Salt over the shoulder: a guide to the supernatural in the modern world

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Salt over the shoulder: A guide to the supernatural in the modern world

by

Chloe N. Clark

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

Program of Study Committee:
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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2016

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDITOR’S NOTE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Forms of Conjuring the Moon</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION ONE: CLEANSINGS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stages of the Exorcism</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play Darkness</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the 4 stages of possession</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirrors are Practically Useless to Me</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aura Symptom</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Ways of Mapping Constellations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convent</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways of Travelling</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stricken</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turn &amp; Click</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION TWO: URBAN LEGENDS</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#Monsters</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rat-Infested Ghost Ship Off the Coast of Britain</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To De-scarf</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rhyme We Told as Children</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La città in cui io abbia abitato</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Gratitude</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollywood Hauntings</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Come When Called</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepwalking</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION THREE: EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNTS</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Color Constancy</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead Man’s Bride</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hide-and-Seek</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Year as a Medium</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotard’s Delusion</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECTION FOURS: MESSAGES, WARNINGS, METHODS OF COMMUNICATION</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once for Yes and Twice for No</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with Ghosts</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things Found on the Recording We Analyzed for EVP</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Routes in Iowa</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor Superstitions</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Little Nightmares</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The publishers and editor would like to thank the family of Dr. Sean A. Keye.

The editor would like to especially thank the following scholars for their help in fine-tuning Dr. Keye’s work:
Professor Debra Marquart, for her expert analysis of the texts and immense support of the project. Professor Christina Hill, for her knowledge of the anthropological significance of Dr. Keye’s work. Professor Charissa Menefee, for her support of the project. Professor Jeremy Withers, for his analysis of the literary significance of the text.

In addition, some other scholars were invaluable in compiling this text:
Bronte Wieland, for his knowledge of medicinal hegemony and gingerology.
Corinna Carter, for her knowledge of horses, video memes, and arcane murder facts.
Erin Schmiel, for her expertise on astrology.
Philippe Meister, for his scholarship on the history of non-profitable newspaper forgeries.
Dr. Marc Seals, for his scholarship on noir, needy students, and Modernism.
Dr. Katy Jaekel, for her work on teacher education and the lore associated with it.
Ron Wallace, for his contributions to the field of Madison based ghost stories.
Lisa Koca whose groundbreaking work on farm-phenomena and Hobbit-facts was greatly appreciated.
Stephanie Gunn for her comments on vampires, chupacabras, and expert analysis of scientific experiments.
Maria Rago for her knowledge of antiquities and book history.
Jennifer Hutchins for her explanation of fan-based phenomena.
Kristin Gulotta who shed light on the nature of cycles in poetry.
Marley Wheeler for her analysis of art and its place in folklore.
Samantha Kohnert who helped launch the field of children-based phenomena.
Tony Quick, for his scholarship on science-fiction and long distance communication.
Meghann Hart, for her knowledge of mangoes and Southern folklore.
Victoria Turley, Autumn Dinkelman, and Kelsey Gagen-Lanning for their work on office politics and gossip.
Ean Weslynn, for his knowledge of humorous legends.
Sara Doan, for her scholarship on commuting and folklore within higher education.
The Clark family, for stories.

The following publications have contained some of the text from this book, sometimes in slightly different form or title:
Abyss & Apex: Convent
Apex: Rolling Dice
Phantom Kangaroo: #Monsters
Liminality: Rat-Infested Ghost Ship Off the Coast of Britain
Treehouse: To De-scarf
Cease, Cows: Dead Man’s Bride
Cheap Pop: Once for Yes and Twice for No
After the Pause: Things We Found on the Recording We Analyzed for EVP
Sleet: On a Watermelon Truck, with a Chupacabra and After the Ikiryoh
Cake: To Dress Children in Ribbons
Horror Writers Association: Z is for—
Outlook Springs: Mephistopheles Never Claimed He Told the Truth
Split Lip: A Spell with the Blood of Oranges and The Apparitionist
Lockjaw: Automatism, or What to Visit in My Town
INTRODUCTION

by: Dr. Sean A. Keye, PhD

When I first stumbled across the manuscript held within this book, my first thought was there is no way these documents can be real. My mind immediately went to Houdini.

The magician Harry Houdini was known for his skepticism⁴. He believed that charlatans who tricked people into believing the supernatural, the mystical, the beyond belief, were no better than common thieves. His well-known skepticism actually rose to the level of a quest for disproving. This is perhaps ironic, given that Houdini’s entire career was built on creating illusion.

We live in a world of shadows. Someone told me that once, and I find myself more and more willing to believe him. For years, I’ve studied folklore but I’ve often wondered what drives us to tell these tales. Why do we long for the Loch Ness Monster or for the Ouija board to spell us out some cryptic message? Is it only a fear of the unknown that makes us chase the unknown?

So what are these documents in “Salt Over the Shoulder,” and what is their origin? I suppose I should explain the inexplicable events that led me to find them.

I was in the university’s library. Yet, again. It seems to be my haunt more and more these days as I work. I was looking for a specific text² on the Singing Bone motif’s prevalence in folklore around the world.³ While I was searching, I noticed a bundle of papers tied together with a red silk ribbon. The papers seemed out of place. I was merely going to take the bundle up to the front desk, except that I caught the hand-written title on the first page of the bundle—Salt Over the Shoulder: A Guide to Supernatural in the Modern World.

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¹ For an excellent biography of Houdini, read Ruth Brandon’s The Life and Many Deaths of Harry Houdini.
² The paper in question was Nick R. Cole’s “Sing Me Back: Variations on Musical Instruments as Crime-Solver”
³ The Singing Bone is listed in the Aarne-Thompson index as Tale Type 780
I couldn’t believe my eyes. My particular field of study is looking at how folklore has remained prevalent within the world—Orpheus, Lott’s Wife, Psyche, and the list goes ever on. How could I not look?

Asking that question, of course, might bring up the history of myths about the dangerous consequences of disobeying the imperative to not look: Orpheus, Lott’s Wife, Psyche, and the list goes ever on⁴. Still, curiosity is a fierce foe to overcome.

The manuscript was a mix of hand-written and typed pages on all sorts of paper-stock. Nothing bound them together once the ribbon was undone.⁵ I admit I may have mixed a few pages up. After some quick perusal, my scholarly code of honor got the best of me, and I begrudgingly delivered the book to the reference librarian. She took one look at it, before telling me that I was free to do with it as I wished. I felt a wave of happiness at this.

That is how I came to find the manuscript⁶ you now hold in your hands. Accounts contained within these texts have left me sleepless in some cases and filled me with a sense of wonder in others.

Although I cannot verify the authenticity of these documents, having no idea of their provenance, I can say that they carry a great sense of their veracity and authenticity. While the absurd and unreal situations in the text may not have happened in an actual sense, those affected by these events certainly believe them to be true. These stories were clearly told for a reason, whether to warn or to educate.

---

⁴ One of my favorite texts on this idea is Don’t Look Back: On “hindsight” in mythology by Dr. Eri Rire. Rire poses the idea that these myths use the idea of looking back with horrific ideas as a way of creating a moral imperative to live in the present and overcome what we’ve lost (or left behind).
⁵ For a look at a common ghost tale of a woman whose head is held onto her body only by a ribbon, try Offa Ceann’s “Women and Ribbons: A Feminist Reading of Common Ghostlore Tropes.”
⁶ I’ve decided to use the term “manuscript” throughout my text, though it is hard to say whether the assembly of texts was meant to be a manuscript or, instead, a collection of texts meant for something else entirely.
So, what follows are eye-witness accounts of hauntings, transcripts of interviews with survivors of possession, and more. The texts appear to have been collected over a long range of time, judging by a variety of handwriting styles, paper type, differing levels of wear, stains, and in some cases pages that seem to have been taken directly from someone’s (perhaps, the collector of the texts?) field notes.

As I finish this introduction, I find myself returning again and again to that red silk ribbon that held the manuscript together. Many cultures place symbolism on the color red. In some Asian cultures, there is the legend of the red string of fate which invisibly binds together people destined to be with one another. In others, red is a sign of danger or protection. I’m not sure how to look at the red string, though I feel there was some kind of fate at work when I found the manuscript. All I can say is that the ribbon is frayed now, though I do not remember how this came to be.
EDITOR’S NOTE

“What I seek to do is explore the corners of the room where the shadows lie....”

—Dr. Sean A. Keye, in his original pitch letter to the publishing house

When folklorist Dr. Sean A. Keye first approached our publishing house, with the manuscript that you’re about to read, I admit we were somewhat skeptical. A collection of found documents on the supernatural? What kind of market could there be for such a text?

However, Dr. Keye made a fascinating case for how needed the text could be. He also promised to put the texts into context and provide his own interpretations and background knowledge.

Dr. Keye sent the manuscript to me and I read it over the course of a few nights. It haunted my days: I saw the supernatural everywhere in the course of my daily life. Our press decided to publish. Unfortunately, shortly after signing the contract, Dr. Keye became unavailable. Our Press, thus, presents the text to you as Keye first sent it to us, with no further additions or alterations.

As to Dr. Keye, he sent me a letter shortly before his disappearance. It was a blank sheet of paper, and in the bottom of the envelope were fragments of tiny red threads.
Other Forms of Conjuring the Moon

I never liked the trick
with the girl and the swords.
The magician would lead her
to the box;

she’d peek inside, as if
expecting it to lead somewhere
unusual, a book-filled desert or
an ice cream shop that only served root beer
floats, right before entering.

The door would shut
and I’d always think she was going to knock;
a reverse invitation of
come in.

Then the magician would use
a blade, always one that shone under
stage lights and stab through so

so quick like hot water warmed spoons
into sherbet. How many times
does it take of hearing the blade
and then silence

before you stop holding your breath?
SECTION ONE: CLEANSINGS

The expulsion of evils, from being occasional, tends to become periodic. It comes to be thought desirable to have a general riddance of evil spirits at fixed times, usually once a year, in order that the people may make a fresh start in life, freed from all the malignant influences which have been long accumulating about them.

— James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

As a child, I remember one occasion when my mother spoke of an exorcism she had witnessed as a girl. Her church was fiercely tied to practices some might consider archaic. I do not remember much of what my mother told me, I was small, but she spoke of the grief of cleansing, or perhaps she had been speaking of the cleansing of grief. It had been something she witnessed: a young woman laid out in white dress upon a table. My mother, in remembering, said, “There was a cake on the counter behind her body, frosted with pink roses.” As a child, I’d thought my mother had meant the girl herself was frosted and I pictured her white dress with tiny painstakingly piped pink flowers of butter-cream, like a human wedding cake. Even though years later, I realize that my mother hadn’t meant the girl, the image still haunts me.

The expulsion or cleansing of evil. Is it possible? Is it necessary? Contained here are accounts of cleansing of spirits in general or cleansing from the touch of ghosts or the dead (not always viewed in a negative light). Of course, accounts of exorcism, though most often associated with practices of Christianity, go across cultures and date back to ancient times.

---

7 *The Exorcist*, though sensationalist, is probably the defining filmic depiction of the practice. How well does the film capture exorcisms? That is a question up for some debate. While the Christian practice of exorcisms certainly can cause harm to the person being exorcised, that is usually when the practitioner lacks experience.

8 The event of an exorcism themselves can seem somewhat commonplace, even Mother Teresa is rumored to have undergone one later in her life. As was artist Salvador Dali, in the 1940’s. Reportedly he sculpted a depiction of Christ on the cross as a thank-you-gift for the friar who performed the exorcism.
While exorcism is the most well-known of these cleansing practices, expulsions come in many forms: exorcism, blessings, and even superstitious methods to control given situations. All of these acts have been around for centuries, yet they continue to persist to the modern day in a variety of permutations.

---

9 For an introduction to the use of exorcisms throughout time, read Ted J. Kaptchuk, et al’s, article: “Placebo Controls, Exorcisms, and the Devil.”
Stages of the Exorcism

it is natural, instinctual even, to blame

the unknown for failure of crops, the work of witches and so, too, the deaths of children

stories for protection,
rituals against the dark

the weight
of loss, the shape of something removed

salt thrown over shoulders
breath held past graveyards

rules given to monsters
Play Darkness

She mourned us before
the day could break and now
scary stories
keep us up all night,
we wear shadows as veils.
Not even lemondrop sugar
candies melt in our mouths.
Hold your breath, cross
your fingers, count to ten.
The rules for the graveyard.10
We love you, love you, you.
Finger bone dice for rolling
try to beat us if you can.
She mourned us before
the sun might rise and now
we wear teeth for good luck.
Turn the lights on, salt your
doorway,11 count the beads. We
give you rules for the night.
We love you, love you, you.
Speak the words for casting
us away and out from you.
Not even beetles will make homes
in the sockets of our eyes.

---

10 There is a superstition that holding your breath while passing graveyards will keep you from being haunted.
11 Salt is one of the most common anti-ghost superstitions around. There is various lore on why this is, though many
attribute it to the purity of salt.
the 4 stages of possession

the scent of books and dust
means nothing to you, except the smell
of the past and I am lost again in
the library stacks, running my fingers over
spines and here and here and here

are the ones I loved and how much
do you consider yourself lived in
instead of living? Is it a weight I will
feel lifted from me, like a sword
out of stone and am I the only one
who wondered how the stone felt?
What relief, a sliver
finally released. And maybe

you talk about the color
of someone’s hair after years
of them having run and run with
no break, no catch of breath,
and I discovered the other name
for exorcism— releasement.

---

12 There are many documented stages of possession which all vary depending on what exactly the victim is being possessed by. In demon possession, for example, one of the early stages is that victims will often hear tapping— usually thought to be rodents—in their walls, which no one else seems to hear.
Mirrors are Practically Useless to Me

we crack our knuckles back to the bone, bend our wrists forward and backward and place our palms down on tables, we twist them clockwise to read the time, we know all of the names of all the bones in our hands, they are precious and important and each one plays a role, we can slip our hands free from handcuffs and spread decks of cards out like fans, we know how to feel the number of them in a deck and count them up

taste the words on the tip of your tongue, swirl them in your mouth, spit them out or swallow them back, incantations taste like cake, like scones dripping with butter and honey fresh from the oven, and the honey gets on your fingers, lick it off and the sweet sticky taste will remind you of telling stories as you lay the cards out, the king and the queen go into the forest and bandits appear and the queen is safe in the castle, but can we make her reappear

stretch out your body on the floor, arch your back, plant your soles on the ground firmly, try to raise yourself, try to raise yourself is what Hansel and Gretel’s mother told them when she pushed them out the door, and the stones clinked in his pockets like they were keeping musical time, he laid them out and sure birds ate the crumbs, but why did nothing eat those stones, shining like light under the moon, and were there no ghosts who would take the pebbles and swallow them one by one in hopes of getting that light back and count off to your favorite number, show the card to the audience, tell them to memorize it, have someone, a stranger, take the card and rip it into pieces or drown it in water or devour it covered in chocolate syrup, dunked in red wine, and watch them savor it, then shuffle, shuffle, cut, false cut, reshuffle, have someone else take the deck from you, have them flip the top card and it is always the card returned, so expected as to be unexpected, no one thinks the tricks will fail anymore

what do you do when you never slip, when every trick works, and you dream at night of piercing bodies with swords, of escaping knots underwater, of palming coins until the end of your life, what do you do when even in your dreams the girl is never left in two, the knots always tug

---

13 After some research, the editor has concluded that this title may be referencing a quote by famed stage magician Nevil Maskelyne.
loose, the coins never fall with a clatter to the floor, what do you do when there is no trick left

place your hands on the floor, stretch out the muscles of your body, speak lies to fill your patter, taste the words, they taste like grass, like cinnamon dusted snow

we all wait with breath held, with eyes unblinking, and we disappear slowly, tying the ropes around our wrists, dipping backwards into the water, pretending we know the answer to the riddle, the answer is smoke and
Aura Symptom

Sometimes I imagine my body as a part of someone else’s house; a room where the ghosts are stored in rows, organized alphabetically or, maybe, by color or shape.

When a lover once traced my bones, his hands warm and the pressure precise, he said that he could feel fissures under my skin, as if my body was breaking slowly from within.

And I often talk to strangers, in the library or on the bus or in aisles of the grocery store that I need nothing from, and ask them to tell me if they can see whether or not I’m still here.

---

14 Interestingly, many scholars have proposed the idea that many times the visions of saints may have been caused by ecstatic auras, associated with such illnesses as migraines or epilepsy.
Other Ways of Mapping Constellations\textsuperscript{15}

Whose hands bleed flames, those fingertips hot, skin against skin,\textsuperscript{16}
and the mark they leave is not of ashes,
and the weight of the world is almost a candle. When we spread secrets back
and forth between us, they tasted of the night sky, of sweat, of sweet.
Have I ever told you about the time the stars had teeth, they devoured galaxies in their sleep, accidentally almost, and black holes were left gaping and we had to fill them with memories, and retellings of fairy tales, and knock-knock jokes that no one ever got the punch lines of. And speaking to each other we imagine the shape of mouths more even than the words, the shape of lips, the movement of tongues. Who is left wanting, aching, rising, waiting, and each movement feels like the moment before release. You speak of flames, of fire, of heat, the pulse and push of a breeze as it carries us closer to one another. We leave our bodies at the gate of the night and try to remember what we named ourselves, so that we might recover our own shells eventually upon waking.

\textsuperscript{15}The font of this particular text, in its original document, was a particularly hard to classify one. Though, one has the distinct feeling that it was a font meant to carry symbolic emotional weight, perhaps of a pleasurable nature. The use of fonts to convey emotions has been one well studied. In a survey of emotion-laden fonts, a scholar writes about one in particular which: “"... contains a stroke flourish that is more socially recognized as a performance of attraction that mimics a human flourish." For more on this fascinating topic and how it pertains to new methods of storytelling, see P. Meister’s "The effect of spatial recognition and font usage on human emotions in storytelling-based operating systems," in the Journal of Rhetorical Folklore.

\textsuperscript{16}One of the interesting qualities to many demonic possession cases are the links to sexuality, or human touch as a catalyst both for possession and exorcism—a laying on of hands is often required for both.
Convent

After the devil came,
dripping into rooms like rain
through sagging ceilings
and after we spread out his skin,
rubbed it raw with salt,
just like Mother taught us,
we found we could not sleep
alone. Every sound the sound
of his feet tapping against the floor
oh how hooves tap
tap  tap
The walls would not protect
us, we thought they were too
thin—maybe we must sleep
with knives curled in the innocence
of our hands, Mother always
said our skin was soft, smooth,
best for turning pages, smoothing
fabrics. What can our hands
do to keep us safe? We sleep
in one room, lights kept burning,
waiting for dawn. The devil
keeps telling us to stop
fighting. The devil keeps
telling us *please stop.*

We sometimes wake at night,
pray with hands clasped, but

17 The word “convent” comes from the Latin for “assembly” and often carries connotations of joining or coming
together.
sometimes the silver of

crosses burns into our skin.
Ways of Travelling

Wow, your gods are so much cheaper here, he says. We wonder at him, at the world that can provide belief to the lost and the losing and those who will have lost. We know the rituals, the rules; we count our breaths held up, we finger beads

that feel smooth as stones crushed over and over by waves, we know to tell our sins to everyone who might listen: I loved him, I loved her, I left behind my nightmares spread like ink across his pillow, I’m sorry, I repent.

We have catalogued our hopes and found them lacking, we lack the imagination to find something better than this, and sometimes we think of prayers to say before sleeping. They climb into bed with us, like lovers returned for one last night, and wrap their arms into us and around us and keep us momentarily warm. In the morning, we are found again to have faces in the mirror, to have shadows which follow us around, however unwilling they might be, and we speak in tongues as often as we can. It’s easy to shape your tongue into twists and waves

and curls, once you know how, once you have trained the muscle. We said our prayers so many times, they have reshaped our mouths to them. We can only speak aloud the words of wanting. I’m sorry.

I repent. We leave our gods, sometimes, at the doorstep and don’t let them come in for days. It gets cold and we eventually feel sorry enough to forgive them. We think to tell him everything but never do.

The costs are low, they take it from your skin, those laugh lines and scars. You didn’t need them anyways, there was nothing left you could lose.
Stricken

We buried our dead but first we wrapped them tightly in white\textsuperscript{18} the shrouds kept the souls locked up, tight, and comfortable The plague-dead we called them, as if so much different from the other dead bodies are bodies the earth will return them to dirt just the same Shrouds keeping them longer maybe or not The dead rise and white cloth hangs from the body

Our ghosts are tricks sheet swaddled children trundling from house to house asking for treats something good to eat mothers hold the hands of their children tight, the grip loosening only at doorways, when it’s safe, when they are asking for gifts, baskets outstretched, mothers breathe out and watch their breath hover in front of them, the cold bites as the sun dips low, children dressed as the dead turn back to smile

Caskets were too needed to bury, carried the bodies over and over, the dead in their shrouds would be protected enough.

The grave is cold, the cloth clings.

So many we buried, one by one by one by one by one by one by one, no time for rites, for prayer, and the dead in their shrouds, shook and shuddered beneath the earth.

A mother finds the drawings later, of ghosts hovering, like sheets filled with air, and she traces the image with her fingers The indentations make the drawing seem fresh She can feel them The sun has a smiling face Her daughter’s hands did this

The shroud memories are carried, like the dead themselves were carried, into the present rippling around shapes that once held life and bright

\textsuperscript{18} It is widely believed by folklore (especially ghostlore) scholars, that the shrouds the Bubonic Plague dead were wrapped in was the starting point for the image of ghosts as white floating sheeted beings. Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas write: “Art of the period is filled with images of burials of corpses wrapped in winding sheets as well as dancing skeletons cavorting with enshrouded, rotting corpses. We can only assume that the images on which such art was based were familiar to the children who survived the plague.” (114)
Children who survived the plague, years later, remembered the images of skeletons dancing with the rotting dead sheets covering bodies but not the death itself.

We buried our dead wrapping them tight hoping to keep them warm.
**Turn & Click**

Keys will leave you wanting something of their own. There are no locks they will not covet, feverishly metal hot, and turning into something else. Freed they will discover that form is water, shape is ghosts who can’t remember their own names, and you are stone struck buildings with windows but no doors. Keys will leave you wanting. Keys will leave you locked.
SECTION TWO: URBAN LEGENDS

“I’m going to check the world’s best source for spawning new urban legends, the Internet. What, you thought I couldn’t even type? The Web is just another threshold between one world and another.”

— Nalo Hopkinson, *Sister Mine*

This story is true because it happened to my best friend’s cousin’s girlfriend. This statement often precedes the telling of an urban legend. It “could be true”; another name for FOAFlore (friend-of-a-friend-lore).

An urban legend was attached to a fountain at the Memorial Union of my college. If one were to throw a coin in, at midnight, then their wish would “mostly come true.” The inclusion of “mostly” in the lore fascinated me. I tried it once, but I can’t remember the wish, or how much of it may or may not have come to fruition.

Some recent studies on the evolutionary persistence of gossip conclude that urban legends are more about community building, rather than intended to provide actual guidance or information. One must consider the persistence and popularity of urban legends, sometimes referred to as “urban belief tales.” In a heralded book on the subject, Jan Harold Brunvand, wrote: “Still, like traditional folklore, the stories do tell one kind of truth. They are a unique, 

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19 In fact, the primary argument of Bernard Guerin and Yoshiko Miyazaki’s article “Analyzing Rumors, Gossip, and Urban Legends Through their Conversational Properties” defines this very connection: “A conversational approach is developed to explain the ubiquitous presence of rumors, urban legends, and gossip as arising from their conversational properties rather than from side effects of cognitive processing or “effort after meaning.” It is suggested that the primary function of telling rumors, gossip, and urban legends is not to impart information to the listener or alleviate listener anxiety about the topic but to entertain or keep the listener’s attention, thereby enhancing social relationships.”

20 Many scholars have noticed the shared characteristics between urban legends and the tales of oral-storytelling cultures.
unself-conscious reflection of major concerns of individuals in the societies in which the legends circulate.”

Here Brunvand echoes arguments about how fairy tales have been used as cautionary tales, stories to warn and educate about current dangers.

Alligators in the sewer, razorblades hid in children’s Halloween candy, all stories with a central moral imperative: don’t buy your children pets that they won’t take care of, don’t accept candy from strangers, etc.

Urban legends have not faded away in the age of the internet; rather, the internet and, particularly, social media have led to a surprising increase in the proliferation of urban legends. These can be seen across college campuses and across the internet. Urban legends are prevalent throughout the world. One need look no further than the mysterious case of Slender Man, to see this almost manipulative power at work.

The increased ability to communicate widely and quickly serves as the ultimate means of spreading these tales. As Farhad Manjoo, a columnist for The New York Times, states: “Shira Chess, an assistant professor of mass media arts at the University of Georgia, who has studied the Slender Man phenomenon, says that crowd-sourced fiction bears similarities to the folklore that was once passed down orally, through generations — only now, the myths are minted online, in a matter of hours or days. Examining Creepypasta reveals something much deeper than any sort of cultish community, she says. It is home to a thrilling new form of immersive,

\[\text{21 pg xii}\]

\[\text{22 Read Ramon Sayles’ excellent article on this particular legend: “Toothy or Toothless: Rumors of Alligators in New York’s Sewers.”}\]

\[\text{23 Slender Man is already labeled as the impetus behind several acts of real-life violence, including the case of two teen girls stabbing a third girl multiple times.}\]

\[\text{24 Creepypasta is a Wikipedia-like site that allows users to post creepy and urban legend-like information from around the world.}\]
interactive human storytelling."\textsuperscript{25} Urban legends and folk takes can be seen as the original form of this “viral” storytelling.

\textsuperscript{25} Manjoo, Farhad. “Urban Legends Told Online.”
#Monsters

In Wisconsin, two young girls stabbed a friend repeatedly

headlines repeated the girls claim
to have done it
to please an urban legend

Slenderman has been around for only a few years, an internet ghost

He’s a figure appearing in the backgrounds of photographs, the edges of the scene, a little too tall and a little too thin, as if his image has been stretched, pulled like warm taffy

People say that if Slenderman appears behind someone than the person will die

what you can’t see won’t hurt you

like girls, leading their friend into the woods, dark and cold and green with life, and slamming a knife into her body, over and over, until they thought she should be dead

In the papers, the girls stare straight into the camera lens. Unafraid now

of seeing themselves in picture

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26 As social media proliferates, the rise in “internet ghosts” and other monsters, supernatural phenomena, has also written. One useful occurrence is the ability to easily find information related to these phenomena by simply searching for them using their “hashtag” (denoted by the # symbol).

27 There are actually several different views on what Slenderman’s appearance in photos means/ will cause. Although, the most common is that Slenderman serves as a kind of photographic banshee.

28 The event, the editor believes this to be based upon took place in 2014.
Rat-Infested Ghost Ship Off the Coast of Britain

Bones in this ship
clitter-clatter and teeth so sharp
they make marks, map our hunger
across the white, off white, bones
the color of cream just gone
sour sweet, oily on the tongue

Water is rocking us, waves are holding
us, keep us close, this wind makes lullaby
through the eaves, our mothers sang
tales to us of blades and mirrors and lovers
who turned to marble, to pebbles, to
beasts, and we slept like ice babies

like those ice babies left in the cradles
for mothers to find in morning time, melting
to puddles, that is loss made for children’s ears,
icel babies, changeling babies, and we dreamed

of children to love us, to hold us close, name us
and feed us biscuit bits, crumbs off fingertips,
take them soft and nibble nibble

at my house, at my ship, is it a little

we scatter and sway, our legs sea-worthy,
our nails dig in wood, we wait and
watch, the water goes on, the water
is the sky is the water and we wait

we wait

They said we ate our children, our
siblings, but we eat only the dead,
we can taste their dreaming, we are the

29 The editor surmises that this pertains to an event from 2014, when a presumed sunken vessel, the Lyubva Orlova, was spotted floating towards Britain.
dead, we are the living, the lived in, sweet
and sour

coats our tongues
To De-scarf

Girls with ribbons
tied tight round
their throats should never
be trusted—
    one wrong pull,
fingers caught,
can only ever end
with the tie undone,
the cut revealed,
the head to come
tumbling off, eyes wide,
in beautiful surprise
at the inevitable looseness of knots.

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30 This urban legend is one of the world’s oldest, as versions can be found in folklore from around the world, going back centuries.
If I admit to you that there will always be at least twelve seconds taken from every day because I think of you then what exactly am I admitting to? And what of buildings abandoned? Of places let to go dark?

He told me to write about something haunted. I saw you in the shadows once. Running around corners and dust shook from your clothes. He told me to imagine the corners of rooms and what might be waiting for shadows to come back to them. He told me that where there were faucets running there would also be lights flickering and my face in the mirror would never be the same one I thought I should see staring back at me.

If I say that the last time I saw you I tried to count the beats of your heart and lost track and somewhere in that losing I just lost everything? And what of those stone stairwells and basements and stalls with locked doors but no one inside? Of sound echoing back to you but not the words you spoke aloud?

He told me to think of stars falling and how they must have felt scared at first and then delighted by the sudden cold. He told me that wishes were like ghosts and if you didn’t believe in them then they couldn’t come true. It hurts to think about the way I thought you were starlight slipping through the window. There are rooms in houses with no windows and the light still gets in. It hides in corners and waits for the creaking of doors, for the faucet running, for the tap tap tap.

If I tell you the truth but only in a language of the extinct will you hear it? A language spoke underwater, at the bottom of wells, inside of mirrors? And what of the corners where there is no place to sleep? Of those rooms where no one ever comes out or goes in but you can hear the rooms breathing?

He said to think of things that scared me. The ghosts I kept as children. Don’t we all keep them? Those ones we expect in every dimly lit bathroom with the mirror that flickers? The ones we know in our closets and under our bed? The ones who like to tell us stories we can’t hear because we don’t speak in the tongues of the dead but still we hear them somehow when we sleep and dream of mazes and forests and planets made empty? Finally I remember the prompt. He said to write about something haunted. So I wrote about you.

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31 One wonders if this title could refer to some kind of urban legend, such as the Bloody Mary rhyme?
La Città in cui io abbia abitato

Why are abandoned cities so creepy? I asked without expecting an answer. Is there anything more rhetorical than our definitions of the dark? How to explain

the color of your eyes at sunset. Do they always blink so? Do they always fall in and out of your face like yo-yos of light? Do you always mean to stare right through me and point to the mural behind me? Do you mean to describe with such clarity the colors I’m standing in front of? I’m here I’m here

here is where the heart is. You can hear it beating. Here hear. Do you notice the voices between the beats. They are calling out the name of your lover. The one you left at the bottom of an ocean, the one you left at the bottom of it all, the one you left with her heart spinning out of orbit. She wants you to know

I thought I heard you yesterday, walking behind me for a block or so. When I turned there was no one there except of course there is always someone something there

tell me about ghosts again. They are coming through the walls at night. They are

listing their favorite things: coffee ground fortunes and hard candy fish colored like rainbows, like the inside of the sky in your dreams, like did you ever imagine as a child what a cloud looked like on the inside, like the inside of the fox skull you found one summer, half hidden under leaves and dirt and

here are cities laid out, destroyed, watch the tide come in, watch the tide come in, watch the tide come in, watch the tide come in

how many places do you know abandoned? Count them. Tell them you’ll remember them. Tell them you know the names of every place you will ever long to see again and they are always on that list. Tell them

that question is still rhetorical and I am hoping to hear you respond.

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32 Roughly translated this reads: The City Where I Lived
In Gratitude

On the bus, this morning, a man talked about narrowly missing death: “The deer totaled my car but the semi obliterated it.” There were only moments between him getting out of the car and the slamming crash. His airbags never went off, the passage out was easy. The bus driver said: “Man, you’re lucky to be alive.”

And I am thinking that there is this in all of us: a need to thank our luck.

In places, around the world, the death toll rises and we whisper prayers for safety, for safety, for a way to find our luck and keep it in front of us, an orange triangle set up in the road, to say “danger, stay safe, pass around even this.”

33 While near-death experiences, NDEs, are often based in reality, they also seemingly fit into the camp of urban legends—because often the stories proliferate and expand from their truths.
Hollywood Hauntings

Marilyn Monroe’s ghost haunts a hotel mirror. Sometimes, she can be seen admiring her flickering shadow, one hip jutted forward. Beautiful women, someone said to me once, make the saddest ghosts.

The car that James Dean died in is said to be cursed. As if metal can hold evil, like cupped hands trying to carry water up a mountain.

People claim that Lucille Ball haunts the home she grew old in. Things break in unexplained ways. As if, even after death, clumsiness remains. Though, there are no reports of laughter, that wonderful high peal.

Jean Harlow, the original blonde bombshell, is said to haunt her own mansion. Some say that her husband haunts it as well. This seems the cruelest fate: eternity with the man who broke you slowly.

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34 Hollywood has more than its fair share of ghostlore. It seems logical, though, that people so watched in life would also be watched in their afterlife.
Who Come When Called

Large-eyed dogs in fairy tales
    are sometimes helpful
    but more often wicked
They follow, chase, frighten
    Padfoot\textsuperscript{35} and Gwylgi
    and Gytrash
    and others
Whose names have been
    forgotten, misused, rewritten
    too many time in too many ways
They steal, slobber, trick
    saucer eyes and thick black fur
    footprints in the mud as big
    as a bear’s, a wolf’s, a lion’s
The splish-splosh behind each
    wary weary wayward traveler
    is like an execution signed off
    the governor turns off the phone
    the switch about to be thrown
Still when I saw you there
    dinner-plate eyes downcast, tired out
    cleaning your paws in the corner
I reached out
    to feel your tongue against my hand
    warm warm warm

\textsuperscript{35} Padfoot, of course, is an omen dog who has gained the most notoriety—due to his inclusion in the wildly popular \textit{Harry Potter} series.
Sleepwalking

Don’t wake him, that’s the first thing you think when you find your sleeping lover walking through the house at night.

Remember your cousin, when you were eight or nine, who told you about a boy who was woken while sleepwalking, and the shock killed him. Dead, right there, boom, your cousin said, smacking her hands together.

Your lover washes his hands at the sink, eyes closed, and you wonder what he is dreaming about: cooking?

Remember the time you dreamed about standing in a kitchen at night and your great grandmother, years in the grave, sat at the table, asking you to make potato pancakes with sour cream and chives.

But, you only had a fridge filled with asparagus and lemons. In dreams you should, at least, be able to please the dead. And sitting down beside your great grandmother you began to weep, and she cradles you in her arms. The tears sustenance enough.

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36 The editor debated where to include this text. Is this false idea about sleepwalking (that one dies if woken) an urban legend or is it more of a kind of myth? It was finally chosen to include here because of the FOAFlore like quality of the cousin’s information.

37 This is a surprisingly popular idea, but one that is scientifically refuted. In an article in Scientific American, the author writes: “The chances of killing a sleepwalker due to the shock of sudden awakening, however, is about as likely as somebody expiring from a dream about dying. While it is true that waking a sleepwalker, especially forcefully, may distress them, it is an absolutely false statement that someone would die from shock, says Michael Salemi, general manager at the California Center for Sleep Disorders.”
Your lover walks to the window, still sleeping, and presses his forehead to the glass. You wonder if the cold would wake him. Then, you notice he is crying. Tears from out of his closed eyes.

What dreams do we dream, you wonder, when we think we are unwatched? You want to hold him, lead him back to bed, but don’t wake him, you think. Let him sleep.
SECTION THREE: EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNTS

“Some people say that we see with all of our senses. That’s how we take information in. But, what do we do when we know that some of those senses are lying to us?”

— Anne-Marie Vista, “The Alabaster Case: When Witnesses are Wrong”

If you have looked at case reports at all, you’ll know that eye-witness accounts are usually some of the most unreliable examples of evidence in court cases (though, incidentally, some of the most believed). The mind is capable of being fooled, misremembering, or even seeing something and connecting it to something else simply because the human mind wants there to be a connection.38 What can we believe?

I know, that as a child, I often thought I saw ghosts. This was because we lived, for a time, in an old house and my sister loved to tell me ghost stories. I visually made connections where they shouldn’t have existed: a white curtain blowing was a woman’s dress, and so forth.

The mind enjoys playing tricks on us. In his aptly titled book, Hallucinations, neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote about hallucination phenomena and a wide array of visual “tricks.”39 This raises the question: how many ghost-sightings or other paranormal cases throughout history were simply matters of hallucinations? These tricks of the senses (as hallucinations do, in fact, occur in all forms of sensory perceptions, not just sight) can be brought on by numerous factors including intoxicated states, trauma, stress, diseases, etc.

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38 For a more comprehensive look at the unreliability of eye-witnesses, especially in regards to the law, read Fredric D. Woocher’s “Did Your Eyes Deceive You? Expert Psychological Testimony on the Unreliability of Eye Witness Accounts.”

39 Some fascinating studies have been done doing functional brain imagery while people are hallucinating and one finds that parts of the visual system up in the temporal lobes of the brain have become hyperactive, and the sort of hallucination one gets goes with particular parts of the brain. So people who see faces tend to have hyperactivity in a part of the brain called the fusiform gyrus.” (Sacks in an interview with Wired Magazine)
Much debate in the scientific community, particularly among psychiatrists and psychologists, centers on the impact of hallucinations upon what are labelled SPE’s or Subjective Paranormal Experiences.  

So can we believe the following texts? All purport to be some kind of eye-witness account. As an academic, I’m inclined to disbelieve. Yet, the witnesses obviously believe what they have stated. Does that, in a way, make them true?

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40 Many articles can also be found linking SPE with people who have suffered some kind of trauma in childhood.
Collective Color Constancy

In this light the dress
is blue and black
I’m sorry
When you are falling backwards
you will remember that white and gold were the color of the stars, hung from the ceiling, at your third grade birthday party and you will think to yourself that you should have said thank you more throughout your life, thank you to your mother who cut stars from leftover wrapping paper for hours, and thank you to your best friend who braided your hair that morning and thank you to the clerk at the dress shop years later who said that the dress looked nice on you
I’m sorry
The dress is blue
and black
I’m sorry
You saw your own reflection in the window and jumped, startled, because you never expect to see yourself looking back at you, and the phone rang at the same time, and picking it up you said hello in a breathless way and no one was on the line, except that you could hear something, someone singing in the background, and you thought it was a pocket dial, until you recognized the song as the one your grandmother used to sing to you when you were little and trying to go to sleep but you’d fight it, you’d fight the sleep until you just couldn’t anymore, and your grandmother sang of fields of gold and white clouds
I’m sorry
The dress: blue
black
I’m sorry
When you know no one will catch you
you try to save yourself, grab at something, but your hands connect only with air, and you think of the color of your best friend’s hair, flax, no gold, gold sounds prettier, and her dress was white and she was running in front of you and you reached out to grab her arm, and stars, and your grandmother singing, and fields of gold, and clouds of white, and stars
I’m sorry
Black and

41 On February 26th, 2015, a photo passed around the internet. The photo was of a dress that people saw either as black-and-blue or as gold-and-white. The idea of mass perception changing the way an individual can perceive something has long been held as one explanation for multiple ghost or monster sightings in an area.
blue
    and
    the dress
    looks beautiful on you
Dead Man’s Bride

This is a true story. When I was 22 we buried my almost-husband in a graveyard that now no longer accepts the dead. Think about that? A graveyard can fill as easily as a movie theatre. Standing room only for the grieving, not the lost.

When he was buried I tried to dig him out of the dirt with my hands. My fingernails broke. I had a fever that peaked to 103\(^\circ\) F. The dirt shoved into the lines of my palms, the beds between nails and fingertips. Someone took me away and I thought of insects, of fungi and the roots of trees breaking through dirt and then wood and then skin. Only someone wrong would think of those things. So, I covered my body in salt to keep the demons out.

A fortune teller once told me that I was scared of crowds because in a past life I had been dragged from my bed and burned at the stake as a witch. Was I a witch, I asked her. I would like to have been burned for a reason. That wasn’t the point, though. The point was that sometimes I have nightmares that I’m in a swarm of people and they buzz like bees and when I look for familiar faces, for someone who loves me, I see that none of the faces have eyes. They just have mouths and teeth and teeth.

I loved a woman, too, once. She had snakes for hair\(^{43}\). She couldn’t turn people to stone, though she laughed once and said she could turn them to sin. Even the scientific names of snakes will writhe on the lips, curl over the tongue. *Sistrurus catenatus*, *Dendroaspis*, *Agkistrodon piscivorus*.\(^{44}\) She left me when she said that my reflection in mirrors, in windows, was always looking over one shoulder. I learned to never look at myself in glass.

I stopped drinking when I found that alcohol made my mouth burn like drinking holy water and my dreams fill up with ghosts. Not

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\(^{42}\) Grief has been proven to sometimes cause fevers.

\(^{43}\) Should we read this as a metaphorical? One is inclined to say yes, although many of the statements in the account could be visual hallucinations or delusions of some sort.

\(^{44}\) Interestingly, all of these types of snakes are venomous ones: the massasauga, mamba, and cotton-mouth, respectively.
him. But ghosts of people I had never known. Is it fair to see the unfamiliar dead? To not know their names, but know their pain? I tried not sleeping for 17 days but it made nightmares bleed out from my eyes.

In the hospital, on the night I was born, a woman died three doors down. Everyone said that this would make me walk in forests at night, find birds who couldn’t sing, plait my hair with the bones of trees.

A man that I trusted once put a gun to my head. He said, if this is what you really want then I will pull this fucking trigger. I did. And he did. And I’ve never trusted him again.

When they buried my almost-husband I thought that I was now a halfway widow. I cut the heart lines from my palms with a silver knife. The scars came in ragged and ridged and irrefutable as gravity. I used to trace my fingertips along his clavicle, has anyone ever loved someone without loving the bones of their body—the jutting hip, the jawline, and now I traced his name where it was etched in stone. Sometimes my skin catches fire spontaneously. Mostly when I see stained glass out of the corner of my eyes.
Hide-and-Seek

The undead, you tell me,
are like children
with no concept of tired,
awake, hungry, satisfied, right,
or wrong. They just have need,
want, all
without reason.

The undead, you
say, will always find
ways to one’s door,
and devour one up
as easily as popcorn—
the movie-kind with too much
salt and Real Butter Flavor.

The undead, you repeat,
are like children without
remorse, each life they take
is a meal without
thinking. And, I agree,
they are like children—
one time I found
the undead curled up on the porch
swing, shivering, and I asked
where they came from.

The undead looked at me, lost,
and pointed to the dark
as if the dark could
ever possibly have been home.
My Year as a Medium

I once went home to find the dead crowding into my bed. They tossed and turned all night, stole the covers, talked in their sleep. They said the names of lost lovers over and over until I almost believed that they were people I too had lost. Sometimes I dreamt the same dreams as the dead. They dreamt as one and I fell into them as easily as one might fall back into the bed of an ex-lover who you never see but still remember the breath of against your skin.

They dreamt in tastes. Pulling candy down from off the top shelves. They were so sweet. Tiny chocolate bears with tummies of milk. Placed them on our tongues and let them melt. The sugar was electric. It caused us to shiver. Of the taste of river water gulped, of the taste of tea leaves bitter and rich and filled with the future, of the taste of sweat off another’s skin.

They dreamt in sounds. It comes to us like flashes of ecstatic light, the blood of saints, the way it wraps and breaks us up. Of the sound of rain echoing down the sides of the house, of the sound of whispers into ears and the breath was hot against our skin, of the sound of palms being read in the version of our lives where every line stretched on forever and wrapped around our hands over and over again.

They dreamt in lightning and ice and the electric pulse of skin meeting skin.

They dreamt of hands.

Of mouths and lips.

They dreamt of silence and the way dirt tasted so bitter and salty.

The way that ashes sound.

I wished I could sleep at night without their arms embracing me; they seem so cold and, yet, still burnt me to fever. I wished I could sleep without the weight of them surrounding me.
They dreamt of silence but screamed at night. I was no comfort to them, so I just dreamt along.

I left them once for days I spent pacing with open eyes; they seemed to forgive me for this. Please forgive me for this.
Cotard’s Delusion

First you will lose all sensation in the tips of your toes
but that, too, will soon seem normal
after the hands that can’t quite grip, the tongue that can no longer differentiate sweet and sharply tangy
and your voice has changed imperceptibly, just enough that you know you no longer sound like you
and next, or maybe after that, will be the way shapes shift so that the moon is a box, swinging open to welcome in the galaxies, and doorways are marbles, rolling, rolling away from you every time you reach out for those diamond edged handles, and then there are the sweeping feelings of things you almost remember but can’t be quite sure happened

45 This is a medical condition characterized by a state of psychosis, wherein the sufferer presumes themselves to be dead. In a way, this can be read as a kind of self-haunting.
to you, in this lifetime, and it’s possible that happened to your mother, or your best friend, or the ghost of your great grandmother who hovers over your bed at night whispering your dreams, and and the pain is in your head somewhere deep behind your eyes, and it is reminding you that you are not you. but rather you are—
Portrait

She struggles. Death was not quick. The body fights long after the mind has given up. Blood on the ground spreads out, ants marching home. He struggled, as well, but falls later. Blood on the ground spreads out, drought river beds after downpour. Blood on the ground spreads out, drought river beds after downpour. Breath can be stolen, like pocket watches, like a kiss. Stories say to run an iron stake through the blood, but no one ever remembers that. His body. Her body. Blood on the earth. Up from the red comes pain. A memory of sharp, of terror. I am born from this. Tell me, now, that I am the cruel one. Tell me I am after this. Up from blood. Sometimes I find myself in the corners of darkened rooms, and my reflection in windows is not there. I’d steal back what you took, if I could, but it’s gone. You can steal breath, like a wallet, like a heart. Blood once spilled does not retreat back into cuts.

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46 A handwritten note on this mentioned that it was translated from French. My guess is that it was translated rather poorly—as evidenced by the fluctuating tenses and seemingly missing words. I dearly wish that whomever collected the texts had included the original.

47 This piece offers few clues as to who exactly the subject of the “portrait” is. From some research I’ve done into murder spirits, I believe this may be about an Afrit. Afrits are a kind of spirit, common in Arabian folklore, who rise from the blood of murder victims. They are said to be particularly vicious towards those who are their victims. While some pieces don’t quite add up to this explanation, there is one particular lore that seems apt to discuss here: that of the only way to prevent an Afrit from rising is to hammer a new nail into the spilled blood.

48 Many of the pieces in the red ribbon manuscript point towards victims of murder. Is this one murder? Or is it, simply, that so many of our myths, fairy tales, and ghost stories begin in murder?
SECTION FOUR: MESSAGES, WARNINGS, METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

“Though truth in advertising is hard to come by, especially in products from the 19th century, the Ouija board was ‘interesting and mysterious’; it actually had been ‘proven’ to work at the Patent Office before its patent was allowed to proceed; and today, even psychologists believe that it may offer a link between the known and the unknown.”

— Linda Rodriguez McRobbie, “The Strange and Mysterious History of the Ouija Board”

The first advertisements for the Ouija Board began to appear in 1891. Ostensibly sold as a game, it was also billed as a tool of communication between the living and the dead. The two ideas seem at odd of each other: should children really be attempting to contact spirits? The other lingering question is: what does this say about a society that would make a game out of spirit communication? Is it simpler, and perhaps safer, to think of it in “light” terms? Still, the game continues to sell well.49

As a child, I had a fear of playing with Ouija Boards. My older sister had one and would pull it out every time she was having a slumber party. I stayed far away. There was something uniquely terrifying to my childhood self about a simple piece of decorated cardboard which could write out messages from the beyond. I had a recurring nightmare about waking up and finding the Ouija Board on the foot of my bed, waiting to spell out some terrible truth. Years later, though, as I came into the study of folklore and supernatural belief, I became quite fascinated with the “game.”

Of course, the Ouija Board has not been the only way that people throughout the centuries have tried to garner insights into both the afterlife and their own lives. Other message

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49 For an insightful look at the history of the Ouija Board, check out Linda Rodriguez McRobbie’s “The Strange and Mysterious History of the Ouija Board.”
systems have included: crystal balls, séances, Tarot, and more. One only has to look at the number of words with the suffix of “mancy” to quickly discover this. The suffix “mancy” comes from the Greek and means “divination, prophecy, and fortune telling, to interpret signs so practical decisions can be made.”

There are also still twelve recognized Spiritualist camps in the United States. The most famous of these being arguably either Lily Dale or Cassadega. Spiritualist camps are towns (or sections of towns, in some cases literally encampments) where people claim special communion abilities with the dead. These are often meccas for mediums and the like. Some of the remaining camps even operate on strictly seasonal (usually summer) schedules.

Spiritualism first came into prominence in the mid-1800’s and continued to have a stronghold of followers through the early 1900’s. The religion centered on the belief that spirits of the dead not only have the ability to communicate with the living but that they also have the want and need to do so.

50 from wordinfo.info
51 see previous footnote pertaining to these towns.
52 One such place is the Wonewoc Spiritualist camp located in Wonewoc, Wisconsin.
Once for Yes and Twice for No

The Fox Sisters\(^53\) were known for their ability to speak with the dead. They listened to the rap, rap, raps of the spirits knocking on walls, on tables, on the inside of cabinets. The raps were letters spelling out secrets. They said a man\(^54\) had been murdered. Buried beneath their house. Such secrets. Secrets are better left unsaid. Sometimes, Maggie and Kate Fox would try to close doors, cover their ears, not listen. The public called for more, for more, voices like pounding. The taste of alcohol was sweet compared to the pounding. Maggie dreamed of the sky bleeding into her skin whenever she went out at night. The stars in her veins shimmered and fell. She didn’t ever wish upon them. What could she have wished for? Kate began to manifest the spirits onto stages across America. They shimmered and shook. The spirits never asked for much. Rapping, rapping. After years, the sisters finally admitted to fraud. The rapping merely the cracking of their toes done in unison. “We only wanted to play a joke on Mama,” they said. Voices shaking

Years later, children playing in the ruins of the old Fox house found white sticking out of the ground. So chalky-colored, so smooth. The bones of a man, murdered some said.

---

\(^53\) This refers to the Fox Sisters—Maggie, Kate, and Leah (though here, for some reason, only Maggie and Kate)—of New York who were known mediums during the 1800’s. However, later the sisters were proven to have been frauds.

\(^54\) They claimed the man was a peddler, named Charles Rosa, who had been murdered by the previous tenant of their house, John Bell.
Speaking With Ghosts

The things we kept in our closets, under our beds, pushed deep into the drawers of our desks. They stretch out to us with hands like shadows, long and drifting and sinuous. Is sinuous the right word? It feels right and sometimes that is all we have. The feeling that things are right.
And often in the darkness

we reach out in our sleep to clutch at things that used to be. How many years did we spend reaching for the glasses we’ve long since changed to contacts? The address of someone we no longer speak to? The memory of someone we used to love back when we loved them and not at all as they are now?

How many times have we wept at songs we overhear, seeping out from shop doors we are just supposed to be passing by? But we remember those songs so clearly. The moment where they had meant something to us. The other night dear, while I lay… And so we rush on, nearly stumbling to get past the point of hearing. How music has betrayed us.

And often upon falling asleep we will dream of the sea, though we have never been. It glimmers in our dreams and we want to run into the waves. And when we do, the water feels so cold. Cold. We wake most nights, gasping for air. Imagining that breath will find us again.
Things Found on the Recording We Analyzed for EVP

Doors open and close.

Footsteps.

Girl’s Voice: I’m sorry. I’m sorry.

Sound of someone from downstairs. Door opens and closes.

Man’s Voice: Leave me alone. I’m dreaming.

Clock ticks. Footsteps.

Woman’s Voice: When I think about it, I wonder if I was right after all.

Minutes of silence. Clock ticks.

Man’s Voice: As a child, we—my brother and I—we used to go fishing at this creek that ran near the rail tracks on the other side of town. One time, I caught a salamander. It had blue spots on black skin. It glist-------

Crackling. Some kind of interference.

Girl’s Voice: --ened. I was only three when we moved. I don’t remember much. I don’t remember much. I’m sorry. I’m so-------------------------------

---------------------------------------------------

Interference.

Woman’s Voice: ---ry. Her name was Mary. She was beautiful. In that way some girls are, where they look beautiful despite their features. Does that make sense? Am I making sense?

A door closes. Footsteps.

Ten minutes of silence.

Man’s Voice: Sometimes I think about how beautiful that salamander was, glistening in the

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55 EVP stands for Electric Voice Phenomenon
sunlight. It was like it belonged to the water and to the light. -------------------------------

Woman’s Voice: --wish I could have seen her again, you know. It was the time. That’s what I----
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Girl’s Voice:--tell myself it over and over. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That’s not enough but it has to be enough. I’m sorry. I am-----------------------------------------------

Tape cuts off.
Rural Routes in Iowa\textsuperscript{56}

When the car breaks down on some rural road in the middle of Iowa and I’m telling Lee to just calm down for five seconds

and then I see a sign, markered on cardboard, LAST CHANCE TO KNOW YOUR FUTURE and the price is there too: $5.00. The zeroes look like sideways eyes, but I don’t know why I think that. There’s a stand

and a woman leaning against it. She’s got hair in scarf and bright colored skirt and, I swear

on the hand of God, that she has hoop earrings\textsuperscript{57}. She’d be pretty if this was a movie. But she just looks sad. I go up to her, place a five on the table with a smack.

She takes my hand in her hands, runs a long fingernail all over my palm in slow, concentric circles that makes me miss sleepovers as a girl. My friends and I would brush out each other’s hair, make braids tight, and there is something so soothing in having someone else run fingers through your hair. The woman shakes her head, hands back my money, says: lady, you have no fortune, and I laugh, say: what the fuck?

She shrugs and Lee yells that the car is running. And I go back to him, again. But, she’s right, when I think about it because I haven’t had palm lines for years.

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\textsuperscript{56} It is illegal to tell people’s fortunes within the city limits of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Presumably, that is where this incident took place.

\textsuperscript{57} I assume that this description is playing off of the misguided—if not downright racist—depictions of “Gypsy” (actually the Romani) fortune tellers often seen in film and television.
Minor Superstitions\textsuperscript{58}

For years a nightmare, every night, that my girlfriend was dying, never dead, but always in the process, the moment before death

Some claim that you can’t die in your own dreams,\textsuperscript{59} though I have many times

In accidents, drowning, being shot, once eaten by a crocodile\textsuperscript{60} who chased me first across the sprawl of a city, but the thought of my girlfriend dying, never dead, more traumatic than my own impossible death in dreams

I carry my superstitions in my sleeves, instead of my heart, they beat out the doubts of my life, the little fears:

a loss of keys, missed appointment, losing words gradually, that slip from my memory

Something must be coming, some spooling out of tragedy that I should have foreseen

The warning itself a kind

\textsuperscript{58} There are well over a thousand catalogued superstitions. Often, these come with cultural associations or significance, but some are common throughout the world.

\textsuperscript{59} This claim is refuted by sleep scientists. See the International Association for the Study of Dreams for more information on common myths about dreaming.

\textsuperscript{60} Crocodiles carry much symbolism within their history. The phrase “crocodile tears” immediately leaps to mind. This phrase is based on the belief that a crocodile would shed tears after devouring human victims. The tears would then turn to jewels, used for luring more unsuspecting humans to their demise. Crocodiles, because of this (unrightfully so, as it is a myth) are often associated with treachery.
of omen, a bringing about of things

like that crocodile sauntering towards me,
stepping over sidewalk cracks
Six Little Nightmares

She likes diamonds crushed into sugar. She drinks her tea with them until she bleeds. Her blood is always sparkling. It looks like melted crayons, the limited metallic kind they had for years. She sometimes sees you and smiles and her smile is like seeing the moon until you go blind.

There are things in the corners of his room, he thinks. Hear how they laugh, like the laughter of tiny little mouths with sharp, sharp teeth clacking against each other.

She once thinks she saw the devil. The devil crept and crawled down the walls of her house, leaving behind trails of shadows and spider webs and slick lines of oil. The devil’s tongue felt like sandpaper against her skin, like the tongues of those wild cats that can lick the flesh from their prey.

He locks his door every night. He likes the click. But sometimes the door unlocks itself, swings open, reveals the darkness of the hallway, the shuffle of feet coming nearer.

---

61 There is debate about the place of nightmare study within a larger context of the supernatural. Nightmares are commonplace and experienced by everyone. What makes them “supernatural”? Yet, nightmares do have a place in the study: they’ve been known to contain omens, to be accompanied by nightmare phenomena, such as in folklore surround the “old hag” (the original explanation for the medical disorder Sleep Paralysis).

62 Could this be a reference to the old folk belief that the moon could drive a person to madness (see the root of the word “lunacy”)? Some monsters, in myth, are also said to turn people either insane or blind upon witnessing them.

63 This nightmare, in fact, reads almost exactly like many reported cases of sleep paralysis. One of the most common elements in complaints, of those suffering from the disorder, is the appearance of demon-like or monster-like figure which creep up to and climb on top of the sleeper. One of the most famous artistic depictions of this is in Henry Fuseli’s painting The Nightmare.
Reflections in windows at night. They never stay in one place. Once I saw myself but my eyes were gone into the darkness. I stared and stared and still saw nothing.

You held me once when I woke screaming, said you only wanted me to stop, to be safe. I remembered that you’ve been gone for years.
SECTION FIVE: BEASTS, MONSTERS, DEMONS, WITCHES

“Unexplained appearances of mystery animals are reported all over the world today. Beliefs in the existence of fabulous and supernatural animals are ubiquitous and timeless [...] The belief self-perpetuates today through multiple observations enhanced by the media and encouraged (largely with the aim of gain for touristic promotion) by the local population, often genuinely convinced of the reality of this profitable phenomenon.”

— Véronique Campion-Vincent, “Appearances of Beasts and Mystery-Cats in France”

An entire field devoted to the study of mythic and unexplainable beasts. Many resources from the medieval bestiaries of old to the online compendiums of current “beasts” are full of references: from the serpent in the Garden of Eden to the dragons slain by Saint George to the sightings of El Chupacabra that proliferate in today’s world.

The bestiaries of the medieval ages were an earlier form of cataloguing both known animals and the fabled beasts of lore. Sometimes these books are all that remains of our ancestor’s knowledge and lore of animals. Texts like The Physiologus, which F.N.M. Diekstra states is “responsible for some of the most enduring iconography of Christianity. Its images and those of its medieval descendants, survived when its natural history had long been discarded as fabulous.”

Of course, definitions of monsters have shape-shifted throughout time influenced by our understanding of science and medicine. Vampires may have been a rare condition, known today as porphyria. Werewolves could be victims of hypertrichosis, a condition treatable (to some

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64 Cryptozoology
65 Diekstra’s “The Physiologus, the bestiaries and medieval animal lore.”
66 The symptoms of which include: extreme sensitivity to light and red urine (which could have implied the ingestion of blood).
67 A condition causing profuse hair growth over the entirety of the human body.
extent) with electrolysis. Today’s monsters are already facing scientific disapproval: some have even stated that El Chupacabra sightings may actually be sightings of raccoons with severe mange.

This also raises the question of what can be included in cryptozoological sections. Must it only include animalistic creatures? Or would demons also fit into this spectrum. I’ve chosen to combine demons into this section, as well as pieces about witches and witchcraft. Witches, while humanistic, often have something distinctly in-human about them in the way that culture portrays them: the skinwalkers of legend or hags or early America, as well as their connection to animal-familiars.

What are the bestiaries of today’s world? And how can we know if what we discover within them will one day simply be known as lore?
Nightly Report on the State of the Beasts

No sightings
of the Loch Ness
eighteen months⁶⁸, newscasters fear
the worst. Remember
the graceful curve of a rough
neck, shivers down the skin?
Names given
to what cannot be

understood. The bodies of
possessed children named
demons, then burned,
ashes salted and spread
so that they could not
return.

The devil has more names
than god. The reason crops
turn to rot, the questioning,
questioning of the plan.
Things are most often hunted,
imprisoned, when they ask us
to imagine.

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⁶⁸ This places this text in around February of 2014.
On a Watermelon Truck, With a Chupacabra

North from Texas, the smell
of rinds like fresh-mown grass,
sweet and contained

Chupacabra dreams of cool
air, against furless skin, and dew-soaked leaves

In Texas, a woman puts out steel
traps to catch chupacabras, fills
the cage with spicy Cheetos and wet cat food, a mingle of salt and rotted

Chupacabra curls smaller, size of one prize-winning melon, tries again to welcome sleep, one husk of fruit in one small paw, savoring pink chunks of flesh for days, fruit born of heat that tastes of cold

In the south, chupacabras are a menace, blood thirsty, vermin; guns are loaded, traps are set, the livestock must be protected

Chupacabra watches the land flashing past, desert gives to lawns gives to cornfields gives to trees, Chupacabra licks juice from sticky paws

One man says a dead chupacabra is worth ten living, he taps his foot and points at a bounty sign he designed himself, a chupacabra drawn with fangs bared, claws out, wild

As the truck slows, Chupacabra leaps

---

Chupacabra sightings have been increasingly migrating north. A recent theory by cryptozoologist, Taffy Jones, wonders if this could in part be due to global climate change or deforestation. The idea of examining cryptozoology through the gaze of environmental factors is a newer one, but early thoughts on the idea can be seen in C. Lark’s *Hidden Clearly: The Effect of Environmental Degradations on Cryptids.*
and lands, dashes to the darkness of forest
cover, still holding three black seeds, memory
that out of sand can grow water
Sometimes We Searched the Ground for Feathers

We plan our vacations
around things we don’t believe in.
In Scotland, once, we traipsed
the skirts of Loch Ness
and bought up postcards
with blurry photos of what
could never have been there.

In Ireland we wish
to visit the island of Saint
Patrick’s Purgatory. It is where
he banished
the Cornu to—the final home
of a giant, terrifying bird.

We love the promise of myths,
but every year there are others,
people who reach the island
on pilgrimage. They fast
and they endure the cold
in order to cleanse
themselves of sin.

We imagine ourselves among them
with our guide books and cameras.
We wonder if we might
ever just give in to something—cast
our sins with our doubts
that we counted as our own
rosary beads.

Would the Cornu accept us,
if that is what his purpose is,
to take the memories
we want to free ourselves from
and eat them up?
The only birdseed we think to scatter.
To Dress Children in Ribbons

She feels
like Grendel’s mother, she says,
because the baby is throwing
eggs at the wall, again. Don’t
act surprised.
When the baby
teethes in rows of fangs
like a shark,
widen your eyes, tsk, wonder
aloud about the state of
today’s youth. When you discover
that she has been collecting
the skulls of ex-lovers and using
them for baby’s cereal
bowls, agree that
milk tastes better when
drunk from bone.

70 Ribbon symbolism attached to children is prevalent in many cultures. Sometimes in a dark context. In India, there
is a legend of a demon child who steal children. These demons can be thwarted by tying red ribbons into the
clothing of your child.

71 This would seem to be a changeling child. Changeling lore is prevalent in most cultures. One essay, “My Son, My
Monster,” by Claudine Bishop relates her own experience with raising a changeling child.
Two Serpents, One Handler

I came from river beds.

The mud rich
scent and moss that tickle-tickled
scales. River mud smells better
than other mud,
like empty promises.

I came from sand and dust wind.

I liked the itch, the crackle crackle of the air
when it was about to storm.
I guess I don’t like to say too much.

Witness this as a sign.

I had a cricket the other day. It crunched
in the most delightful way. Tasted like choc—

How do you know what chocolate tastes like?

I wasn’t going to say that. It tasted like chalky mouse.

Chalky mouse? I don’t think mouse and cricket taste at all alike. I think of crickets as tasting like the leather of boot when one’s fangs sink in for the bite. That pleasant squish before disappointment.

These serpents are deadly.

Do you remember that time?

With the One-Who-Got-Loose?

All the noise, like sheep being chased by the wolf.

Where do you think she went?

The forest?

She wasn’t of a forest.

I’d go to the forest.

She wasn’t you.

Yet, I hold them.

72 The question of whether serpent handling should be included in texts about the supernatural is one that could deserve its own book. I have included the text, without comment, in my desire to be true to the pieces that I found.
Have you ever thought about it?

That…or the other?

Escape?

Oh, of course. I was born, writhing, and my mother said I was born to bite. Tiny teeth even then. You?

*I am protected.*

Sometimes, I
dream of the roots of trees—they look like us, you know, if you think about it.
Imagine being like that, supporting something so weighty and smelling of life;that’s what I was made for:

Even trees must eat. Grab up their life from the earth. Sweet and rich.

*They will not bite.*
On Bray Road Melancholia

Some wolves keep their dead
in one place—easy to catalogue
the losses when the bones
can be counted. These wolves
remember the shape of land
before beasts built roads,
ostories passed from snout
to snout; stories kept close,
arming bellies with the smell
of deep forest, running stream,
the collecting mosses under paw.
Ghost imprinted forests
hung like shadow play curtains.
The wolves’ bones shift in earth, beasts
metal claw shovel them loose.
The wolf watches, sniffs the air for memory,
the smell of new nothing, and shifts
back into the darkness—sometimes still
spotted at night, always disappearing.

73 Bray Road in Walworth County of Wisconsin is home to various sightings of a werewolf-like creature. The sightings were prevalent throughout the 60’s and recurred in the 90’s. The creature came to be known as the Beast of Bray Road. Journalist Linda Godfrey wrote a book about the phenomena, *The Beast of Bray Road: Trailing Wisconsin’s Werewolf.*
Cyhyraeth

My love learns to howl the banks of the river, the bedroom window of every dreaming body She collects pebbles from the slopes of the mountain like souls of men left out to harden and when she has too many they will be placed in jars to keep on windowsills in case of earthquake so that they will be the first things to break My love casts no shadow no footsteps sounding hollow against the floor of the earth, no dust will be born from her skin She calls out with the wind, with the falling of heavenly bodies with the crack of every soul being broken into My love lists names on the walls of her bedroom and when she lists the last one we might finally sleep

74 Cyhyraeth are essentially the Welsh version of Banshees.
75 This verb choice strikes me as strange, cyhyraeth are known to cry, sob, or wail. So why the use of an “animal” like term? Does this provide an extra layer of othering?
Z is for—

When my sister came back from the dead, we watched her first tentative steps as if she were a baby on the verge of toddlerdom.

Please, she said. That was it, though, we waited for her to continue.

She was so cold, we wrapped her in blankets, tucked hot water bottle under her feet, made steaming cocoa that I decorated with the heads of marshmallow Peeps.

Please, she said. Her tongue was thick, the word came out funny, foreign.

We watched the undead on screens: movies where we used to flinch and scream, videogames where we used to blast their rotting bodies with shotguns.

Please, she said. Her eyes saying something else, but we’d never been good guessers.

We brought her food, she should eat, she needed to eat, but she shook her head, pushed away our arms, tried to yell, but nothing came out but a moaning, the sound in films that would be accompanied by dragging footsteps.

On the screen, she jabbed her fingers at the undead being shot. She said, please.

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76 I have lingered over this account for many hours wondering why the word “zombie” is merely hinted at, instead of directly stated. Is it a form of distancing from the horror of the situation? Or is the sister, of the account writer, something other than a zombie?

77 In popular culture and literature, zombies often seem to exist within a kind of alternate universe where the characters have never before witnessed zombies. Does this reference to pop culture within this account then make it somehow more believable?
After the Ikiryoh

Read, read to me, the letters that you wrote
me when I was young and you were tender,
sweet, your touch was soft then, caressed
my skin, made me ache and arch my body,
the bridge to your river.
In the river I am filling my lungs with algae
dark emeralding tendrils stop, stopping my breath
You said you’d never not love me, well, they say
hate is love in mirrors, and you bent back my fingers
to touch my wrist, and your touch was quick then,
pulling, twisting, made me ache and arch my body,
the tree limbs under such weight.
The weight of your thoughts filling my body with ghosts
spiriting breath stop, stopping my heart
Speak, tell me, say again those words you spoke,
they dripped with demons, when I was young,
and you were harsh, your touch was pain then, clawed
my skin, made me ache and arch my body,
the bones under your hands.
Your hands pushing me down filling my head with nothing
hating thoughts stop, stopping my soul.

78 Ikiryoh are a kind of Japanese entity that, according to folklore, are created by the evil or hateful thoughts of someone. They can enter the bodies of the person who is the object of those thoughts. While there are many rites to exorcise an Ikiryoh, it has been documented that they are extremely hard to be rid of (see: The Akutagawa case).
Mephistopheles\textsuperscript{79} Never Claimed He Told the Truth

When the Devil child is sad, which is often, he curls into a ball at the foot of his bed and he digs his clawed little hands into his blankie until at the other side of the world storms whip into shape, take whole cities with them, and then he starts to feel better.

His sister braids her hair and rolls her eyes whenever he comes into the room and Devil child looks at the floor and doesn’t ask if she will braid his horns because she’s already told him, \textit{like a million times}, that horns don’t braid.

And sometimes, at dinner, Devil child refuses to eat the green vegetables on his plate, demands for something red but he’s not trying to be bad, he just is afraid of losing his color, because Grandma said: you are what you eat.

Once, Devil child, woke from a nightmare about the end of days, and he screamed and screamed, until his mother came running and asked him what was the matter and he howled, it didn’t end, mama, it didn’t end, and she wrapped warm arms around him and rocked him until he fell back into sleep.

Devil child imagines what life will be like when he is grown, when he is come full form, and he thinks that it will mostly be the same, he will mostly be ignored and he will mostly not care, but he does wonder if he could grow up to be someone else.

\textsuperscript{79} One of literatures best known demons, of Germanic origin. He appears, most famously, in \textit{Faust}. 
Rolling Dice

Deals with the devil are always
at night, on bridges, in the backroom
of every house.
The devil
wears blue, black, red, shades of white.
The devil arrives and

Usually it’s midnight when the words go
from lips to ears, ears to lips,
lips to lips. The devil knows
how to say your name just
right, the way it makes your toes
curl, your skin burn, and

mostly, it ends with the devil reaching
out, taking your hand, holding
you close, close, close, until
the sky falls out of your
skin, the waves break backwards, the taste of silver on your tongue

Sometimes the devil gives
you the chance to take it back,
just cross that bridge before
anyone else, swim to the bottom
of that bottomless lake, steal three golden
locks of hair.

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80 Is this a reference to the idea of determining psychic abilities through dice-rolling? I hesitate to make that assumption though it would clear up some of the “problematic” imagery in the text.
81 The majority of documented crossroads deals take place at night, if not exactly midnight.
82 In every culture, names hold immense power. If the devil knows your name, that is a highly unfortunate thing.
83 Iron is a common demon-deterrent. I have not been able to hunt down a source where silver is associated with the devil.
84 In almost every culture that has some devil belief, there are devil bridges. These bridges have stories attached to them about deals with the devil and the devil is usually outwitted in these stories.
85 Many fairy tales hinge on the hero doing some kind of impossible task. A common type of task found in these stories is to steal hair from the head of the devil.
Stories Begin

in the ears of their youngest.

Stories of women who walk
with the night, long fingernails, and red
eyes the better to see you with, my dear.

Children shake and shiver, pull covers
over eyes, scamper to parents’ bed
at the first sign of a door creaking.

_There once was a witch in this town
when it was a village_, stories begin.

She lived at the edge of it all, down
dirt road, and by the forest. Children
didn’t dare knock on her door.

She’d eat them up, toes and all, after
she caught them. Children were
pastries to her, sweet and fat.

One night, the men came and took
her from her bed.

They cut loose the skin she wore,
disguised as human, and salted down
her real form, left her screaming.

The parents close the book, encourage
children to sleep,

check that they have stayed in all night.
A Spell with the Blood of Oranges

There is a magic trick that no one really knows how to do.

It’s the one where the magician drowns at the end and the audience rushes the stage and resuscitation is attempted and the magician doesn’t make it.

The man I loved had the build of an escape artist. He taught me how to slip

from handcuffs, from the borders of maps, from graves. He showed me how to place my feet and palms on the bed and raise my body like I was overcome with the spirit of god.

Once a girl threw herself off the top of a thirty story building because her lover was a high-wire artist.

He had been the best in the world and everyone said his ability to balance was supernatural. I saw him once and imagined that the people who loved him must also hate him.

When the man I loved disappeared, I looked for him in unexpected places. I checked under cars, in the back of hotel room closets, and even in the least used stacks of college libraries—the untranslated French poetry collections and the books made up of superstitions.

The girl didn’t die and the story made all of the newspapers. She broke every bone in her body but somehow she lived and the press heralded it as a miracle. She made a statement: I am more than him now. He is no miracle. Later, she died of her internal injuries and the obituary was kept to the back pages.

Sometimes, without warning, I faint. Sometimes, after, I will wake up in places

I don’t remember ever having been. The smell of oranges, of cinnamon, of cloves, will be in the air. I will taste cocoa
ground with chili peppers on my tongue. When people ask me if I’m alright, I never know how to respond.

There is a magic trick that no one really knows how to do.

It’s the one where the magician’s assistant is locked into a mirror. She pounds and pounds on the glass but no one ever knows the words to bring her back on through.
The Person of the Place

We keep paperclips in the corners of our rooms never knowing when we might need to attach ourselves to something new and every time we place our bodies on the floor we raise our hands to caress\textsuperscript{86} the air. Do we still imagine that ghosts can carry weight, that we can feel the air as it tries to embrace us back? And could you please do something for me when the weight becomes too little? Tell my love he knows nothing of stone walls and steps and if he is right handed than he will never fight his way to somewhere else. Tell him I am a curved piece of wood, a tree made to the shape of a bow. Tell him I am practicing the memorization of his fingers, of his touch, and that I am collecting stones to keep in my mouth. They taste of cold and water and earth and nothing of him. We are trading our cards back and forth between us, the paper cuts sting at first until they don’t. The wheel of fortune was my favorite. I folded it into the shape of a tiger. Placed on my tongue, it tasted of honey on the bark of trees. We line ourselves up on the floor, body to body, and reach for the ceiling. Do we still believe that the ghosts will sleep with us soundly, that they are not restless in their dreaming? And would you think to do one thing for me when the nightmares wake your ghosts? Tell my love he knew everything and that I am the one cradling shadows, praying for the air.

\textsuperscript{86} This image of raising one’s hands and touching the not there seems to be a prevalent one throughout these texts.
A Spell to Raise Your Other

To plant your feet under
will only serve
to rot you at the roots.

And I cannot promise
that in this world
I will love you but
in another
I might, I really might.

You cast round-edged stones across
the algae plumped lake hoping
that skips across water
were the same as walking.

And I won’t pretend
that I didn’t wake
up some nights
asking for you
to come back up breathing
I did, I really did.

To let your body sink
down where the catfishes go
will only turn you wild.

And I never said
that I would raise
your body from
the dead like
you begged me to
I didn’t, I really didn’t.
Like a Way of Keeping Count

My love knows nothing
save for the twelve ways
to make a princess dance until
her shoes turn to dust upon her feet\(^{87}\)
and it is midnight somewhere and someone
else is always dancing at every point in time

And do you remember the weight
of the skin on your skeleton and how
heavy it felt when you thought of witches
who could cast their skins aside and the salt
you kept on your tongue still melts, no matter
how cold you think you are getting

Who is the voice of reason when the sun
no longer remembers how to set and just
hangs in the sky like it has been painted
into place and remember the canvas
was not always filled with light and the oils
dripped and the trees were created
from spatters of color never meant
to have been used

And my love knows nothing
of the way winter feels colder
when the sun is brightest and the ice
that coats the trees makes them break
and the salt tries to keep the ice from
you but nothing melts and so we keep
dancing until we crumble
like stars that have been dead
for years and yet still shed enough
light to let you find your way home.

\(^{87}\) One assumes this is a reference to the famous fairy tale “The Twelve Dancing Princesses.”
SECTION SIX: LOCAL LORE, HAUNTINGS, APPARITIONS

“There are so many ghosts we return to, throughout history and place. There are the famous ghosts that a town weaves into their local legends, but also the personal ghosts: ex-lovers, friends we never see, ourselves when we were young.”

—From A Guide to Haunting

Local lore is some of our most common folklore. It is the stories that get repeated over and over, intrinsically tied to a sense of place: the white ladies who haunt specific dead-end roads, the ghosts who roam the halls of campus hotels, and more.

In the small town where I grew up, there were many local legends about haunted places, mostly familiar tropes such as ghostly hitchhikers, and witches’ graves. However, one unusual story stuck with me.

A woods grew at the very center of town. According to local legend, a young girl wandered into the woods one winter and froze to death. On particularly dark and cold nights, one could hear the little girl crying and calling out for someone to take her home.

When I was about twelve, I remember playing a game of hide-and-seek in the same woods, and hearing...something. A child’s voice? I wasn’t positive, but it was a voice of some kind. My mind could have been playing a trick on me, my ear primed from years of hearing the legend.

Still, sometimes, in dreams, I return to that moment. I hear it again.

Yet, years later, as I read through these texts, one detail lingers in the back of the mind. I remember the voice identified itself as Olivia, a fact I only discovered recently while

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88 What makes Local Lore differ from Urban Legends? I have made the distinction based on local lore usually being more concretely connected to a specific place, whereas urban legends are more malleable.
89 For an excellent website devoted to Local Lore, check out Prairie Ghosts.
90 This is a surprisingly common recurrence in campuslore.
91 Ghostly hitchhikers are one of the more common tropes of both lore and urban legends.
researching old articles on another subject from the newspaper of my small town was the name of the missing girl.
The Wind Mill Haunting

Not long after we married, which was not long before he died, my husband told me about his father. An abusive man. He was kind only in rare flashes that made the cruelty seem worse. People who can be kind but choose not to be are so much worse than those who simply can’t be kind. My husband showed me the scars on his arms: where bone had broken through flesh. I hadn’t said it out loud, but had thought that there was beauty in those scars—so white and ridged, like the dried out skin on tree where the bark has long since been gone.

[…]

His father, he said, did not believe in ghosts.

[…]

Isn’t that how these stories so often start?

[…]

They lived in the house at the top of a hill. Still another hill stood behind the house and on the top of that hill was the old wind mill.

[…]

What?

[…]

The one you asked me about, yeah.

Someone had died there. That’s what the kids all said. One of those local legends nobody ever bothers checking out, because you know it’s too good to be true but you don’t want it confirmed.

You’ve heard the rhyme?

Alice, Alice, warm and sweet.
Met her lover on the hill.
He held her soft, such heat.
And when he’d had his fill
Buried her, buried her head over feet.

92 In places, there seems to be the missing voice of the interviewer. One can only guess as to what the questions asked may have been.
Alice, Alice, dark and cold.
Brought her lover to the hill.
She held him fast, such a hold.
And when she’d had her fill.
Buried him, buried him, let him mold.

[…]

That’s not the version you heard? I suppose it changes. Stories are like that, yeah? They get into people and shift and turn and roll off the tongue in new leaps.

[…]

Oh yes, my father-in-law. He died you know. Drunk, climbing the wind mill. My husband told me that it was some point he was proving. Tyrants like to prove points. He wasn’t afraid. I think that was what it was. My husband saw him fall. Tumbling like a star that didn’t know it was shooting.
My Mother Always Told Me We Lived in Haunted Times

old bits of farm machinery
scattered across our property
in acres long since gone wild—
grape vines curled amorous
around rust-stolen wheels,

pitchfork tines hit
by our glistening shovel heads
as we dig for diggings sake

the pleasant push and toss

the smell of old metal
distinct and crisp
like some lakes in autumn,
when the algae turns from
emerald to copper

this hasn’t been a farm
for almost a century—
these are spirits we imagine
we keep finding: sharp,
and ancient, and almost
like bones.
Automatism; or What to Visit in My Town

There was a woman
kept hands
lined up in jars
along her walls

Hands of children,
    men,
    crones—
from soft to ridged
with wrinkles, from having spent
so much time holding the hands
of others

These hands, she showed
to visitors—prized as needle-
point portraits or tea cups
imported from some place
exotic—and they would gasp
and ooh ahh, such
perfections

Once or twice a visit, someone
recognized the fingers
of a former lover, the heart-
line of a childhood best
friend, the bird-fine wrist
    of a piano teacher,
    once desired,
the way she pressed keys, hovered
hands over—

The woman would ask
if the visitors wished
to borrow, or buy,
    but no, no
    heads are shook

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93 Automatism is spontaneous motor behavior, normally associated with guidance of a supernatural nature.
hands pushed deep
into pockets, don’t
be tempted.

Still, the collection grew
hands floating,
fingers stretching,
as if to reach
out and grasp
another’s.
Categories of Apparitions

Ghosts who appear only in your dreams sit on the edge of your bed, comb their hair, hoping that you’ll wake up and find them, finally, and ask them about how they’ve been.

The vase that breaks itself or the TV that snaps on in the middle of the night, unplugged, are often the signs of a poltergeist. In a house of anger, a poltergeist goes often undetected. The bruises appearing on wrists, the hesitancy to speak up, are common signs.

Sometimes energy can soak into a room, like wine spilled on fabric but without the stain, the knowledge that something has been lost. These ghosts are stuck in loops, reliving a moment over and over, walking to the door to get the news about a husband dead in war, or picking up the phone over and over to hear about a child lost, lost.

Some of the dead return to us in moments of crisis. They are here to speak, but do not speak, as if seeing is enough.

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94 “With ghosts there is a taxonomy—that is to say, there are many kinds of ghosts,” Roger Clarke writes in his study of ghosts and ghost lore, Ghosts: A Natural History: 500 Years of Searching.

95 Psychologist Nandor Fodor, in the 1930’s, theorized that poltergeists were repressed anger or frustrated sexual desire and, thus, more of a living entity rather than a haunting spirit.

96 These are usually referred to as Mental Imprint Manifestations.
The Other in the Room

Some nights you wake up, positive that the one you love is sitting in the dark beside you as a ghost. You never turn to look though and so they’ve never died.

He asked, once, if you believed always that the ghosts of the living would come for you. You tried, hard, not to nod.

You like thinking about being in love more than you liked your lover. He had nice hands, though. You reason that, sometimes, that is enough.

She asked, maybe twice, if you were afraid of the living dead, those zombies coming back. You shook your head.

You almost always want to turn, to see the one you love, though in dreams he never lives. You wake up often to the ghost beside you weeping. One of you is weeping.

You answered, just the one time, that you’d never fear something you’d been for so long.
The Apparitionist

I used to sleep with this guy who studied Japanese ghosts in literature. He’d talk about them while I was trying to go to sleep and the names stuck in my head long after I’d forgotten his. Shogo, Yokai, Yurei. And his dog was named Lafcadio.\footnote{One can presume this is a reference to notable scholar of Japanese ghostlore, Lafcadio Hearn.} I do remember that. The guy’s name was something easy, one syllable, started with an L or a J.

I have an ex whose own ex before me attempted suicide. He said that she cut along the horizon rather than up the mountain. I asked what led her to it and he couldn’t remember, but he thought that it might have been because she lost the ability to dream after a car accident. I took this metaphorically, but he corrected, said literally. Said she closed her eyes and nothing came. I was terrified for years afterwards that every bump on the head might sever my dreams from my body.

My best friend and I, when we were children, would chase ghosts down by the valley stream. We’d pass their names between us in the form of stories. There were so many tales we had memorized. Most were cannibalized, stolen from the memories of other towns. The Dead Bride, The White Woman, The Lost Girl. When we tired of the dead, we would catch tadpoles in cupped palms, just for a second before releasing them. Years later when the bodies of birds were found, I tried to imagine them back to life and I would always get as far as their lives inside eggs.

I had a cousin who sold her soul, or that’s what she told me. She said the devil met her at a game of cards. She said the devil was a beautiful woman. She said the devil spoke in French and she didn’t speak the language, so she thought she was merely selling the memory of a man she once knew. And what does it feel like to have no soul, I asked. \textit{Like every night is the night before Christmas but you never wake up on Christmas morning}, she told me.\footnote{Is this text perhaps in conversation with the earlier text “Dead Man’s Bride?”}
There was a woman who I knew. She had a scar that perfectly circled her body, as if she had once been sawed in half. *I’ve never liked that magic trick,* she told me once in confidence. I never saw the scar, though, she told me about it as if one day I would and she didn’t want me to be surprised.

My friend reads the shapes of people’s skulls. She brushes out my hair, takes bobby pins, and begins to pull it all into swoops. Her fingertips on my scalp map out the secrets of my fortune. When I lean backwards and rest fully into her hands, she says that she knows my future. *You will carry such heavy things.* I laugh, thinking the voice she has adopted is merely theatrical until she continues. *You will carry so many other people’s ghosts.*

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99 Phrenology.
Things People Have Written in Letters to Ghosts

Remember the time we woke up too late to watch the sun rise and the sky was already bright and you said you thought you saw the color drain from your eyes when you looked in that mirror once I meant to tell you that the windows were beginning to crack under the weight of the water, that’s a phrase you used to describe how stones must feel after they stop skipping, why would you say something like that? The doctor told me to hold my breath when I felt the first twinge of pain and if it lasted longer than I could keep the breath in than I should get help. What kind of dreams do you have at night? Or is there just an emptying out? Like when you sleep after a fever has broken and in the morning you can’t remember anything except that you feel new? I kept all of the pebbles you collected and I spread them over the bottom of the bathtub and filled it with ice water and when I climbed in it felt like I was in a lake and I thought that I could hear the wind through trees but it was only the house settling down with no one moving about and often I imagine that you are still here only you no longer live in this city and you no longer have the same phone number and maybe your name has changed and that is why I never hear from you anymore. Does that seem like something I should have told you sooner? I meant to, you know. But I thought you knew. I just keep thinking about how we ran outside anyway and kept going until we reached the top of the hill and you said that if we just ran fast enough than the sun would rise again.
To Ghost #1

Often I try to imagine the space between galaxies
it’s funny how something so vast is easier to comprehend than the space between my body and yours
there are places in between us where I can’t see
there are shadows in all the corners of this room
when did distance become uncrossable
when did distance become years
your life is a dash left between two dates
what happened in that space
I used to think that dreams were actually just other lives we only got to visit sometimes
there are places in between us where I can’t dream a way out
there are lights turning off in windows across the world
After Ghosts

A bird whose song sounds
the same as your heart beats from
a distance and when
I think of the sky at morning after
a night when it has rained for hours
it reminds me of your voice and
this is not say I’m sorry but rather
that sometimes, at dawn, I wake up
and hear birds that make me feel
like the room is emptied of even
the shadows I have named after you
About Ghosts

I think you can tell a lot about a person by the faces they expect to see out darkened windows, under the bed, in the very back of the closet. The ghosts we keep close tucked into our pockets, the way we sign our names, the color we think of when told to imagine something peaceful; these are the ones we need to exorcise every day. The ghosts that come back to us sometimes in dreams, usually we see them across crowded streets and yell out their names but the trouble with common names is that you can’t turn every time you think someone might be calling for you. There’s always someone calling out to you. And in dreams these ghosts never remember us, they shake their heads when we open our arms to embrace them.

That is enough.
Ballad of Silver Blades

I’m sure your ghosts will come
out of the corners of rooms
and the backs of closets, hidden
behind coats that haven’t been worn
since they were in style that year
everyone wore yellow the shade
of marigolds.

Your ghosts will answer to every name
that you think to call them. Remember
how it felt the first time you realized you
never knew the middle name of your
grandfather? Ghosts will still answer, even
if all you call them is love or you there.
Ghosts carry no grudges, they can’t
keep up with them.

You will always wonder what became of your ghosts,
the ones you heard singing in the hallways
of emptied out buildings, the ones who
had such beautiful voices but only when
they thought no one was listening, the ones
who hummed instead when they saw you
could see them.

One day you will ask for your ghosts
and your voice may shake and your
breath may come too fast, too shallow,
and you will wonder what time it is where
they are and whether they might
catch their trains, walk the distance,
reach you soon enough. Know, though,
that I’m sure your ghost will come,
they will always come, to hold you
as tightly as they can.
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