary school; still, on Finn’s tenth birthday he’d tried to force Hardy into a game anyway, to no avail.

“Their blood is toxic.” Hardy’s reel clicked in the dark. “Did you know.”

Finn tutted.

“It is,” said Hardy. “That’s why it’s not served in sushi restaurants.”

“You’ve never been to a sushi restaurant.”

“Yeah I have.”

“Since when?”

“In Norwich.”

“With who?”

The question hung in the dark for some long moments. From somewhere near, a lone owl called, and then the noises around them stilled.

“It’s true.” Daddo cleared his throat. “A tiny amount can stop a heart dead.”

Finn looked out at the river, which at night looked like the black satiny material his mum always had in her sewing box. “Yeah right.”

“Captain,” Daddo said. ‘The Captain’ had been the name of their now-departed cat; to swear untruthfully on him was an offence that was simply not done.

Finn could hear the satisfaction in Hardy’s voice when he said, “Told you.”

“That’s not fair,” Finn said. “I want to go to Norwich.”

“Anyway, I’m more worried about eels in the loo, to be honest with you.”

Hardy cast his line out again, though there was too little light then to tell with any

certainty where it landed. “There’s a man just last week who got bitten on the arse by one when he went for a poo in the night. It was in the news.”

Finn snorted. “No there wasn’t.”

“Honest. You know those sewage outflows that empty into rivers and stuff? Apparently that’s how they get into the plumbing; it all connects to each other. Think about it.”

The trouble was that it sort of made sense.

As casually as he could, Finn said, “So what happened to him then.”

Hardy and Daddo each began to draw their lines in, reels clicking unhurriedly and out of time.

“Obviously he had to go to hospital. I mean, he’s fine *now*. But that’s the kind of thing that haunts a person. Every time he uses a toilet, he’ll be crapping himself.”

Daddo must have appreciated the joke because he laughed quietly, which Finn knew Hardy would’ve loved. A shudder swam up his spine as he thought about all those times he’d used the loo in the middle of the night and hadn’t even so much as looked into the bowl to know if there’d been an eel staring up at him, ready to sink in its needled teeth. “You’re making it up,” Finn said. “You always make things up.”

Finn wasn’t a storyteller, not like Hardy, who could pluck one from anything. He got it from Daddo, who told stories to calm them before bed when they were little, to entertain them if the TV got cut off when he was out of work. There was the time, years ago, that Hardy said the trees in the wood swapped places with each other at night to confuse people, and Finn still liked to imagine it was true. There were the stories about how the movement of clouds across the sky meant you could tell the earth was rotating, or how colour didn’t exist in the past which was why the photograph of their great-gran was black and white, that inhaling enough helium from birthday balloons could make a person float, and that Finn’s favourite teacher, Ms Pekter, lived at school with all the other teachers, how islands and continents only floated on the surface and could be swum beneath, the seeds in strawberries were really fly eggs, and that flicking the lights on and off fast enough would make the switch catch fire.

And then Hardy said, "That's not even the scariest thing though." He sighed heavily, as if what he were about to say pained him. "You remember Dean Sankar, from school?"

"What about him?" Finn said.

"Well that's the thing," Hardy said. "He was got by an *electric* eel."

"What do you mean?"

"He went swimming here in summer and had a great big mark in the shape of a lightning bolt on his leg when they pulled him out, like a current had gone right through his body, and that was the end of him."

"No," Finn said. "He moved away."

"That's what the school wanted people to think because they didn't want to scare anyone." Hardy's line whooshed as he cast it out.

"That isn't true," Finn said, looking at Daddo and then at Hardy. "I know you're just being a Pretending Parker." That was what Mum used to call Daddo, even though his name was Paul. She'd stopped Daddo from telling his frightening stories in front of Finn and Hardy, those stories that men tell, but she'd never forbade Hardy from doing it, hadn't needed to in those days.

Hardy continued, as if Finn hadn't said anything. "I know because I heard a couple of the teachers talking about it."

"There aren't electric eels here."

"There aren't *supposed* to be, sure," Daddo said then. "But electric eels *do* live in freshwater rivers."

"Exactly," Hardy said. "They were brought here. And guess who it was that put them in."

Finn's throat felt like there was a plum stone in it.

"Pelham," Hardy said quietly. "The eels are to keep people away."

The cottage looked eerie then, the way it surveyed them with its wonky windows and crooked roof, terrifying in its silhouette and its looming silence. And the river, like an obscure and cavernous abyss waiting to swallow him up, filled with all kinds of monstrous things; in the dark, there were crocodiles and sharks and giant bone-crushing snakes waiting for one of them to fall in, there were Loch Ness monsters and krakens, and now, electric eels. He did not like the river at night, preferred it in the day when it was a different thing entirely, placid and benign, a place he'd skipped stones with his mum.

He was used to Hardy's stories, but this one felt different, threatening in a way they never had before. He looked to Daddo, but he saw that he was grinning which seemed a strange thing to do in that moment, and then suddenly there were hard fingers jabbing at him and Finn was screaming, loud and pitched enough to be embarrassing as Hardy made a zapping noise and pretended to electrocute him.

He leapt up, did not care that he flung the rod at his feet. "That's not funny," he shouted. "I'm going home." He hated that his voice wobbled, that his tears came so quickly.

Daddo must have realised, because he said, "Enough now, Hardy." And when Hardy didn't stop he said sharply, "*Hardy*." And then, softer, "Sorry, Finn, mate. That wasn't on."

"I'm leaving," Finn said again. But in the dark anything could get him, and so he just stood there, wishing that he were older and braver than he was.

"We're all going together," Daddo said, getting to his feet. "Now, Hardy."

"We haven't caught anything yet though," Hardy said, but did as he was told.

They walked back in silence, Daddo's hand on Finn's shoulder. And as they crossed the meadow, Hardy said, "Hey Finn, guess what."

"What," he said sulkily.

Then Hardy made a farting noise with his mouth, so long and wet and ridiculous, that Finn couldn't help but to laugh at it, and the dark filled with the sound of them all, blowing raspberries and cackling the rest of the way home.

On Saturday morning, Daddo was the last to come downstairs for breakfast. Hardy and Finn were at the table eating toast with jam, and Daddo popped two slices of bread in to brown for himself.

"Right," he said. He was wearing his robe and a towel round his shoulders, his hair wet. "Who's been piddling in the bathtub?" He looked at each of them, drying his ears out with a towelled finger.

Finn froze, felt his cheeks begin to bloom. Hardy laughed as if it was the funniest thing anyone had ever said.

"I'm serious," said Daddo. "I'm sick of standing in a puddle when I have a shower. Which one of you is it?"

"It's not *me*," Hardy looked amused and horrified at the same time. "I'm not an *animal*. Ask *him*."

Daddo held up his finger, indicating that it was time Hardy close his gob.
“Finn,” he said. “What’s going on, mate?”

Finn lowered his head even more. “It’s in case there’s eels,” he mumbled.

“What?” Daddo said.

“That can get in from the pipes,” Finn said. “That can bite your arse.”

Hardy started laughing again, hysterical this time.

“You said it was in the paper,” Finn shouted at him. “You said he had to go to hospital.”

“I can’t believe you’re *such* a child,” Hardy yelped.

“Hardy,” Daddo warned.

“It’s not my fault he’s pissin’ in the bath.”

“*Hardy*.”

“Yeah, shut it, Hardy,” Finn said loudly.

The toast popped up.

“Enough, the both of you.” Daddo was rubbing his forehead. “You,” he said to Finn, “No more of this. You either use the toilet from now on or you hold it until morning. And you—” He turned to glare at Hardy. “Stop being so bloody antagonistic.”

“Fine, I won’t ever talk to him again.”

“Good.” Daddo retrieved his toast and last week’s newspaper folded roughly on the counter. “No-one talk ever from now on.”

Hardy rolled his eyes, but took another slice of bread from the bag, glowering at Finn as he tore hunks from it and chewed.

Stop looking at me, Finn mouthed.

“Ah-ah.” Daddo did not glance up as he read the sports column. “That’s talking.”

Silence for a short while.

Hardy drummed his fingers on the table. He looked at the oven clock.

Daddo licked his finger and turned the page. “Somewhere to be?”

“The guys want to go fishing.”

Daddo looked up at him, pleasantly surprised.

“They want to learn how.”

“That’s great then,” Daddo said quite happily. “I’d planned on doing some work at the allotment today, but I suppose I could be persuaded to the river instead.”

He was smiling. "Maybe we could bust out the boat." Daddo had recently saved up for a second-hand rowboat, currently housed beneath a tarp in the garden, awaiting a re-oil and a new coat of paint.

"Actually," Hardy said, "I was just going to ask if I could take another rod? They don't have any."

"Oh," Daddo hesitated. "Right." He looked down at the paper once again and said in a voice that sounded falsely cheerful, deflated, "So long as you're careful with it then."

Hardy's ears reddened. "Thanks," he mumbled. "I'm going to take a shower so don't do any dishes." He lingered at the table.

"Righto." Daddo was staring intently at an advert for dish soap.

"I want to go fishing," Finn said.

"No," Hardy said quickly. "You can't come."

"What about the allotment?" Daddo said. "Just the two of us."

Finn made a whining noise.

"So go fishing by yourself then," Hardy said.

"But I won't catch anything by myself." Hardy was a better angler than Finn. This was partly because he had a height advantage, since he was, by now, nearly as tall as Daddo, which meant he could cast further, but also that he could see the choice spots he needed to aim for. Like Daddo, Hardy could read a river and its fish in a way that Finn could not, could get a measure of where the current slackened or broke or converged into a seam, and knew how to find the fish in each of these places and what kind, could anticipate whether or not they'd bite. Daddo said that when Finn was tall enough to see it, he'd teach him, too.

"I don't care," Hardy said. "It's not my problem."

"Give me strength." Daddo sounded annoyed now. "Stop bickering, the pair of you." To Hardy, he said, "I'm not having him stay here alone, melting his brain in front of that bleedin' tablet all day, watching God-knows-what. He wants to fish, so take him with you. End of."

Hardy slammed his way past the table and out the room, shouting about the injustice of it all. Daddo sighed and looked up at the ceiling, the way he tended to do when upset.

"Teenagers," Finn said.

Daddo said, "You'll be doing the same soon enough." And it felt like a balloon filling too quickly in Finn's chest.

"No I won't."

Daddo began to spread jam on his toast.

"I won't," Finn said.

But Daddo only kissed Finn's head. "Off with you then. In case he tries to go without you."

They walked in silence past the church and along the road where it rounded away from the village, Hardy looking at his phone the whole time. Finn wondered why they were going this way, which was longer, instead of cutting across the meadow. It became clear when they'd reached the other side of the woods that Hardy hadn't wanted Daddo to see them, because he turned abruptly to Finn as they entered the treeline. "You're not coming with me."

"But Dad—"

"I'm not taking my little brother like it's some *playdate*." The words seemed to disgust him. "You can stay here or go home, or do whatever you want. But just don't follow me."

"But what about these?" Finn held up the green compost bag that Daddo had filled with peanut butter and jam sandwiches; thick globs of purple clung to the inside of it.

"I don't care, you have them."

"But there's too many. He made enough for everyone."

"Fine." Hardy snatched the bag and practically threw one of the sandwiches back. "There. Bye."

"But why can't I just come?"

"Because it's *embarrassing*."

It was said quickly and without a second thought, flung from his mouth like wind-caught embers to land hot on Finn's cheeks. Guilt, or something like it, flashed briefly across Hardy's face and he wavered. "You're so annoying," he said, quietly exasperated, before turning and marching on without him.

Finn watched him leave, leaden with hurt. It occurred to him that he *could* actually go fishing by himself. Daddo had shown him how to lift the line out of the water gradually at first, so that it didn't make a loud suction-cup noise, which would

scare the fish. He'd taught him to bend from his elbow and not his wrist, and that when he lifted the line up and out and back, he should hold the rod by his ear and pause, like he was talking on the phone; that all the power should come from that backwards motion and not the forward cast, or else the line would drop in heavy tailing loops, instead of straightening out far in front of him. But then, he didn't know how to map the river, couldn't see where it was that the fish should be, and even if he were by sheer chance to catch anything on his own, Hardy wouldn't be there with the net to help him pull it from the water, and the thought of removing the hook from its bloodied mouth by himself, and then lying precariously on his stomach to hold the fish upstream until it was strong enough to swim away again, filled him with a dread; he had never done those things without Hardy or Daddo to oversee. He could find Daddo and say he'd changed his mind, but then there would be questions about Hardy and Finn might cry, and anyway, he didn't want to spend the day with the weirdos at the allotment, who genuinely found vegetables interesting.

He decided then that he would follow Hardy, that he could pretend he was a spy and Hardy his target, a game they used to play before Hardy stopped having fun. He folded his sandwich in half and tucked it into his pocket, moved as quietly and hurriedly as he could, avoiding anything that might crunch or snap, which was tricky, since everything was so dry. Now and then he'd duck quickly behind a tree or a withered clump of bracken, and peer out from behind them with his sandwich raised high like a pistol, scanning the trees ahead to keep Hardy in his sight. Brown leaves drifted from the canopy like spring blossom.

At one point, Hardy veered sharply to the left, until he reached the site they'd been clearing for the development. He stood for some moments with his hands on the chain-link fence, looking out at what had once been part of the woods, now stripped bare. Hardy remained there for some long moments, until the church bell began to sound, its note distant and thin, and then walked onward again. Finn approached the fence when the coast was clear; he'd not been down to the development site in the daytime before. There was a large machine that glared in the sun, brightly yellow and mechanical, and at odds with the landscape around it, and all over the ground was sawdust and craters where great big stumps had been removed like teeth. It looked so desolate, so wrong.

He continued after Hardy, not really conscious of how long he'd been following, until he heard voices as he approached Pelham's Lookout. He snuck

toward the sound, crouching awkwardly as he walked in order to keep hidden. He saw Hardy in the dip beside the bridge, not with his goon friends, but with a girl. He realised gradually that she was the older sister of another girl in his class at the junior school, only she'd stuck on some fake eyelashes that were so heavy and long, he could see them easily from where he lingered. They made her eyes look half-closed, and she kept touching them like she was making sure they were still there. Hardy mumbled something and the girl – Amanda, he thought her name was – giggled nervously, looking out over the river. Finn crept nearer, wanting to hear what they were saying, and concealed himself by the stump of an old tree. When he looked again, they were kissing.

He had never seen his brother kiss anyone, not like that, the way their heads were bobbing in tandem and sticky, wet noises were coming from their mouths. He had often wondered what it would be like to kiss someone properly, had even tried it on the back of his hand once, though he'd found the experiment unremarkable. Watching Hardy now, he felt within himself a jealousy, both that his brother got to kiss a girl, but also that he'd chosen to be there with her instead of him.

He watched, scarcely blinking for not wanting to miss anything, as Hardy's hand rubbed up and down her thigh, watched as it crept beneath her clothing and travelled up her stomach, pulling the fabric with it the higher it went, so that her soft fleshy skin was exposed. And then his hand was at her breast, and Finn could see the pulsing movement of his fingers, clutching and kneading at it, and Hardy moaning in a way Finn had never heard before, that made him feel embarrassed.

And then Amanda pushed him away and got up, straightening her clothes. "Someone in that house could see us."

Hardy rolled onto his back, looking up at the sky.

"What's this?" Amanda nudged the green compost bag with her foot.

"Nothing," Hardy said.

She picked the bag up. "Why do you have so many sandwiches?"

Hardy propped himself on his elbows. "My dad made me take them."

Finn had forgotten about his own sandwich, and he saw now that the bread was flattened where he'd clenched it too tightly, its contents having oozed onto his fingers. He put it down on a root and wiped his hand on his trousers, but his skin still felt tacky.

Amanda bit into one and pulled her face. “There’s so much jam.” She laughed – Finn knew she was laughing at Daddo, felt the hot snap of it at his ears – and then she threw the rest of it into the river.

Hardy stood, and for a moment Finn believed that he was going to get angry with her, that he was going to tell her she shouldn’t discard things that didn’t belong to her, especially not into the river, which was not there for her to treat that way.

Hardy took the bag from her. “We can use them as bait.” And then he began tearing off large hunks of sandwich and tossing them into the water, where they floated worthlessly in the milky green shallows.

“When we catch the fish,” Amanda said. “We get to take them home, right?”

“You’re not technically supposed to,” Hardy said, coolly. “But my dad does it all the time.”

“Really?”

“Goes at night so no one sees him.”

She snorted. “Your dad seriously sounds so lame.” She said this almost gleefully, and then kissed his cheek.

“I know, right,” Hardy smirked.

He had offered it up so easily.

“I’ve got an idea.” She poked him in the stomach. “We could make sushi with whatever we get. Like we had on our first date?”

“Nah, I’m going to eat whatever we catch like I’m Gollum,” Hardy said. “I’m biting into it straight from the river.”

“Gross,” she said. “What about its guts and stuff.”

“I’m not even going to kill it first,” he continued.

Amanda picked up the rods, smiling at him. “You’re such a psycho.”

It seemed that the person Finn was watching was not his brother, but someone unknown to him completely, someone who made him feel strange and sickened, and that this person, whoever they were, would be unrecognisable to Daddo as well. In that moment he longed intensely for familiarity and for the profound, pillowy comfort of his mum, and unsure of what else to do, he slipped away and ran through the woods back the way he’d come, and as he ran, he could think only that he hated this new Hardy. When he finally reached the allotment gate (his legs splashed from running full pelt through the ford), and saw Daddo at his plot having a cup of tea with the others, he darted clumsily along the grid of vegetable

patches, had not even stopped running before everything began to pour breathlessly from him.

Daddo put down his mug and stood in one movement. "What's happened," he said, alarmed. "Is Hardy alright?"

But Hardy was not worthy of Daddo's concern. "No," Finn shouted, "He's a prick."

Bemusement or perhaps impatience settled into Daddo's face, and he did not take his eyes from Finn as he said, "Emir, mate, can I use your shed for a minute?"

A man sat in one of the plastic chairs nodded, and said, "Help yourself."

Daddo shut the two of them in a small shed that smelled of soil and gardening gloves, and something else that Finn couldn't place. He sat Finn on an upturned bucket, and stood with his arms crossed, so tall his head grazed the roof. "Out with it."

He told Daddo all of it, every single part of what had happened.

When he was finished, Daddo blew air heavily from his mouth. "Okay." He nodded slowly, as if contemplating everything he'd just been told. For a few long moments, he looked beyond Finn, staring into the back of the shed. "Okay," he said again, finally. "Come on, then."

Finn followed behind Daddo, snaking between plots to the overgrown gate and then up the road, but instead of continuing on to the woods, they stopped instead at Daddo's car, which was old and rusty blue.

"Where are we going?" Finn said.

"To think."

They drove from the village and out past the town. Daddo had the radio on too loud.

After a short while, Finn said, "Are you mad at Hardy?"

Daddo didn't answer, didn't even look at him. Regret began to agitate in Finn, that perhaps he shouldn't have told Daddo *everything*, that perhaps he'd landed Hardy in it because of Amanda, or that he'd hurt Daddo by telling him about the sandwiches and the river and the things they'd said about him.

When Daddo pulled the car over, it was into the parking lot of a pub Finn hadn't seen before, called *The Merry Wherrymen*. Daddo got out of the car without saying a word, and as Finn followed, he saw that they were on the river again. Inside,

Daddo ordered a pint of Adnams lager from a woman at the bar. The two of them made polite, disinterested chat about the upcoming pub quiz as the woman pulled the tap, and Finn realised that it had been a long time since he'd seen Daddo with a woman, and speculated whether he could have a secret girlfriend like Hardy did. But Daddo was almost always at home or work or the allotment, or with them, fishing, and he couldn't imagine where somebody might fit into the space that was left. It had not occurred to him before that Daddo might want someone, or if that kind of thing was all over for him now.

They sat outside on an upstairs patio that jutted out over the water. The pub was on a steep bank, and Finn was able to see the river in a way he hadn't before, giving him a near complete view of its width. From here, he could see great swathes of bright green river weeds trailing downstream, could see logs and stones beneath the surface.

And then Daddo began talking. "A river is made up of different currents." He pointed over the railing. "See the way the water's moving just there? That's your seam. It's where the slower water in the eddies meets the faster current running through the middle, and then further out, closer to the bank is your shallows. Smaller fish spend all their time in the eddies, but some fish, the bigger fish, the ones we want, hang out along the seams with their bodies in the gentler current and their heads in the main channel so they can catch anything whizzing by." And then he said, "It's the most rewarding part of a river, where they meet like that, where the fish are in two flows. Now you don't need me or anyone to show you where the fish are."

"That's not true," Finn said. "I'm still too short."

Daddo had a mouthful of beer, then pushed it across the table to him.

Finn could not help but to grin at it.

"A mouthful," Daddo said.

He lifted it to his lips, the glass slick with condensation.

"And not a big one either."

It was bitter and strange, and didn't taste fizzy and sweet the way soda did.

"People are a lot like rivers," Daddo said.

Finn rolled his eyes.

"What do you think of the beer?"

"I like it," he lied.

“I’ll get you a lemonade,” Daddo said.

Hardy was in the living room when they arrived home. He must have been just sitting there, waiting for them, because the remote was still tucked behind the TV. He looked at Finn and then at Daddo, waiting for him to speak first, to gauge whether he was in trouble or not.

“You’re back,” Daddo said. “How was the river?”

“Good,” Hardy said. “Fine.” He looked again at Finn, intently this time. “Are you feeling better?” He spoke slowly, knowingly. “Because you didn’t eat your sandwich. You left it behind.”

Finn nodded. The jam was still smeared on his trousers.

“Anything happen?” Daddo said.

“What do you mean,” Hardy said. “Like what?”

“Oh.” Daddo shrugged. “I suppose I don’t know.”

Finn watched the pair of them, as if the shape that had existed between them before had changed, and they were feeling their way round its new, alien contours.

“Finn left early,” Hardy said.

“That’s what he told me,” Daddo said.

Finn looked at the floor.

When Daddo spoke again, it was quietly, deliberately, so that every word seemed in a way to be magnified. “He told me a right story in fact.”

“Did he.”

“Said he was on the riverbank and about fifteen feet or so from him, was it, he saw something that really upset him.”

He heard Hardy inhale deeply, bracingly.

“He said,” Daddo continued, “That a great big log bobbed to the surface—”

Finn saw the confusion on Hardy’s face first, before he could register for himself what Daddo had just said.

“And it was all slimy and smooth and mottled green with algae, isn’t that right, Finn?” He glanced at Finn, and then turned again to Hardy. “And then he sees right there on the end of this log, the end that’s closest to him, an eye. And it was bulbous and staring, he said, but it was intelligent too, like it was drinking him in, watching him as if he’s something to see. And he knew by the size of its fat cheek

and its long pointed jaw, that it must be enormous, monstrous. It could only have been the Heskett Hag.”

Hardy must have been relieved that he wasn't in trouble, because he started to grin.

“You think she's funny, do you?” Daddo's voice took on a menacing quality, and Finn knew then that Hardy wouldn't go unpunished after all. “Terrible things have happened to people who've underestimated the Hag. She's a horrible beast of a fish, a wolf in pike's clothing, and she's...” He moved away from Finn, closer to Hardy. “She's bigger than anything in an English river should be. She can go wherever the river takes her, and one river connects to another of course – the Wensum, the Yare – the Broads are her hunting ground. She waits among the weeds and silt, stalks the unsuspecting holiday boats, just waiting for someone to fall in. No one's ever managed to get her yet because whenever someone goes out to try, she's never found, like she can disappear at will, but she's always there, watching, biding her time. And, ah, she's older than anyone alive by centuries—”

“That's impossible,” Hardy said, his voice nervy in the way it always was these days, but undercut with something more; unease maybe. “Fish don't live that long.”

“Sure,” Daddo said. “*Normal* fish. But the Hag is something else, something from another age. The Hag, well, she was actually a woman, once upon a time, who the men of Old Heskett tried to kill for being a witch. They chucked her in the river to drown her, but it backfired because she turned into the monster she is today, doomed to haunt the river for the rest of time. And that's why she likes to get men most of all I reckon, boys, too. I'm surprised you've not heard the old tales about her?”

Hardy shook his head.

“*Have a paddle and be followed by a shadow*, they used to say,” Daddo continued. “The scariest part, in my opinion, is that she's scale-less, like an eel, with bladed teeth and a muscular, crushing throat, and she blends in with the water, just like Finn said, all dark green and brown, practically invisible; you wouldn't know she was there until it was too late. The perfect predator, really.

“*Take a dip and she'll have a nip*.

“Twenty years ago, in fact, a woman told the paper that the Hag took her Wolfhound on a summer's evening, sucked it under as the poor dog went in after a stick and turned the river red. They say the Hag once dismembered a swimmer, a

whole leg down her thick throat, bitten clean off, that she eats children whole so there's nothing left of them to bury. But her favourite meal, according to all the old boys at the pub, is to rip open the stomach so that a person's guts trail out as they try to swim away to safety, so she can eat them from the inside out.

"See the water stir and you'll be taken by her."

"We're just lucky that Finn wasn't using his rod, or she'd have pulled him in by his line. All she could do was sink below the surface, down beneath the weeds to disappear, and wait for her next opportunity to feast."

Finn's heart was thumping so loudly it felt impossible that no one else should hear it, each wallop within his chest surging cold fear through his body. Hardy must have felt the same because he was staring at Daddo, impossibly still, as if he were holding his breath.

After a little while, Hardy said quietly, "Is that actually what he told you?"

Daddo glanced at Finn, crossing his fingers behind his back so that Hardy couldn't see them. "Captain."

Hardy looked approvingly at Finn. "Good story."

Eileen

The light was already beginning to change by the time Eileen arrived at the station to catch her train home. She could not be late getting back today; her son, Christopher, was coming round for an unexpected farewell dinner, and she'd promised Morris that she'd be there before Christopher arrived.

Eileen was seated on one of the benches outside because the air smelled cold and clear, and she liked how it made her cheeks feel like cool marble when she removed her glove and touched her warm fingers to them. At one end of the platform was a family, a hum of excitement around them. On the nearby bench, two teenage boys were holding hands, their knees slouched toward one another. One of the boys had a choppy haircut. It was he who caught her looking and shifted, whispering something so that the other glanced at her. Eileen smiled, but they'd already turned away. She supposed that maybe she should let Morris know that she was on her way home now, but thought again of the conversation they'd had that morning as she was leaving for work, the way he'd said to her, *This is important, Eileen*, and decided not to.

She'd returned to those words all day: sometimes she imagined them to be reproaching, and at others they took on a more pitying tone, but no matter how they came, they would not settle and be done with. Morris liked to joke that being a vicar wasn't a bad gig as far as hard work went, that it was really only on Sundays that Eileen had anything to do. He would say this to their friends in order to elicit a chuckle, to her parishioners at community events, and at any other time her occupation came up. *I'm only kidding*, he'd placate her later, *I know it isn't true*. But still, he would say it. It did not matter that Eileen was never home before seven most days, that she oversaw four parishes, which meant four times the number of services to give and parish accounts to keep, community projects and fundraising campaigns to oversee, of parishioners to visit. The meetings were daily. She sat on the board of

governors for two schools. There was the scandal of the development to deal with (she'd seen the plans for the houses, modern and large and concrete, completely incongruous with their surroundings). And on top of it all, was the constant pressure of dwindling congregations, and the peril of beautiful old churches becoming fallow so that no one cared anymore when they began to crumble, and this, more than anything else, compelled her to continue. Faith was important. History was important. But people and communities were the most important. And Eileen knew that in some way she was important because she kept as much of it going as she could; people needed her, and who was she not to support them? Just now, for example, she'd come from visiting a man who was having complicated surgery tomorrow; he'd moved last year and ended up a few parishes removed from hers, was under the guidance of a different vicar now, a man, but even still, it was she who he asked for. She was entitled to six Sundays off a year and four weeks paid holiday, and she held a sense of personal satisfaction – or, if she was being frank, it was pride – that she'd never once used them all, had never even taken the full week of rest she was allowed after the intense demand of Easter and Christmas. But her efforts did not go unnoticed or underappreciated. She never went long without a note of thanks, and every year there were little parcels of homemade Christmas cake and carefully wrapped chocolates. She was trusted with their most vulnerable moments but equally, some of their happiest, and what a gift both of those things were.

Eileen checked the station clock; the train wouldn't be long, and she sighed quietly. It was of course understandable, perfectly understandable, that she should be upset; neither Morris nor Christopher could surely fault her that. It felt inevitable that tonight she would be the interloper in her own home, her own family, and all because of a woman whose name she didn't even know. *I don't care what she's called*, she'd said, when Morris tried to tell her. *If he wants me to know her name, then he can tell me himself*.

Morris had called her ridiculous.

A young woman with Down Syndrome walked onto the platform and stopped in front of the boys. She was carrying a bouquet of flowers wrapped with a big yellow bow, and wearing a jumper that had a cat on it with oversized eyes and its chin on its paws, smiling, or grimacing, Eileen could not tell which.

The young woman had a long drag of her cigarette before moving nearer to the boys, saying something to them, and had an expression of boredom as she looked

along the train track, into the distance. The boys glanced at one another uncertainly, before one of them bent to tie her shoelace. She flicked her spent cigarette onto the platform, and then fished one of those awful vapes from her bum-bag and began to suck on it. When her lace was tied, she took a few more steps along the platform without another word and paused by Eileen, letting out a large, sweet-smelling cloud. She glanced at Eileen's white collar, and then produced a piece of paper from her bag.

"Can you tell me where this is?" She had a soft voice, but it was authoritative all the same. She held up a sheet from one of those cheap party invitation pads meant for children, though she looked to be in her late teens at least, and it was bordered with colourful balloons and confetti, and had been filled out in neat handwriting.

You are invited to the party of: *Sally. S.*

At: *29 Conway Road, Sheringham*

On: *Friday, 17th October*

Arrive by: *6pm*

Until: *8pm*

Eileen had not been to Sheringham in years, and even then, she'd never deviated from the promenade of shops that led directly from the train station to the beach.

"I'm sorry." She handed back the invitation, and then began to look for her phone so that she could map it.

"Can you hold this?" The young woman held out the bouquet, which Eileen, with her hands still filled with things from her backpack, took. The young woman had another drag of her vape, expelling it through her nose as she began to leisurely root through her bum bag. When she'd found what she was looking for – she pulled out a pack of fruity gum – a sparkly green pen cap fell to the platform, and she watched it bounce before gently kicking it away.

"Alright, Zoey?" A man from the nearby family had taken a few steps toward them. He had a large belly and wore a beaten-looking leather jacket. "Where are you off to, then?"

The young woman – Zoey – said, "I'm going to a party."

"I love a good party, me." And then he bounced his elbows and shoulders awkwardly in a sort of silly dance. He stopped when he noticed Eileen looking, his eyes briefly catching her clerical collar, and he said to Zoey, "How's your dad then?"

"Fine."

“He still sore I beat him at darts the other night?”

She popped a piece of gum in her mouth, then returned the pack to her bum bag.

“We’ve got tickets to the Pavilion,” he said. “You been before?”

“Once,” Zoey said. “It was okay. They got my Nan on stage and made her squawk like a chicken.”

“Ha!” He clapped his hands, rubbed them together.

“They ask for volunteers.”

“Cheers for the tip.” He winked. “Tell you what, I’ll make one of them lot do it and take a picture for you.” He thumbed over his shoulder to his family, and then glanced at Eileen before saying, “So where’s this party, then?”

Zoey walked over to him, handing him the invitation, and the two of them joined the others.

Eileen realised too late that she still held the bouquet, and examined it for the first time. There were white lilies in it, the kind always used in funerals. Zoey hadn’t removed the powdery orange stamen, which would blemish the petals – one of them was already stained yellow from where the pollen had fallen – so Eileen hooked her fingers round each one, pulling so that they all dropped into her cupped palm before she deposited them beneath the bench. She smoothed the ribbon, adjusted the card tucked between flowers to make the handwritten *To Sally* more visible, and then set them on the bench so that Zoey could retrieve them later.

There’d been a boy in Christopher’s class years ago who had Down Syndrome. They’d gone to each other’s birthday parties, and she’d found him sweet and shy, though she couldn’t remember having talked to him, having talked to anyone with Down Syndrome, now she really considered it. And thinking of it now, as she returned her things to her backpack, she didn’t know what had become of this boy, or when, if, he and Christopher had stopped being friends. She decided that she would ask him at dinner this evening, as a way to punctuate the no doubt ceaseless conversation about Christopher’s plans.

Tomorrow morning, Christopher was moving all the way down to Penzance to be with a woman who Eileen would only be meeting for the first time tonight. He hadn’t even told her he was seeing this woman; it had been Morris. *Apparently they met online*, Morris said. *She’s a doctor and he’s in love*. Eileen had expected Christopher to tell her himself, but after waiting weeks it became clear that he

assumed the information had been reliably relayed to her second-hand, and that that was good enough. At least Morris had agreed that the situation was abrupt. They'd never even heard of this woman, and now she was taking him about as far away from Norfolk as a person could get before they left England all together.

A train pulled into the station, not hers, but one bound for the coast. The doors opened but no one got off. She watched the boys beside her stand and head toward the nearest carriage, did not realise she was staring so intently until the boy with the haircut waved in a pointed way that made her blush. When she looked up again, the platform had completely emptied. The flowers were still on the bench. "Oh dear," she said aloud. She approached the train, hoping that Zoey would realise she'd forgotten them and appear at the door. She scrutinized the windows, but didn't know which carriage she was in. The train made an urgent beeping noise – the doors were going to close. Eileen hesitated, looked at the flowers in her hand, the envelope with its shaky handwriting, and then stepped onto the train. The doors hissed closed. She lingered in the precipice between carriages, unsure of the choice she'd just made, as the train pulled itself to motion. Beyond the window, the station slid lazily by, until quite abruptly it was replaced by a bank of vivid green; it shocked her, just how green the rest of Norfolk was in comparison to Hesket.

The second carriage was much fuller than the first, and the aisle felt narrower. She held the flowers overhead so that they didn't swipe the seats as she passed, walking slower than she wanted to, self-conscious in her examination of every filled seat. All Eileen could think to do was nod and smile awkwardly if they caught her looking, as she tried not to knock into anyone each time the train lurched. She found Zoey in the next carriage, still with the family from the platform.

"Excuse me." Eileen presented the bouquet to the table. "You forgot your flowers."

The table quietened. Zoey looked first at Eileen and then at the flowers, recognition settling into her face.

The woman at the table took the bouquet from Eileen and held it to her nose. "Well these are lovely, Zoey."

The man peered briefly up from his phone. "Hurry up and take them from her, Zoey. Don't want Carol getting any ideas."

Carol tutted, and passed them to her.

Zoey snapped her gum. “Thanks.” She inspected the flowers briefly, then put them down on the table, and gazed out of the window.

Eileen did not know what she’d expected – some enthusiasm at the bouquet having been returned perhaps, or that her efforts might be acknowledged more gratefully. But then, Zoey was not to know that because of her she would now be late. “Well,” she said. “Have a wonderful time at your party.”

Zoey was staring intently out of the window at a passing plume of wheatfield.

“Zoey,” Carol said. “Hun, the vicar is speaking to you.”

Zoey turned to look at Carol, who gestured toward Eileen with her head.

“Thanks,” Zoey said again.

Eileen swayed in the aisle as the train hurtled onward.

“It’ll be good fun, won’t it?” Carol pressed. “The party.”

“Yeah,” Zoey said, nodding. “They’ve got like, *Fortnite* and *Call of Duty*, so it should be pretty good.”

The girl next to Zoey moaned. “No waaaay, Mum won’t let us play those.”

“No, I won’t,” she said. “Far too violent, vicar.”

“They’re not that bad,” Zoey said. “It’s mostly just guns.”

“See?” The girl slunk in her seat. “I told you, it’s *fine*.”

“Zoey,” Carol said.

“Just don’t drink too much, Zoey,” the man quipped. “We know what you’re like with the booze.” And then he laughed, pleased with himself.

The slouching girl joined in, looking at Zoey, who very clearly tried to suppress a smile as she turned to the window again.

“Kev,” Carol scolded. “A little more decorum in front of the vicar, please. And you...” she motioned to her daughter. “Say hello to the vicar.” When her daughter didn’t respond, she said, “Now please, Hannah.”

“But no one else is,” she protested.

Carol turned to her youngest girl, “You too, Grace, come on.”

“I *did* already,” Grace said.

Carol shook her head, and said to Eileen, “So contrary, the pair of them.”

The train pulled in at the station, and people began shuffling toward the doors.

“This is us already.” Carol stood suddenly, ushering the children to follow.
“Everyone up, quick-quick.”

Eileen had assumed they were going to Sheringham, that they would walk Zoey to where she needed to go.

Zoey turned to watch them leave. “Bye.”

“Take care, hun.” Carol waved at Zoey, and slung her purse over her shoulder. “God bless, vicar.”

“I don’t think she knows where she’s going, though,” Eileen said.

Kev zipped up his coat. “You been to your friend’s house before, Zoey?”

Zoey snapped her gum again. “Yep.”

“Vicar.” He nodded once at Eileen, and then was gone.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“Sally’s house.”

“Because you were asking how to get there earlier.”

A flicker of impatience crossed Zoey’s face.

Eileen knew she should get off. But even though the departure warning sounded, she did not move. And then the doors closed, and the train continued, and she sat herself at the table across from Zoey. She upended her backpack on the seat next to her, retrieved her phone in the jumble. “May I see your invitation?” Eileen said. “So that I can look up directions for you.”

“I think it’s fine,” Zoey said flatly. “Really.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to double-check your route.”

Zoey ignored her.

“It’s not— it’s not that I think you don’t know,” Eileen lied. “It’s just something I always do when anyone asks for directions.”

Sighing, Zoey sat back against her seat. “I suppose.” She sounded dubious but slid the invitation across the table.

Eileen copied the address into her phone. “It’s only a seventeen-minute walk from the station. Have you got a pen?”

Zoey began nipping at the peeling skin around her fingernails. “Nope.”

Eileen rummaged through the pile beside her but found nothing. “Well it’s an easy enough route.” She showed Zoey her phone. “See? Just up station road—”

Zoey pulled out her vape.

“I don’t think you can use that here.”

Zoey made an annoyed sound and dropped it back into her bag.

“Have a look at this though.” Eileen angled the phone closer to Zoey. “If you remember it then you won’t get lost.”

The phone vibrated once in her hand, and Zoey’s eyes darted to the top of the phone screen and lingered there a moment, before she returned to her nails again. “I won’t get lost.”

“Do you have maps on your phone?”

“No, I don’t,” Zoey said. “I don’t need it.”

Eileen could feel the train already beginning to slow again.

“You got a text, by the way,” Zoey said.

Eileen checked her phone. It was from Morris:

nearly home?

If she started back now, she’d only be half an hour late.

The train pulled into another station, and Zoey gazed outside again to watch the people queueing to get on. Eileen put the phone down on the table, covering the screen with her hand, and the two of them sat quietly. The stamen had left Eileen’s fingers a nicotine yellow, like her father’s had been after decades of cigarettes. It was her strongest memory of him.

Morris was a very different kind of father than her own had been. He was much more emotional, certainly much more attentive, perhaps overly so. He’d coddled Christopher as a child, accommodated his every impulse, had given in easily to tantrums and excused poor behaviour in his teenaged years. Even now, he went out of his way to do things that Christopher himself was capable of doing. And he’d indulged Christopher’s ridiculous relationship with that woman. Eileen was not a panderer, but she had been a good mother. She, more than Morris, had been the one to do bath time, to put Christopher to bed, to pick him up from school. She’d never missed a recital or a game, had made sure he visited the dentist and read books. It was she who carefully chose and wrapped every Christmas and birthday present, who’d helped him find his first flat. Yet it was Morris who he’d told, Morris who – in Eileen’s mind – their son so clearly favoured, and it angered her; she’d not been above admitting as much to Mo either, who’d only said he felt sorry for her, if that’s what she believed. The carriage filled with more passengers, the chatter louder now, and the train moved onward. She would wait until she was on her way back to call and explain her tardiness.

“It’ll be dark in hardly any time,” Eileen said. “How about I walk with you when we get to Sheringham? I’ve got directions, and you wouldn’t want to rely on a stranger if you get lost.”

“You’re a stranger,” Zoey said.

“I’m Eileen.”

Zoey raised her eyebrows.

“I’m a vicar.” Eileen touched her collar.

“I know *that*,” she snorted. “I’m not blind.” It was difficult to tell her tone, whether it was playful or irritated.

The seat upholstery was bristly and rough, and prickled Eileen through her cotton trousers, irritating her skin. She gestured to Zoey’s jumper. “I’ve got two cats, you know. Three, if you count the one that hangs around the graveyard at St. Giles’ church.”

“I prefer dogs.” She smoothed her jumper. “And this is actually a kitten.”

“Ah.”

A man wearing a tracksuit walked past them, talking loudly on his phone.

Zoey leaned forward, her arms on the table. “Is the church haunted?”

“Pardon?”

“There’s graves.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Eileen said. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Zoey chewed her gum. “There’s one in the Bible.”

Eileen smiled. “It’s not a literal ghost. Not like what you’re talking about.”

“So you don’t have any, like, scary stories?”

“No.”

She looked disappointed.

“Actually,” Eileen said, remembering. “My son said he saw something once.”

Zoey waited.

“He used to come to the church with me when he was a child to practice his violin. He way very gifted. I’d be shut away in the vestry mostly – meetings and paperwork – and he’d be out in the nave, and I’d hear him playing in the background. And it was lovely, really, the two of us getting to spend time together, before children get older and lose interest in their paren—”

The phone vibrated against the table once, twice. Zoey glanced at it, then settled her attention back on Eileen.

“Well anyway, one day he’s practising his scales and then suddenly there’s this almighty scream, I mean it really was—” Eileen made a wide gesture with her hands. “Within seconds he came running in, pale as anything. He was crying. Sobbing, actually. And he collided into me. I remember his head hitting my chest, and his knuckles were absolutely white around his violin. It took a while for him to be able to talk properly so that I could understand what had gone on.”

She paused. It was not a story she’d shared before. She had thought about it now and then, could still see that look on his face as clearly as the day that it occurred. Zoey was no longer chewing her gum, the whole of her attention fixed solely on Eileen. The phone vibrated again, continuously this time – someone was calling. Without looking to see who, Eileen slipped it from the table and into her backpack.

“He said it happened when he was playing, looking out on the pews as usual, performing for a pretend audience. One moment they were empty and the next he saw a hooded man sitting in one of the rows, watching him.”

“Oh shit,” Zoey whispered. “Just watching?”

Eileen nodded. “Apparently it was grinning, the man, and...” She paused dramatically, ran her finger along the inside of a lily petal, down near the centre where it was green and irregularly textured, like the dull pins on a music box.

“And what?”

“He said part of its mouth was missing.” She motioned to her lower jaw. “And there were flaps of skin or something just hanging from its face.”

For a moment, Zoey looked anxious, disturbed, but then her fear dissipated, and she smiled. “That’s so creepy.”

She imagined Zoey walking into the party later, telling them all the ghost story she’d just heard from the friendly vicar who’d made sure she got there okay. It was the kind of thing they might talk about all night, that might even become part of their mythology. *Remember that vicar who told me about the haunted church?* It wasn’t haunted of course; just a figment of a child’s imagination, or even another ploy for attention. Morris had made Christopher a difficult child, demanding of their time, as if it was owed to him, which to a degree it was, of course; they were his parents. But then Christopher had refused to return to the nave, demanding that he remain in the vestry with her, which at the time had been impossible. She had meetings scheduled, it would have been inappropriate and unprofessional for him to

stay in the room. Whenever she pictured him from that day, more than fear she saw on his face, was an outrage, and this, in turn had made her dig her heels in even more.

“I’d never go there again,” Zoey said.

“Well.” Eileen tapped her fingers impatiently on the table. “I had to work, and like I said, you know, he couldn’t just stay at home.” She was surprised at how defensive she felt.

“How old is he?”

“Now? Thirty-one.”

“That’s old.”

“It’s not old,” Eileen said.

“I’m twenty.”

“Well I’m nearly sixty-four, and that’s not old either.”

Zoey looked unconvinced, and then offered her a piece of gum.

“Thank you,” Eileen said. She took it, even though she did not particularly want it. Zoey watched Eileen put it into her mouth, and then took another piece for herself, adding it to one she already had. As far as Eileen was concerned, the gum had no discernible flavour other than overly sweet.

The train began to decelerate again, and the two of them looked out the window into the dusk. They were at Sheringham now. It was less a station and more a single platform, with only three benches beneath as many lit streetlamps. Behind these were bushes, and the dark roofs of houses, and in the distance, a Tesco.

“Have you got any cigarettes?” Zoey asked as they stepped onto the platform. She had the bouquet sandwiched between her arm and torso, flowers at a precariously downward angle.

“I don’t smoke,” Eileen said. And then, because she could not help herself, “It’s bad for you.”

Zoey rolled her eyes. She pulled out her vape, dragging deeply and then exhaling a large sickly mist that drifted momentarily along the platform before evaporating into nothing. The temperature had cooled, and Eileen buttoned up her coat.

“Are you cold at all? I might have a scarf with me.”

Zoey shook her head as she had another drag. Eileen checked her phone. On the home screen were two messages and a missed call from Morris:

Christopher's come early. Says they need to leave sooner
because he has some bits to finish packing, fyi.

and,

where are you?

It was just after 6pm. She would have been home by now.

"This way, let's not dawdle." Eileen marched along the platform, weaving through the passengers waiting to board the train. She stopped by the parking lot and waited, Zoey following at a languorous pace, more concerned with her vape than keeping up. "Do you want me to hold those for you?"

She did not resist when Eileen gently pulled the bouquet from her.

"We're late." Eileen continued walking, peering at the map on her phone every few yards and pausing so that Zoey would catch up. Overhead, shadowy gulls were calling, and beneath that, a constant faint sound in the distance, like wind or traffic. The further they walked from the station, the more Eileen could hear it, and she realised that it must be the North Sea. She checked the map; they were not that far from the beach, and if she were to take the next road left, the sea would be there in front of her, rolling in and retreating again into infinite night.

Eileen eventually eased her pace to match Zoey's, and they walked together in silence until the shops gave way to more houses, the streets empty. She had long since stopped chewing the gum, thinking that perhaps this would dull the flavour.

"You should help that ghost," Zoey said.

"How do you mean?"

"Tell it to go to the light or whatever," Zoey said. "Like they do on those paranormal shows."

Eileen rarely had the chance to sit in front of the television.

"It's there for a reason," Zoey continued, "And maybe it's stuck."

"Oh?" Eileen tried to hide her amusement. "What sort of reason?"

"Unfinished business. Revenge, guilt; that stuff."

"I didn't know ghosts could feel guilt."

"Well, they can."

They fell into silence again.

When they finally got to the turning onto Conway Road, Zoey paused. She began waving at a boy who was approaching from the opposite direction. "Hey," she called. "Hi Reuben."

He was dribbling a football, and glanced up at the sound of his name. He had a lean face and pimples around his chin and forehead, and looked sixteen, seventeen. “Hey, Zoey.”

Zoey had another drag of her vape as he crossed the road and joined them.

“Were you just at practise?” she said.

“Yeah.” He picked up the ball, tossing it gently between his palms.

“Ready for the Battle Royale tonight?” Zoey sounded excited.

“You know it.” His voice pitched on the second word. “Maybe don’t bring a sniper rifle to a shotgun fight this time, though.”

The two of them laughed, the joke obscure to Eileen, and she shifted impatiently, the bouquet crinkling audibly now they were away from the crowd.

Reuben looked at her. “Hi?”

“This is Sally’s brother.” Zoey gestured over her shoulder at Eileen. “That’s Eileen.”

“Sooooo...” She saw him register the collar at her neck. “How do you know each other?”

“The train,” Zoey said.

“Zoey asked for directions,” Eileen clarified.

He scoffed. “You know where we live,” he said to Zoey. “You’ve been over, like, a million times.”

Eileen’s mind began to whirr as she reconciled what he’d just said. “It’s fine.” She smiled reassuringly. “I don’t mind. Happy to help.”

“Well, it’s just literally there.” He pointed down Conway Road. “So she’s alright from here, aren’t you Zoey?”

“Yeah,” Zoey said. “Thanks.” She didn’t look at Eileen when she said it. And then, without even a proper goodbye, she turned the corner onto Conway and was gone, just like that.

Her exiting felt too abrupt, too impassive. But she’d forgotten her bouquet again, and Eileen could follow and rectify this sense of deflation, could tell her, at least, to take care.

“Her flowers.” Eileen began to follow after her, but Reuben held out his arm.

“It’s alright,” he said. “Give em here.” He took them from her, and looking at them, and at Eileen, he said, “You really didn’t need to come all this way. She could’ve carried these herself.”

“I wanted to make sure she’d be alright.”

“Yeah,” he said, “But it’s kind of…” He trailed off, as if considering whether or not to say whatever it was that he was thinking. “You know?”

“No actually,” Eileen said. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Sometimes she gets people to do things for her when she’s bored or can’t be bothered, that’s all.” He gestured to the bouquet, as if to demonstrate his point. “Like I said, she could’ve obviously carried these.”

He had momentarily stunned the words out of her. If it was a joke, it was a crude one. And if he meant it, which she suspected he did, well, that was even more tactless and malign a thing for him to have said. “I think a bit more sensitivity is needed, young man.” She was aware of how old she must have sounded to him; she sounded like her father, who had always used *young lady* when he scolded her.

His expression changed then, so that he looked exasperated, and she could not tell if it was with pity or self-satisfaction that he said, “She’s got her own flat, you know. She has a job and a driver’s licence.” He smirked openly at her. “Think about *that*.” And then he too left her standing stupidly there, with her erroneous assumptions, on the corner in the dark. She took the gum from her mouth, and held it, horribly pink and glistening in her palm, until she could find a bin.

It was Christopher she called on her walk back to the station. As it rang, she thought again of that day with him in the church, and wondered for the first time if she had done the right thing; it was not defensiveness she’d felt earlier on the train, but the stirrings of guilt, like silt rising from a riverbed. From somewhere, church bells began to ring. She felt a sudden pressure on the crown of her head then, almost like fingernails on her scalp, felt it rake the skin and move her hair, and she spun quickly round, thinking maybe it was Zoey playing a trick, or that she’d come to say goodbye after all, but there was no one there; the street was empty all around, not even a seagull overhead, the streetlights imparting it with an eerie glow. She continued walking, quicker now, the phone pressed again to her ear, but after a few long moments it rang out to voicemail, and she hung up and tried Morris. He answered after the fifth ring, sounding like he’d just been laughing.

“Where on earth are you?” he said.

“I’m on my way home now. I won’t be long, an hour and a half, I should think.” There was chatter in the background, a woman’s sharp laughter. “I’ll definitely be there within two.”

Morris relayed the message. She could hear Christopher's voice but couldn't tell what he was saying.

"Can't you get here sooner? They're heading off in about forty-five or so minutes. I texted you."

"Is he angry?" Eileen said. "Let me speak to him."

"He's fine," Morris said.

"He must be furious," Eileen said. "I completely understand if that's the case."

"He's not. Really. We're having a good time."

"Surely he is, though."

"Eileen, I'm telling you, he doesn't care. He's not angry." There was another shrill giggle. "Susanna is *lovely*." He said this deliberately, she knew, because she'd not asked about her. "It's a shame you aren't here to meet her." She was probably sitting in Eileen's seat at the table.

She felt a desperation overcome her then. "Is he really leaving that soon?"

Morris must have covered the receiver with his hand, because his voice sounded muffled when he said, "Eileen wishes she was here."

She heard Susanna respond with a sound like, "Aww."

"Mo," Eileen said.

The sound of Christopher then, saying something she couldn't make out, and then all of them laughing.

"Mo," Eileen said, louder. "He isn't staying?"

"He can't. But he's invited us down to Penzance for Christmas, which isn't too long off if you miss him tonight."

"Christmas?"

"I know," Morris said. "But hey, maybe you could take it off this year. Wouldn't that be nice." But even as he said it, his conviction faltered, and Eileen knew he understood that she could not, that her work would not allow it, and that in offering, Christopher had understood it as well.

Arthur

The day of the invitation, Eileen had come round as usual, and Arthur insisted like always that she sit in the only armchair, that he was fine on the floor.

“I tried baking a focaccia,” he said, when she’d asked how his week had gone. “Disaster. I’ll stick to sourdough.”

“You know, I tried getting Christopher into that sort of thing,” she said. Christopher was nearer to Arthur in age than she was. “My mother was Irish and used to bake a loaf of soda bread before we went to school.” They were sat near the window overlooking the river, and she was watching the water, a wistfulness on her face.

“I’ll make you some,” he said.

She seemed not to hear him. “I think she probably did it because the smell was enough to get us out of bed without any hassle, but now it just means that homemade bread makes me think of her and growing up in that house.”

He’d been about to repeat his offer, when she said, “What else have you been up to?”

“Oh,” he sighed. “Same old, really. When I’m not working, I’m doing this.” He opened his arms wide, gesturing to the cottage around them. “Ongoing project.”

“Find anything new? Any more hexafoils?”

“Not lately.”

“Have you gone out?”

He lay back on the hardwood floor and looked up at the old beams that crossed the ceiling. “Sure.” He’d waxed the floors himself, and the wood beneath his hands felt pleasing, so smooth it was almost soft, and he stroked it absentmindedly with his fingers.

“That’s a no, then.” It was not a reprimand, but it was not a pardon either. She stood. “I’m going to help myself to a glass of water. Would you like one?”

Eileen had started coming by as a favour to his mother, who was herself involved in the church up in Whitley Bay and used this network to enlist Eileen; it was his mother's way of interfering without having to travel all the way to Norfolk. His mother often complained that he spent too much time shut away in 'that creepy old dump', that someone his age needed friends, needed to get out and do things. It was not that Arthur never left the cottage; he did, occasionally, when absolutely necessary, venture out for appointments or to collect groceries if the delivery slots were full. His mother did not understand the nature of his introversion: that the very thought of leaving the cottage made him feel unwell, made him sweat and shake and sick to his stomach, an affliction that had steadily befallen him in the time he'd lived there.

That she'd taken it upon herself to send someone round to hang out with him, as if she were arranging a playdate, had been intensely embarrassing, particularly since the person she'd selected was nearer to her own age than his and because he couldn't think of someone more boring to spend his time with than a vicar, which showed, he'd thought, just how self-serving and absurd his mother's concern was to begin with. And because he'd thought this vicar would undoubtedly report back, he'd decided, when she showed up on his doorstep that first afternoon and asked to be let in, that he'd be polite enough but he'd also make it fun for himself and not be above antagonism, and before she'd even sat down, he told her that he was, unlike his mother, a staunch atheist and that he did not buy into the fire and brimstone propaganda; she'd surprised him completely when she said that, in fact, neither did she. As far as she was concerned, Hell, she said, was nothing more than a tool to control the masses. They talked at length on the government, on banned books and music today versus back-in-the-day. And they deliberated the new development, which was, at that point in time, still just a rumour; in the spirit of debate, they'd unofficially taken sides as to whether it would be beneficial or harmful for Hesketh. He found her fascinating and confounding in equal measure, so naturally he invited her back the following week, requesting that she keep it from his mother, and it had been that way ever since.

Eileen set two glasses of water down on the floor between them and sat again in the chair. Arthur had been luxuriating in the peacefulness of outside, grateful that the commotion of cutting down the woods did not carry over to a Saturday. The site was situated further along the river, but the noise carried and made it sound closer. It

had been that way for over a fortnight now since things with the development had resumed, the daylight hours disturbed.

When Eileen spoke again, her voice was gentle. "I thought we'd decided that you'd get some fresh air."

"I get fresh air whenever I want." He motioned to the window with his foot.

"Ha-ha," she said, sardonically.

A dull squeal then, like the swinging of a door, which made her turn sharply. She'd told him once there were stories that the cottage – which she'd said was actually the oldest part of Hesket, aside from the church – was haunted, but then he'd made some joke about the Holy Spirit, and she'd not brought it up since.

He stretched, languorous on the floor. "Has your son left for Penzance?"

She turned again to the window, avoiding, Arthur thought, his eye. "Mm."

"You must miss him."

"Yes, well," she sounded weary. "Apparently, he's already not getting on with his girlfriend, now that they're living together." She pulled a face, her mouth exaggerated downward, a bit like a fish. "Mo's going down in a couple of weeks to see him."

"That's a shame."

The two of them lapsed into companionable silence. From where he lay, he could see the willow tops across the river swooning dreamily; they'd been losing their leaves ahead of the coming winter, and the wind pulled a few from the branches now, so that they skipped away beyond the frame of his view. They had done well to keep their greenery this long after so little rain, sustained throughout the drought by their proximity to the river.

Eileen said quietly, "If I lived here, I'd be very unproductive."

That Eileen was much older than Arthur was not off-putting, nor was her religious faith or her intense dislike of *Die Hard*. He looked forward to his conversations with her, partly because they were not afraid to disagree and that made for interesting discussion, and partly because he liked to watch the way her lip curled around a particular crooked tooth when she talked, catching on the tapered point that jutted out, fanglike.

"Listen." She turned to him, her hands on the arm of the chair. "I know you won't want to, but I've something to ask of you." There had been a sudden

transformation in her; she was now charged with a self-conscious energy, and spoke quickly, as if not wanting to lose her nerve.

Arthur sat up. "Go on?"

"I'm having a party." He saw that she was blushing. "It's a birthday party. Dinner. There'll be a whodunnit game, you know, everyone around the table gets a character and one of us is murdered and one of us is the killer. It's all very silly." She lowered her gaze and began to pick tiny bobbles off her jumper, collecting the fluff in her palm. He could imagine her then as a young woman: shy, but in a way passionate. "Anyway, it's in six days – on Friday – and we've had someone drop out, which means there's a spare seat. You'd be doing me a favour if you came; the game can't be played without all the characters. So, what do you think?"

When she looked at him then, it was with a kind of hopefulness, a desire, even, and he was surprised that he could feel it mirrored within himself. It was flattery he felt most of all, that she wanted him there, that she should become so nervous because of him. And because this event was to take place in the future and was of no immediate consequence to him now, he said, "Of course I will."

A long, stuttering creak came from the floorboards. It juddered through his tailbone and up his spine as the cottage shifted, the feeling intensifying as she put her hand on his wrist, rubbed his skin with her thumb. It was the first time so intimate a gesture had passed between them, and it shocked him that he felt a certain pleasure from it.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." She smiled at him.

"Anything for you." And because that sounded too fervent, he bowed exaggeratedly to make it seem less truthful, which was difficult to do whilst sat on the floor.

"You say that now, but I haven't told you just how *ancient* some of us are." Her self-deprecation didn't mask her bashfulness.

There was the sense that a new possibility had been opened up to him, and though he wasn't yet certain of what exactly it might be, he knew it was in some way alluring. He felt emboldened by it, and said, "Will I be sat near you?"

The question appeared to catch her off-guard, if only momentarily. "Well, I thought..." she began. And then, "Yes, if you'd like."

"I would," he said. "Would you?"

She looked down at another bit of pilled fabric, as she pulled it from her sleeve and said tenderly, "Course I would, Arthur."

When she left, he sank into the empty armchair and into her lingering warmth, and as the cottage knocked and whined, he imagined for the first time Eileen sat at the little kitchen table of a morning with the paper spread out, reading choice bits aloud to him while he made them coffee on the stove, speckling the newsprint in ruby smudges of jam and crumbs of homemade bread.

The estate agent had described the cottage as a little tired but full of character. Of all the houses Arthur had seen and could afford, this was the most neglected, the most unloved. That it had been abandoned for years had only intensified its disrepair. It was equal parts holey and clogged and loose and calcified and leaking and swollen and cracked and mouldy. But its bones were good: the plumbing and electrical – added, along with sash windows, relatively late in its life – were miraculously still in fine working order; it had beautiful, if woodworm infested, timeworn beams; the fireplace was large enough that he could walk into it if he stooped; the wattle and daub exterior was mostly in good shape; within the wilderness of the garden were rambling roses, and it sat beside a river (a river! On the edge of a woodland, no less), and how many people could say they lived in a place like a cottage from a fairy-tale? The asking price was less than he'd expected something like this should be. He had a sum of inheritance, and so he made an offer in the spirit of adventure and moved in not long after.

For money's sake, he took on the project himself, room by room in the spare hours between sleep and working from home. He was acutely content in the company of the cottage, happy to take a bleach solution to the mould and a bowl of vinegar to the taps, to replace its myriad broken tiles and spray woodworm treatment, patch and paint every wall. Sometimes he wondered just when anyone had last cared for it like he did. As time passed, he was pleased with how comforting the cottage became, how warm and familiar and charming, and how lucky he felt when the sun puddled like syrup on the hardwood in the afternoon.

The more time Arthur spent in the cottage, the more he understood there was a difference between being alone and loneliness. He did not feel alone.

Not ever.

For one thing, the cottage was constantly making noise according to the weather, the temperature, and its compact size gave it a feeling of intimacy and fullness, so that even though it was just him there, none of the rooms ever felt empty. The cottage was a warren of chambers, one leading into another, and all of them very nearly too small for furniture. The ceiling lights were wired nearest the outer walls so that at night the rooms were all much darker on the one side than the other. The floor in the office (which was in fact just a cupboard he'd converted by installing a plank of wood as a makeshift desk) was terribly bowed, so that whenever he worked, he had to sit in his wheeled chair with both feet planted or else roll into the living room. The bathroom sink spouted only scalding water.

And then there were the multitude of unusual things that had for so long been hidden from human eyes, revealed to him over the years like so many little gifts: a crudely carved wooden horse, so *obviously* male (it was unrealistic, that size, certainly?!), about the dimensions of a tealight and hidden behind a baseboard; a sliver-thin coin half-embedded in ceiling timber, snapped in two when he tried to dislodge it, so that one half was still wedged in the beam, the other a token he kept in his pocket; a child's leather shoe beneath a loose floorboard, flattened and dusty and stiff; there was an object made of platted wheat stalks, nebulously shaped like a heart; a knobbly wrought iron key that did not fit into any lock he could find. And one afternoon, when the sun was low enough, it threw into relief carvings in the fireplace, intersecting lines roughly like a chequerboard and others that looked like encircled six-petalled flowers, and then he noticed more of them, etched into beams and across the top of the front door.

"They'll be hexafoils," Eileen had said when he showed her. In was in the early days of her coming round. "They were believed to protect the home," she explained enthusiastically. "The idea was a witch would get trapped in them so they couldn't enter. There were witch-hunts here, you know. A lot of women were accused. A devastating amount, actually, if you consider how small the village is."

"What happened to them?"

"Nothing good, God rest them."

"I had no idea."

"No," she said. "It's not exactly the kind of thing to boast about, is it? All those women tortured and then swum. That was how they tested them, by dunking them into the river and letting water decide their fate. If they sunk, they were

innocent, though of course they'd already drowned by that point. If they floated it meant they were rejected by God, so they were hanged. Doomed either way."

"I'd expected them to have been burned at the stake."

"Not in England; Scotland, yes. But witchcraft was a felony here, so they were hanged. You can impress people with that fact next time you're at a party."

He wondered if not knowing about these things made him seem in some way *naïve*, if it made her think him juvenile. "I didn't know you were such a history buff."

"Things shouldn't be forgotten just because they're unpleasant. I think there should at least be a plaque put up in the village, some acknowledgment they existed, but the parish council favour the approach that it's best not to be haunted by the past." She sounded disapproving. "It was women just like me who were killed, you know."

He raised his eyebrows.

She pressed her hand solemnly to her chest. "I'm the first female vicar this parish has ever had and there were people spitting about it when I took the post, and *that* was in the nineties. I can't imagine an attempt at something so brazen would've gone over too well in those days, do you?"

And so that was how this odd little lump of earth and timber, after having been abandoned so long before Arthur fixed it up and gave it new life, finally got its name: Hex Cottage, an homage to history not forgotten.

In the days since Eileen's invitation, there had been a feeling that hung in the air like a coming rainstorm, permeating every part of the cottage, so that he often had to open a window or turn on the television, or play music very loudly just to ease it: the constant sense of a presence just beyond his periphery or in another room, as if at any moment a cough or a sigh might be heard, though of course there never was. It was worse at night, when the sounds were much louder than was normal, even for the cottage – a groan that might pull him from the edge of sleep, a loud pop like the cracking of a bone.

But he was in too much good spirits to feel ill at ease. The promise of the invitation buoyed him considerably. It felt like a development in their relationship, a forward progression. He began to imagine her nervousness that day was because she was in some way attracted to him; whether she'd only realised it that afternoon or

had harboured thoughts of him for a long time, were both entertained. These fantasies were intoxicating, and the more he thought on them, the more they intensified and grew, shapeshifting into a quiet lust or passionate sex, and sometimes even confessions of love. The more he associated Eileen with attraction and sex and romance, the more he began to wonder that perhaps the reason he was entertaining these waking dreams so ardently, was because he was recognising his own dawning longing for her. That she wanted him to meet her friends, who were themselves also older and perhaps worldly people, probably meant that she must think of him as having a similar maturity level. Her husband, Morris, never really factored as a complication – Arthur imagined him to be a dull, tedious man, dense to the interests and desires of his wife, disparaged and put-up-with by her friends, who all secretly thought him unequal to Eileen. The whole thing was distracting. He googled things like, *famous couples with large age gaps*, while he was meant to be working on the website design for a new client, spent long bouts of time imagining various hushed conversations with her at the party in which she admitted her feelings for him.

In these periods of enthusiasm, he'd start to make preparations even though it was still days away: he carefully selected an outfit, which he ironed and hung on the back of his door; cleaned and polished his nicest shoes; and as he cut his hair at the bathroom sink, he thought of a gift for her, a gesture that she would find touching, meaningful, something between the two of them.

He would bake her a loaf of soda bread.

He ran the clippers over his scalp and imagined presenting the bread to her, perhaps in the kitchen away from everyone else. She'd smile as she unwrapped the cloth it was nestled in, hold a hand to her mouth when she realised what it was. *Oh*, she'd whisper, *You remembered*, and would insist that they share a piece, only them, that it was too special to put out for everyone. Closing her eyes, she'd bite into it, moaning softly. He'd put his hand on her – her arm or her back – and she'd angle her face to him, the shape of her breasts obvious beneath her blouse (he tried to imagine her in a low-cut dress, but couldn't visualise anything other than the modest blouses and jumpers she always wore). He'd touch her lips with his finger, and she'd press her mouth into his hand and then he would kiss her, passionately and against the fridge, feel her jutting tooth against his tongue.

He fantasized that the gentle scrape of the clippers at the top of his neck were her fingernails. There was suddenly an awful clunking and screeching and

howling of pipes when the tap spluttered surprisingly to life of its own accord, and began to gush so forcefully it sprayed the mirror and floor and all over his torso, hot water that made the fabric of his t-shirt cling to his belly, and his trousers feel pleausurably warm against his thighs and groin.

As the week unfolded, he oscillated between excitement and trepidation. To leave the cottage was an unwelcome thought that made adrenaline knock through his body. But then, his thoughts would return to Eileen, to the invitation and what it could mean, to the stolen whispers and brushes of skin he'd imagined in those idle moments, and his desire to attend the party would dominate again.

He woke one morning, three days before the party, slick with sweat. He pushed the duvet far from his naked body, and found the sheets were damp. The room felt torrid, like he was in a greenhouse. He put his hand to the radiator and found it was piping hot, even though the thermostat was set to zero. He fruitlessly wiggled the knob a bit. He would have to shut off the valve with a wrench. The air was sweltering, cloying, and made him feel sick. In the living room, he opened the window to let in some air, and pulled the armchair nearer so that he could sit with his face at the opening, breathing deeply the cool and gentle breeze, feeling it fill his ribs and waft pleasantly against his hot skin. Outside, the harsh cacophony of distant machinery was unpleasant, but there was something else too, closer and from above, the stiff sound of wood against wood, and then,

BANG.

The window slammed like a guillotine, less than an inch from his head. He recoiled jerkily into the armchair, hard enough that it fell backwards to the floor, and he lay for a few long moments on his back, heart thudding in his ears, until the relief that it had not landed on his skull came over him like a euphoria.

After the shock of the window, a complete regret set in as it dawned on him the reality of what he'd agreed to. It was bad enough he'd have to be sociable with people he'd never met, that they'd want to know who he was and what he did, why he was there at all, and worse, he'd have to try to be someone *interesting* in front of the woman he now fancied. But more than that, it was the *leaving* that caused an acute dread. There was nothing he could pinpoint about venturing out of the cottage that made him feel this way; he did not think certain death waited for him outside or

that something else horrible would happen. It was not logical, he knew, but seemed instead to come from some other place he couldn't locate and influence him on a level beyond rational thought.

He'd not always been like this. Reclusive. Certainly it wasn't *that* long ago he was in the pub of an evening with friends, was it? Granted, he'd always had anxiety, social and otherwise, but not to this extent, not when he'd lived in town before the move here, which had not felt an unreasonable distance away at the time. He'd assured his friends that nothing would change – it was, after all, an easy enough trip by bike or bus – but everything these days felt too distant, too far away. When had he started making excuses? When had they stopped inviting him out?

He noticed the flakes of paint two days before the party, woke to it scattered across his pillow and in his hair like pale blue confetti. It was just above his bed, one long crack in the wall, the paint blistering off in patches to reveal a buttery yellow layer. The internet suggested it was damp, which made sense given the cottage's proximity to the river and its old single-glazed windows. He moved his bed as far from it as he could, which was not easy in a room so small, then pulled a fan from the jumble in his cupboard and turned it on high.

By the afternoon it was worse. The room resembled a snow globe, scales of magnolia and off-white, a violent shade of crimson, billowing around as the fan huffed; he turned it off and returned it to the cupboard. There was now a patch larger than his head, and he rubbed the edge of it with his thumb, felt where the years of paint hollowed out in millimetres. Next came wallpaper, something floral that lifted at the seam and peeled away, and then citrus fruits and art deco shells hanging from the wall in scrolls, more paint, then florals again, a history revealed in sheets. The patch continued to spread, was now the size of a bread bin and he pressed the back of his hand to it, was surprised by how dry it felt; if not damp, then what?

The day after that, the plaster had fallen off in scabs, the gypsum board beneath marbled in raised fissures. By the time Arthur was readying for bed that night – the night before Eileen's party – it had broken away in cardboardy chunks to reveal a lumpy daub, which Eileen had once told him was some combination of wet soil, clay, dung, straw, and sand; where small pieces of it had broken off with the gypsum, there was a crude lattice of old wooden strips. The patch now occupied a surface area larger than his computer monitor, had grown at an alarming rate. He

turned out the light and climbed into bed, wondering what to do about it. Moonlight filtered through the curtain, the room shadowy but not completely dark. He hadn't lain there long before he heard it, a slow scraping that made his eardrums tingle in the stillness. He rolled over, trying to see, to pinpoint the sound. He looked at the wall, the patch reduced to a dark shadow.

There is something about nightfall that intensifies a thought, a feeling, a sense.

Scraaaaaape.

A ripple of fear then.

He was being ridiculous; he scoffed out loud to assure himself just how ridiculous he was being. It was the looming party that was getting to him, making him feel like this. That's all it was. That and a rodent behind the daub. He could only hear it now because of everything that had fallen away, all those layers that had insulated any noise before.

When he woke, he lay there for long, groggy minutes in the watery light of morning and felt the weight of an unsettled sleep haunt the room like a dense fog. He rolled over and saw the wall, no longer a patch of exposed daub, but a hole, with splints of wood and rubble on the floor.

He got out of bed, cautiously moved closer to it.

At first, he couldn't quite tell what it was. Like hard, dried out leather. Then he noticed the rows of yellowed fangs that were attached to a grotesquely shrivelled head, mouth agape as if in horrified surprise, the empty pits for eye sockets. And then the strange, stiff contortion of its desiccated body, bones protruding through taunt hairless skin, the hooked needle-like claws at the end of its withered legs, its thin, rattish tail. A cat, horrifyingly mummified, trapped in the wall; he shuddered to think that it had been there this whole time, inches from his slumbering head. Stranger still, was that it had been sealed inside an alcove of fretted wood, like a purposely made tomb.

Since his discovery of the cat that morning, the cottage felt strange, as if there had been a change in its barometric pressure. The cat unnerved him. Morbid fascination had him periodically peer it at its angular skull, the bony contortions of its body.

The soda bread was cooling on the kitchen table, a golden brown, flour-dusted sphere, with a line he'd cut into the dough that had satisfyingly cracked and split apart as it baked, and he traced it with his finger. He'd never made soda bread before, was worried it might be overdone, inedible, and that Eileen might say, pityingly, that it was a shame, and refuse to eat it.

By the time he needed to get ready to leave, it was already dark out. He ran a cloth over his polished shoes again, carefully re-ironed his best shirt and trousers. He could not recall when he'd worn them last, the cotton crisp and pleasing on his body, and he felt quite good in them, attractive. He even found an old cologne, something musky and heavy. He put on his coat and wrapped the bread, pleasantly warm still, in a clean dishtowel and then stood for a few moments, breathing deeply, preparing himself. Prolonged unease swirled strangely with the excitement at the possibility of his fantasy coming to life, and he retched in the toilet.

Returning home, hours later, he was intoxicated from the wine and the company. It felt wonderful outside, the air crisp and smelling of autumn, and faintly, of wood burning from someone's stove. As he unlocked the door and stepped inside, he checked his phone, blearily, for the time, and saw that it was perhaps too late – too early – to message his friends and suggest they meet at The Red Lion pub in town on Sunday, but vowed to when the sun was up so it would not seem like just a drunk text. It had been so long since he'd joined them for a roast, hadn't it? Why had he ever resigned himself to miserable hermitude? He made himself a cup of strong tea, felt giddy at having been out and social, lively in a way he hadn't for ages, even though the night had not gone as he'd envisioned. To begin with, the bread had not been the magic apple he'd first hoped it would be. Eileen had put it out on the table, and he'd watched everyone help themselves; she hadn't even managed a bite before it was gone. That he felt indifferent about the unfulfillment of his fantasies, his romantic affections for Eileen, surprised him.

He leant against the counter, taking small sips of hot, milky tea, and mulled over the alchemy that had occurred that evening. The party had been a motley of guests, mostly Eileen's age, as she'd said, but one of whom, Fiona, was the great niece of an older man attending and was perhaps only a few years younger than Arthur. She'd worn glasses and had a pink streak in her curly hair, and shared self-deprecating anecdotes about singledom and dating, and he realised (was even,

admittedly, a little embarrassed at) how disconnected he'd been, holed up alone in the cottage for so long. He had no stories to contribute of his own of course, not since he'd been living Hesketh. He'd been preoccupied with Eileen's mouth all evening, watching it spray spittle when she laughed and food clot unappealingly around her fanged tooth, and he found that he no longer wanted to kiss her. It became clear as he sat quietly at the table that he'd allowed himself to get carried away. His solitariness had swelled what should have only been a passing thought into some unwieldy obsession. He was not sure now that Eileen even thought of him in that way at all. It was entirely possible that he'd misinterpreted her nervousness that day, that she'd not been anxious he would turn her down but was in fact sheepish for having to ask him at all because his invitation was so clearly an afterthought; she'd said, hadn't she, that someone else hadn't been able to go, that there was a spot that needed filling. He felt a sure sense of relief at this prospect, that she didn't think of him as anything more than a friend.

Upstairs, he felt the air change as soon as he went into his bedroom and closed the door behind him, that same moody atmosphere, only it seemed more concentrated now, compressing the room. He had the distinct sensation at the top of his neck and inside his ears, of expecting a sound, like waiting for the clap of thunder in a lightning storm, but there was only its absence, the cottage unsettlingly still. He went straight to his bed, turning on the lamp beside it. Fiona had regaled the party about having recently attended a séance (she was sure it was the same neighbourhood...), and so he'd volleyed back by bringing the cat up, and it had gone over well as a curiosity (in fact, Eileen had promised to come round and see it tomorrow). You always find things, Eileen had said, and recounted eagerly to the other guests the objects he'd shown her. And it was true, he'd found a lot of remarkable things – the coin, the hexafoils – but there was something about this one that felt different, niggled uncomfortably at him.

In his periphery, he was aware of the cat's empty eye sockets as he undressed, positioned as it was to be facing him from within the wall, and he allowed himself to look at it. At first, he thought it was simply the drink fooling him, that his vision was only blurred – but in the dim light, something gleamed in its horrid little mouth.

He inserted the tip of his finger into it.

His immediate feeling was one of revulsion. It was soft and moist, slippery. A tongue. He pulled his finger out instinctively, his skin scraping against the rounded tip of one of its fanged teeth. For a moment, all he could do was blink at it, uncomprehendingly. Surely the tongue was not still alive. Surely that was impossible. But he could still feel its wetness on his fingertip, and no matter how much he blinked and rubbed at his eyes, he could not unsee how much it glistened.

He gathered the duvet around him and hurried downstairs. By the time he reached the last step, he'd already told himself it was a hallucination, that even the moisture he'd felt on his finger was not real. He was very drunk, that was all, and didn't people become unreliable when they were drunk, wasn't the creepiness of finding an ancient cat in his wall just making his imagination run riot? He turned on all the lights and splashed his face with cold water, drinking from the tap in quick, hungry gulps. He settled, finally, in the armchair and was thinking vaguely about attempting to sleep in it when he heard a skittering noise, like when hail fell down the chimney.

He waited, but nothing appeared in the fireplace. When it happened again, he found his phone. Turning on the torch, he crawled into the mouth of the chimney, twisting his body so that he could shine his light upward into its felting of cobwebs and soot. Angled the way it was, he could only really see into it a few meters, but it was enough to find a horde of mummified cats, their mouths stretched open, all of them frozen in a horrific hiss, jaws filled with those sharp little pointed teeth, and in that precise moment Eileen's words resurfaced, *You always find things*, as it dawned on him why the first cat had so troubled him: he had not *found* it, the way he had the things under the floorboards or wedged in the beams, but rather it seemed to him, with a sobering and horrible clarity, that the cottage had shown it to him intentionally – a gift; a threat.

Rain

A cumulonimbus, exceptionally large and anvil-shaped, 12,000ft high and more than a mile wide, if one were to measure, gathered in the earliest hours of the morning to form an altogether impressive and portentous column above Hesketh. The first tentative drips landed on the purple petals of a saffron crocus just as the dawn was approaching. A vicar, up before anyone else, her mind cluttered and fraught as she readied for the day ahead – a trip to the coast in the hopes she might track down a young woman and apologise, acquitting herself of the shame that had been plaguing her – was the first to notice raindrops splatter the windowpane. And because it hadn't rained in so long, she traced them briefly with her finger, and peered out at the looming dark mass above, as it began to empty itself over the village.

It was less a shower than a sudden and almighty downpour. A week of rain fell in the first thirty minutes alone. Months of drought had left the ground hard as quartz, and the downpour engulfed the surface in pools of water. Within two hours the rainfall measured over five inches, and the storm drains overflowed in sinewy rapids, inundating the road, swelling around car tyres and over the pavement, sluicing up the front paths of the houses, and all the while the rain was still battering ceaselessly down.

No one in Hesketh knew what to do; the deluge rose so quickly, so unstoppably, and nothing like it had happened to the village in recent memory. When the water lapped against doorsteps, people (in what would prove to be an altogether pointless endeavour) began to prepare their homes as best they could: stuffing towels across the thresholds, piling the rest of their belongings on higher shelves and kitchen counters, mopping up the puddles that crept beneath the door. As it was, the rain was to make history as the heaviest that the county had ever seen and the most disastrous event in Hesketh on record, worse even, than the flood of 1647.

After eight inches of rainfall, the River Hesk was a rushing torrent, and in its rage, it burst its banks and 400 million gallons of water poured into the adjoining meadow and woodland, sending a chipper truck hurtling into a lone cottage, which crumbled unceremoniously at the corner so that most of the wall disappeared downstream.

From the ford, the river surged into the village, filling the houses and church with even more water. One woman, who later claimed to have had psychic visions of the flood in the days leading up to the disaster, retreated to the stairs and watched helplessly as her table and chairs began to float around the room, retreating a step at a time as the water rose.

The force of the flood swept away cars parked along the road and uprooted a tree stump in a local garden, disinterring a centuries old skeleton, its bones later found in the churchyard beside a chainsaw.

A major incident was declared.

It was later determined that the substantial loss of trees along the river and deep into the woodland contributed to the scale of the disaster. Of course, they only had to look to Old Hesk, and the trauma of what had happened on that ground so long ago, for the cause of it all. That kind of past can haunt a place, can seep into the land like a slow poison, fermenting with the soil, mutating the way any contagion does, transmogrifying into something stronger, stranger, something supernatural. And there it remained for centuries, until the ground was broken open and the woods ripped out, and the blight was released again.

When at last the rain eased, a mere four hours later, Hesk was changed: the road was now a river, six feet deep in places; ground floor rooms had been transformed into subaquatic caverns; the church nave resembled a swimming pool, only its ornate pulpit visible, rising out of the water like a lighthouse; and what was left of the woodland was now a swamp, the meadow a swelling lake.

People sought safety in the upper stories. One woman attempted to climb onto the roof, her husband watching from their bedroom window as he waited for his turn, but she slipped and nearly fell into the water, and so clambered back inside, standing in her haste on beads of excrement on the carpet, left by a young hare dozing, unconcerned, on their bed. Another man had the foresight to rescue his rowboat as the water level rose and tied it to a bush beneath the upstairs window with a long enough lead that it could rise along with the water, and he eased himself

from the window into the boat as his sons watched on, determined that the three of them would row to the care home down the road and check on the residents there (they'd only recently moved a poor woman to a flat on the ground floor), while they all awaited the arrival of emergency services.

And an enormous fish, bound for near four hundred years to roam the river, at last had her chance to venture to all those places she had before only tantalizingly glimpsed from her watery realm. She went all the places a fish shouldn't, wove in exaltation through bracken and blackthorn, beech and oak and yew, and out into the wide expanse of meadowland, liberation found in its edgelessness. And then on to the allotment, brassicas tickling her long pale underbelly as she swam over jewels of flower in clumps along the bed below, a garden hoe floating on the surface scraping her flank as she passed, before she navigated toward the row of houses, half-submerged like a string of buoys.

A boy, now sat at the bow of his dad's rowboat gazed around the strange and surreal sight of Heskett under water, his dad occupied by the cautious backwards descent of his older brother into the boat, was the only one in the chaos that day to see her gliding through the water. It had been a kingfisher darting by that caused him to look toward the allotment, to see the approaching fin cutting through the water. He hadn't time to register fear or shock; there was only a sensation of awe. Her smooth, glinting back broke the surface when she neared, as if she wanted him to see her, passing right next to the boat, close enough that he might touch her if he were bold enough. He understood there was a graceful effortlessness to her movement, a beauty to the mottling of green-brown scales and elegant upward curve of her lower jaw, the muscular line of her body. She was the hugest fish he'd ever seen, double the length of the boat, her bony pointed head passing the bow before the tail had even neared. He felt the power of her as the boat lifted easily in her swell, and then she was gone, up the village road, submerged again, a big fish, previously confined to the realm of tall tale, now released into the wide world.