

So Runs the World Away

Caitlin R. Kiernan

A falling star for your thoughts," she says and Gable, the girl with foil-silver eyes and teeth like the last day of winter, points at the night sky draped high above Providence and the wide Seekonk River. Night-secret New England sky, and a few miles further north you have to call it the Pawtucket River, but down here, where it laps fishy against Swan Point and the steep cemetery slopes, down here it's still the Seekonk and way over there are the orange industrial lights of Phillips-dale; Dead Girl blinks once or twice to get the taste out of her mouth, and then she follows Gable's grimy finger all the way up to heaven and there's the briefest streak of white light drawn quick across the eastern sky.

"That's very nice, but they aren't really, you know," she says and Gable makes a face, pale face squinched up like a very old woman, dried-apple face to say she doesn't understand and, "Aren't really *what?*" she asks.

"Stars," says Dead Girl. "They're only meteorites. Just chunks of rock and metal flying around through space and burning up if they get too close. But they aren't stars. Not if they fall like that."

"Or angels," Bobby whispers and then goes right back to eating from the handful of blackberries he's picked from the brambles growing along the water's edge.

"I never said anything about angels," Gable growls at the boy, and he throws a blackberry at her. "There are *lots* of different words for angels."

"And for falling stars," Dead Girl says with a stony finality so they'll know that's all she wants to hear about it; meteorites that stop being meteors, Seekonk changing into Pawtucket, and in the end it's nothing but the distance between this point and that. As arbitrary as any change, and so she presses her lips against the jogging lady's left wrist again. Not even the sheet-thin ghost of a pulse left in there, cooling meat against her teeth, flesh that might as well be clay except there are still a few red mouthfuls and the sound of her busy lips isn't all that different from the sound of the waves against the shore.

"I know seven words for grey," Bobby says, talking through a mouthful of seeds and pulp and the dark juice dribbling down his bloodstained chin. "I got them out of a dictionary."

"You're a little faggot," Gable snarls at the boy, those narrow mercury eyes and her lower lip stuck way out like maybe someone's been beating her again, and Dead Girl knows she shouldn't have argued with Gable about falling stars and angels. Next time, she thinks, I'll remember that. Next time I'll smile and say whatever she wants me to say. And when she's finally finished with the jogging lady, Dead Girl's the first one to slip quiet as a mousey in silk bedroom slippers across the mud and pebbles and the river is as cold as the unfailing stars speckling the August night.

An hour and four minutes past midnight in the big house on Benefit Street and the ghouls are still picking at the corpses in the basement. Dead Girl sits with Bobby on the stairs that lead back up to the music and conversation overhead, the electric lights and acrid-sweet clouds of opium smoke; down here there are only candles and the air smells like bare dirt walls and mildew, like the embalmed meat spread out on the ghouls' long carving table. When they work like this, the ghouls stand up on their crooked hind legs and press their canine faces close together. The very thin one named Barnaby (his nervous ears alert to every footfall overhead, every creaking door, as if anyone up there even cares what they're up to down here) picks up a rusty boning knife and uses it to lift a strip of dry flesh the colour of old chewing gum.

"That's the gastrocnemius," he says and the yellow-orange iris of his left eye drifts nervously towards the others, towards Madam Terpsichore, especially, who shakes her head and laughs the way that all ghouls laugh. The way starving dogs would laugh, Dead Girl thinks, if they ever dared, and she's starting to wish she and Bobby had gone down to Warwick with Gable and the Bailiff after all.

"No, that's the soleus, dear," Madam Terpsichore says, and sneers at Barnaby, that practised curl of black lips to flash her jaundiced teeth like sharpened piano keys, a pink-red flick of her long tongue along the edge of her muzzle, and "*That's* the gastrocnemius, there," she says. "You haven't been paying attention."

Barnaby frowns and scratches at his head. "Well, if we ever got anything fresh, maybe I could keep them straight," he grumbles, making excuses again, and Dead Girl knows the dissection is beginning to bore Bobby. He's staring over his shoulder at the basement door, the warm sliver of light getting in around the edges.

"Now, show me the lower terminus of the long peroneal," Madam Terpsichore says, her professorial litany and the impatient clatter of Barnaby digging about in his kit for a pair of poultry shears or an oyster fork, one or the other or something else entirely.

"You want to go back upstairs for a while?" Dead Girl asks the boy and he shrugs, but doesn't take his eyes off the basement door, doesn't turn back around to watch the ghouls.

"Well, come on then," and she stands up, takes his hand, and that's when Madam Terpsichore finally notices them,

"Please don't go, dear," she says. "It's always better with an audience, and if Master Barnaby ever finds the proper instrument, there may be a flensing yet," and the other ghouls snicker and laugh.

"I don't think I like them very much," Bobby whispers very quietly and Dead Girl only nods and leads him back up the stairs to the party.

Bobby says he wants something to drink, so they go to the kitchen first, to the noisy antique refrigerator, and he has a Coke and Dead Girl takes out a Heineken for herself. One chilly, apple-green bottle and she twists the cap off and sips the bitter

German beer; she never liked the taste of beer, before, but sometimes it seems like there were an awful lot of things she didn't like before. The beer is very, very cold and washes away the last rags of the basement air lingering stale in her mouth like a dusty patch of mushrooms, basement-dry earth and a billion microscopic spores looking for a place to grow.

"I don't think I like them at all," Bobby says, still whispering even though they're upstairs. Dead Girl starts to tell him that he doesn't have to whisper any more, but then she remembers Barnaby, his inquisitive, dog-cocked ears, and she doesn't say anything at all.

Almost everyone else is sitting together in the front parlour, the spacious, book-lined room with its stained-glass lampshades in all the sweet and sour colours of hard candy, sugar-filtered light that hurts her eyes. The first time she was allowed into the house on Benefit Street, Gable showed her all the lamps, all the books, all the rooms, like they were hers. Like she belonged here, instead of the muddy bottom of the Seekonk River, another pretty, broken thing in a house filled up with things that are pretty or broken or both. Filled up with antiques, and some of them breathe and some of them don't. Some, like Miss Josephine, have forgotten how or why to breathe, except to talk.

They sit around her in their black funeral clothes and the chairs carved in 1754 or 1773, a rough circle of men and women that always makes Dead Girl think of ravens gathered around carrion, blackbirds about a raccoon's corpse, jostling each other for all the best bits; sharp beaks for her bright and sapphire eyes, for the porcelain tips of her fingers, or that silent, un-beating heart. The empress as summer roadkill, Dead Girl thinks, and doesn't laugh out loud, even though she *wants* to, wants to laugh at these stiff and obsolescent beings, these tragic, waxwork shades sipping absinthe and hanging on Miss Josephine's every word like gospel, like salvation. Better to slip in quiet, unnoticed, and find some place for her and Bobby to sit where they won't be in the way.

"Have you ever *seen* a firestorm, Signior Garzarek?" Miss Josephine asks and she looks down at a book lying open in her lap, a green book like Dead Girl's green beer bottle.

"No, I never have," one of the waxworks says, a tall man with slippery hair and ears that are too big for his head and almost come to points. "I dislike such things."

"But it was beautiful," Miss Josephine says and then she pauses, still looking at the green book in her lap and Dead Girl can tell from the way her eyes move back and forth, back and forth, that she's reading whatever's on the pages. "No, that's not the right word," she says, "That's not the right word at all."

"I was at Dresden," one of the women volunteers and Josephine looks up, blinks at the woman as if she can't quite remember what this particular waxwork is called.

"No, no, Addie, it wasn't like that at all. Oh, I'm sure Dresden was exquisite, too, yes. But this wasn't something man did. This was something that was *done* to men. And that's the thing that makes it truly transcendent, the thing that makes it..." and

she trails off and glances back down at the book as if the word she's missing is in there somewhere.

"Well, then, read some of it to us," Signior Garzarek says and he points a gloved hand at the green book and Miss Josephine looks up at him with her blue-brilliant eyes, eyes that seem grateful and malicious at the same time.

"Are you sure?" she asks them all. "I wouldn't want to bore any of you."

"Please," says the man who hasn't taken off his bowler, and Dead Girl thinks his name is Nathaniel. "We always like to hear you read."

"Well, only if you're sure," Miss Josephine says, and she sits up a little straighter on her divan, clears her throat, and fusses with the shiny folds of her black satin skirt, the dress that only looks as old as the chairs, before she begins to read.

"*That* was what came next — the fire," she says, and this is her reading voice now and Dead Girl closes her eyes and listens. "It shot up everywhere. The fierce wave of destruction and carried a flaming torch with it — agony, death and a flaming torch. It was just as if some fire demon was rushing from place to place with such a torch. Flames streamed out of half-shattered buildings all along Market Street.

"I sat down on the sidewalk and picked the broken glass out of the soles of my feet and put on my clothes.

"All wires down, all wires down!"

And that's the way it goes for the next twenty minutes or so, the kindly half-dark behind Dead Girl's eyes and Miss Josephine reading from her green book while Bobby slurps at his Coke and the waxwork ravens make no sound at all. She loves the rhythm of Miss Josephine's reading voice, the cadence like rain on a hot day or ice cream, that sort of a voice. But it would be better if she were reading something else, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", maybe, or Keats or Tennyson. But this is better than nothing at all, so Dead Girl listens, content enough and never mind that it's only earthquakes and conflagration, smoke and the screams of dying men and horses. It's the *sound* of the voice that matters, not the words or anything they mean, and if that's true for her it's just as true for the silent waxworks in their stiff, colonial chairs.

When she's finished, Miss Josephine closes the book and smiles, showing them all the stingiest glimpse of her sharp, white teeth.

"Superb," says Nathaniel, and "Oh yes, superb," says Addie Goodwine.

"You are indeed a wicked creature, Josephine," says the Signior and he lights a fat cigar and exhales a billowing phantom from his mouth. "Such delicious perversity wrapped up in such a comely package."

"I was writing as James Russell Williams, then," Miss Josephine says proudly. "They even paid me."

Dead Girl opens her eyes and Bobby's finished his Coke, is rolling the empty bottle back and forth across the rug like a wooden rolling pin on cookie dough. "Did

you like it?" she asks him and he shrugs.

"Not at all?"

"Well, it wasn't as bad as the ghouls," he says, but he doesn't look at her, hardly ever looks directly at her or anyone else these days.

A few more minutes and then Miss Josephine suddenly remembers something in another room that she wants the waxworks to see, something they *must* see, an urn or a brass sundial, the latest knick-knack hidden somewhere in the bowels of the great, cluttered house. They follow her out of the parlour, into the hallway, chattering and trailing cigarette smoke, and if anyone even notices Bobby and Dead Girl sitting on the floor, they pretend that they haven't. Which is fine by Dead Girl; she dislikes them, the lifeless smell of them, the guarded desperation in their eyes.

Miss Josephine has left her book on the cranberry divan and when the last of the vampires has gone, Dead Girl gets up and steps inside the circle of chairs, stands staring down at the cover.

"What does it say?" Bobby asks and so she reads the title to him.

"*San Francisco's Horror of Earthquake, Fire, and Famine*," she reads, and then Dead Girl picks the book up and shows him the cover, the letters stamped into the green cloth in faded gold ink. And underneath, a woman in dark-coloured robes, her feet in fire and water, chaos wrapped about her ankles, and she seems to be bowing to a shattered row of marble columns and a cornerstone with the words "In Memoriam of California's Dead — April 18th, 1906".

"That was a long time ago, wasn't it?" Bobby asks and Dead Girl sets the book down again. "Not if you're Miss Josephine, it isn't," she says. If you're Miss Josephine, that was only yesterday, the day before yesterday. If you're her — but that's the sort of thought it's best not to finish, better if she'd never thought it at all.

"We don't have to go back to the basement, do we?" Bobby asks and Dead Girl shakes her head.

"Not if you don't want to," she says. And then she goes to the window and stares out at Benefit Street, at the passing cars and the living people with their smaller, petty reasons for hating time. In a moment, Bobby comes and stands beside her and he holds her hand.

Dead Girl keeps her secrets in an old Hav-A-Tampa cigar box, the few she can't just keep inside her head, and she keeps the old cigar box on a shelf inside a mausoleum at Swan Point. This manicured hillside that rises up so sharp from the river's edge, steep and dead-adorned hill, green grass in the summer and the wind-rustling branches of the trees, and only Bobby knows about the box and she thinks he'll keep it to himself. He rarely says anything to anyone, especially Gable; Dead Girl knows what Gable would do if she found out about the box, *thinks* she knows and that's good enough, bad enough, that she keeps it hidden in the mausoleum.

The caretakers bricked up the front of the vault years and years ago, but they left a small cast-iron grate set into the masonry just below the marble keystone and the verdigris-streaked plaque with the name "Stanton" on it, though Dead Girl can't imagine why. Maybe it's there so the bugs can come in and out, or so all those dead Stantons can get a breath of fresh air now and then, but not even enough room for bats to squeeze in, or the swifts, or rats. But plenty of space between the bars for her and Bobby to slip inside whenever she wants to look at the things she keeps inside the old cigar box.

Nights like tonight, after the long parties, after Miss Josephine finally loses interest in her waxwork ravens and chases them all away (everyone except the ghouls, of course, who come and go as they please through the tunnels in the basement); still a coal-grey hour left until dawn and she knows that Gable is probably already waiting for them in the river, but she can wait a few minutes more.

"She might come looking for us," Bobby says when they're inside the mausoleum and he's standing on tiptoes to see out but the grate is still a foot above his head.

"No, she won't," Dead Girl tells him, tells herself that it's true, that Gable's too glad to be back down there in the dark to be bothered. "She's probably already asleep by now."

"Maybe so," Bobby says, not sounding even the least bit convinced, and then he sits down on the concrete floor and watches Dead Girl with his quicksilver eyes, mirror eyes so full of light they'll still see when the last star in the whole goddamned universe has burned itself down to a spinning cinder.

"You let me worry about Gable," she says and opens the box and everything's still inside, just the way she left it. The newspaper clippings and a handful of coins, a pewter St Christopher's medal and a doll's plastic right arm. Three keys and a ragged swatch of indigo velvet stained maroon around the edges. Things that mean nothing to anyone but Dead Girl, her puzzle and no one else knows the way that all these pieces fit together. Or even *if* they all fit together; sometimes even she can't remember, but it makes her feel better to see them, anyway, to lay her white hands on these trinkets and scraps, to hold them.

Bobby is tapping his fingers restlessly against the floor, and when she looks at him he frowns and stares up at the ceiling. "Read me the one about Mercy," he says and she looks back down at the Hav-A-Tampa box.

"It's getting late, Bobby. Someone might hear me."

And he doesn't ask her again, keeps his eyes on the ceiling directly above her head and taps his fingers on the floor.

"It's not even a story," she says, and fishes one of the newspaper clippings from the box. Nut-brown paper gone almost as brittle as she feels inside and the words printed there more than a century ago.

"It's almost like a story, when you read it," Bobby replies.

For a moment, Dead Girl stands very still, listening to the last of the night sounds

fading slowly away and the stranger sounds that come just before sunrise: birds and the blind, burrowing progress of earthworms, insects and a ship's bell somewhere down in Providence Harbour, and Bobby's fingers drumming on the concrete. She thinks about Miss Josephine and the comfort in her voice, her ice-cream voice against every vacant moment of eternity. And, in a moment, she begins to read.

Letter from the *Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner*, dated March 1892:

"Exeter Hill" Mr Editor,

As considerable notoriety has resulted from the exhuming of three bodies in Exeter cemetery on the 17th inst., I will give the main facts as I have received them for the benefit of such of your readers as "have not taken the papers" containing the same. To begin, we will say that our neighbor, a good and respectable citizen, George T. Brown, has been bereft of his wife and two grown-up daughters by consumption, the wife and mother about eight years ago, and the eldest daughter, Olive, two years or no later, while the other daughter, Mercy Lena, died about two months since, after nearly one year's illness from the same dread disease. About two years ago Mr Brown's only son Edwin A., a young married man of good habits, began to give evidence of lung trouble, which increased, until in hopes of checking and curing the same, he was induced to visit the famous Colorado Springs, where his wife followed him later on and though for a time he seemed to improve, it soon became evident that there was no real benefit derived, and this coupled with a strong desire on the part of both husband and wife to see their Rhode Island friends, decided them to return east after an absence of about 18 months and are staying with Mrs Brown's parents, Willet Himes. We are sorry to say that Eddie's health is not encouraging at this time. And now comes in the queer part, viz: the revival of a pagan or other superstition regarding the feeding of the dead upon a living relative where consumption was the cause of death and now bringing the living person soon into a similar condition, etc. and to avoid this result, according to the same high authority, the "vampire" in question which is said to inhabit the heart of a dead consumptive while any blood remains in that organ, must be cremated and the ashes carefully preserved and administered in some form to the living victim, when a speedy cure may (un) reasonably be expected. I will here say that the husband and father of the deceased ones, from the first, disclaimed any faith at all in the vampire theory but being urged, he allowed other, if not wiser, counsel to prevail, and on the 17th inst., as before stated the three bodies alluded to were exhumed and then examined by Doctor Metcalt of Wickford (under protest, as it were, being an unbeliever). The two bodies longest buried were found decayed and bloodless, while the last one who has been only about two months buried showed some blood in the heart as a matter of course, and as the doctor expected but to carry out what was a foregone conclusion, the heart and lungs of the last named (M. Lena) were then and there duly cremated, but deponent saith not how the ashes were disposed of. Not many

persons were present, Mr Brown being among the absent ones. While we do not blame anyone for these proceedings as they were intended without doubt to relieve the anxiety of the living, still, it seems incredible that anyone can attach the least importance to the subject, being so entirely incompatible with reason and conflicts also with scripture, which requires us "to give a reason for the hope that is in us", or the why and wherefore which certainly cannot be done as applied to the foregoing.

With the silt and fish shit settling gentle on her eyelids and lungs filled up with cold river water, Dead Girl sleeps, the soot-black ooze for her blanket, her cocoon, and Bobby safe in her arms. Gable is there, too, lying somewhere nearby, coiled like an eel in the roots of a drowned willow.

And in her dreams Dead Girl counts the boats passing overhead, their prows to split the day-drenched sky, their wakes the roil and swirl of thunderstorm clouds. Crabs and tiny snails nest in her hair and her wet thoughts slip by as smooth and capricious as the Seekonk, one instant or memory flowing seamlessly into the next. And *this* moment, this one here, is the last night that she was still a living girl. Last frosty night before Hallowe'en and she's stoned and sneaking into Swan Point Cemetery with a boy named Adrian that she only met a few hours ago in the loud and smoky confusion of a Throwing Muses show, Adrian Mobley and his long yellow hair like strands of the sun or purest spun gold.

Adrian won't or can't stop giggling, a joke or just all the pot they've been smoking, and she leads him straight down Holly Avenue, the long paved drive to carry them across the Old Road and into the vast maze of the cemetery's slate and granite intestines. Headstones and more ambitious monuments lined up neat or scattered wild among the trees, reflecting pools to catch and hold the high, white moon, and she's only having a little trouble finding her way in the dark.

"Shut up," she hisses, casts anxious serpent sounds from her chapped lips, across her chattering teeth, and, "Someone's going to fucking hear us," she says. She can see her breath, her soul escaping mouthful by steaming mouthful.

Then Adrian puts his arm around her, sweater wool and warm flesh around warm flesh, and he whispers something in her ear, something she should have always remembered but doesn't. Something forgotten the way she's forgotten the smell of a late summer afternoon, or sunlight on sand, and he kisses her.

And for a kiss she shows him the place where Lovecraft is buried, the quiet place she comes when she only wants to be alone, no company but her thoughts and the considerate, sleeping bodies underground. The Phillips family obelisk and then his own little headstone; she takes a plastic cigarette lighter from the front pocket of her jeans and holds the flame close to the ground so that Adrian can read the marker: 20 August 1890-15 March 1937, "I am Providence", and she shows him all the offerings that odd pilgrims leave behind. A handful of pencils and one rusty screw, two nickels, a small rubber octopus and a handwritten letter folded neat and weighted with a rock so the wind won't blow it away. The letter begins "Dear Howard," but she doesn't read any further, nothing there written for her, and then Adrian tries to

kiss her again.

"No, wait. You haven't seen the tree," she says, wriggling free of Adrian Mobley's skinny arms, dragging him roughly away from the obelisk; two steps, three, and they're both swallowed by the shadow of an enormous, ancient birch, this tree that must have been old when her great-grandfather was a boy. Its sprawling branches are still shaggy with autumn-painted leaves, its roots like the scabby knuckles of some sky-bound giant, clutching at the earth for fear that he will fall and tumble for ever towards the stars.

"Yeah, so it's a tree," Adrian mumbles, not understanding, not even trying to understand, and now she knows that it was a mistake to bring him here.

"People have carved things," she says, and strikes the lighter again, holds the flickering orange flame so that Adrian can see all the pocket-knife graffiti worked into the smooth, pale bark of the tree. The unpronounceable names of dark, fictitious gods and entire passages from Lovecraft, razor steel for ink to tattoo these occult wounds and lonely messages to a dead man, and she runs an index finger across a scar in the shape of a tentacle-headed fish.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she whispers and that's when Dead Girl sees the eyes watching them from the lowest limbs of the tree, *their* shimmering, silver eyes like spiteful coins hanging in the night, strange fruit.

"This shit isn't the way it happened at all," Gable says. "These aren't even *your* memories. This is just some bitch we killed."

"Oh, I think she knows that," the Bailiff laughs and it's worse than the ghouls snickering for Madam Terpsichore.

"I only wanted him to see the tree," Dead Girl says. "I wanted to show him something carved into the Lovecraft tree."

"Liar," Gable sneers and that makes the Bailiff laugh again. He squats in the dust and fallen leaves and begins to pick something stringy from his teeth.

And she would run, but the river has almost washed the world away, nothing left now but the tree and the moon and the thing that clammers down its trunk on spider-long legs and arms the colour of chalk dust.

Is that a death? And are there two?

"We know you would forget us," Gable says, "if we ever let you. You would pretend you were an innocent, a *victim*." Her dry tongue feels as rough as sandpaper against Dead Girl's wrist, dead cat's tongue, and above them the constellations swirl in a mad, kaleidoscope dance about the moon; the tree moans and raises its swaying branches to heaven, praying for dawn, for light and mercy from everything it's seen and will ever see again.

Is death that woman's mate?

And at the muddy bottom of the Seekonk River, in the lee of the Henderson Bridge, Dead Girl's eyelids flutter as she stirs uneasily, frightening fish, fighting sleep

and her dreams. But the night is still hours away, waiting on the far side of the scalding day, and so she holds Bobby tighter and he sighs and makes a small, lost sound that the river snatches and drags away towards the sea.

Dead Girl sits alone on the floor in the parlour of the house on Benefit Street, alone because Gable has Bobby with her tonight; Dead Girl drinks her Heineken and watches the yellow and aubergine circles that their voices trace in the stagnant, smoky air, and she tries to recall what it was like before she knew the colours of sound.

Miss Josephine raises the carafe and carefully pours tap water over the sugar cube on her slotted spoon; the water and dissolved sugar sink to the bottom of her glass and at once the liqueur begins to louche, the clear and emerald bright mix of alcohol and herbs clouding quickly to a milky, opaque green.

"Oh, of course," she says to the attentive circle of waxwork ravens. "I remember Mercy Brown, and Nellie Vaughn, too, and that man in Connecticut. What was his name?"

"William Rose," Signior Garzarek suggests, but Miss Josephine frowns and shakes her head.

"No, no. Not Rose. He was that peculiar fellow in Peace Dale, remember? No, the man in Connecticut had a different name."

"They were maniacs, every one of them," Addie Goodwine says nervously and sips from her own glass of absinthe. "Cutting the hearts and livers out of corpses and burning them, eating the ashes. It's ridiculous. It's even worse than what *they* do," and she points confidentially at the floor.

"Of course it is, dear," Miss Josephine says.

"But the little Vaughn girl, Nellie, I understand she's still something of a sensation among the local high-school crowd," Signior Garzarek says and smiles, dabs at his wet, red lips with a lace handkerchief. "They do love their ghost stories, you know. They must find the epitaph on her tombstone an endless source of delight."

"What does it say?" Addie asks and when Miss Josephine turns and stares at her, Addie Goodwine flinches and almost drops her glass.

"You really should get out more often, dear," Miss Josephine says.

"Yes," Addie stammers. "Yes, I know. I should."

The waxwork named Nathaniel fumbles with the brim of his black bowler and, "I remember," he says. "'I am watching and waiting for you.' That's what it says, isn't it?"

"Delightful, I tell you," Signior Garzarek chuckles and then he drains his glass and reaches for the absinthe bottle on its silver serving tray.

"What do you see out there?"

The boy that Dead Girl calls Bobby is standing at the window in Miss Josephine's parlour, standing there with the sash up and snow blowing in, small drifts of snow at his bare feet and he turns around when she says his name.

"There was a bear on the street," he says and puts the glass paperweight in her hands; glass dome filled with water and when she shakes it all the tiny white flakes inside swirl around and around, a miniature blizzard trapped in her palm, plastic snow to settle slow across the frozen field, the barn, the dark and winterbare line of trees in the distance.

"I saw a bear," he says again, more insistent than before, and points at the open window.

"You did *not* see a bear," Dead Girl says, but she doesn't look to see for herself, doesn't take her silver eyes off the paperweight; she'd almost forgotten about the barn, that day and the storm, January or February or March, more years ago than she'd have ever guessed and the wind howling like hungry wolves.

"I *did*," Bobby says. "I saw a big black bear dancing in the street. I know a bear when I see one."

And Dead Girl closes her eyes and lets the globe fall from her fingers, lets it roll from her hand and she knows that when it hits the floor it will shatter into a thousand pieces. World shatter, watersky shatter to bleed heaven away across the floor, and so there isn't much time if she's going to make it all the way to the barn.

"I think it knew our names," the boy says and he sounds afraid, but when she looks back she can't see him any more. Nothing behind her now but the little stone wall to divide this field from the next, the slate and sandstone boulders already half buried by the storm, and the wind pricks her skin with icing needle teeth. The snow spirals down from the leaden clouds and the wind sends it spinning and dancing in dervish crystal curtains.

"We forget for a reason, child," the Bailiff says, his rust-crimson voice woven tight between the air and every snowflake. "Time is too heavy to carry so much of it strung about our necks."

"I don't hear you," she lies, and it doesn't matter anyway, whatever he says, because Dead Girl is already at the barn door; both the doors left standing open and her father will be angry, will be furious if he finds out. The horses could catch cold, he will say to her. The cows, he will say, the cows are already giving sour milk, as it is.

Shut the doors and don't look inside. Shut the doors and run all the way home.

"It fell from the sky," he said, the night before. "It fell screaming from a clear, blue sky. No one's gone looking for it. I don't think they will."

"It was only a bird," her mother said.

"No," her father said. "It wasn't a bird."

Shut the doors and run...

But she doesn't do either, because that isn't the way this happened, the way it happens, and the naked thing crouched there in the straw and the blood looks up at her with Gable's pretty face. Takes its mouth away from the mare's mangled throat and blood spills out between clenched teeth and runs down its chin.

"The bear was singing our names."

And then the paperweight hits the floor and bursts in a sudden, merciful spray of glass and water that tears the winter day apart around her. "Wake up," Miss Josephine says, spits out impatient words that smell like anise and dust, and she shakes Dead Girl again.

"I expect Madam Terpsichore is finishing up downstairs. And the Bailiff will be back soon. You can't sleep here."

Dead Girl blinks and squints past Miss Josephine and all the colourful, candy-shaded lamps. And the summer night outside the parlour window, the night that carries her rotten soul beneath its tongue, stares back with eyes as black and secret as the bottom of a river.

In the basement, Madam Terpsichore, lady of rib spreaders and carving knives, has already gone, has crept away down one of the damp and brick-throated tunnels with her snuffling entourage in tow. Their bellies full and all their entrail curiosities sated for another night, and only Barnaby is left behind to tidy up; part of his modest punishment for slicing too deeply through a sclera and ruining a violet eye meant for some graveyard potentate or another, the precious vitreous humour spilled by his hand, and there's a fresh notch in his left ear where Madam Terpsichore bit him for ruining such a delicacy. Dead Girl is sitting on an old produce crate, watching while he scrubs bile from the stainless-steel tabletop.

"I'm not very good with dreams, I'm afraid," he says to her and wrinkles his wet black nose.

"Or eyes," Dead Girl says and Barnaby nods his head.

"Or eyes," he agrees.

"I just thought you might listen, that's all. It's not the sort of thing I can tell Gable, and Bobby, well..."

"He's a sweet child, though," Barnaby says, and then he frowns and scrubs harder at a stubborn smear the colour of scorched chestnuts.

"But I can't tell anyone else," Dead Girl says; she sighs and Barnaby dips his pig-bristle brush into a pail of soapy water and goes back to work on the stain.

"I don't suppose I can do *very* much damage, if all I do is listen." And the ghoul smiles a crooked smile for her and touches a claw to the bloody place where Madam Terpsichore nicked the base of his right ear with her sharp incisors.

"Thank you, Barnaby," she says and draws a thoughtless half circle on the dirt

floor with the scuffed toe of one shoe. "It isn't a very long dream. It won't take but a minute," and what she tells him, then, isn't the dream of Adrian Mobley and the Lovecraft tree and it isn't the barn and the blizzard, the white thing waiting for her inside the barn. This is another dream, a moonless night at Swan Point and someone's built a great, roaring bonfire near the river's edge. Dead Girl's watching the flames reflected in the water, the air heavy with wood smoke and the hungry sound of fire; and Bobby and Gable are lying on the rocky beach, laid out neat as an undertaker's work, their arms at their sides, pennies on their eyes. And they're both slit open from collar-bones to crotch, stem to stern, ragged Y-incisions and their innards glint wetly in the light of the bonfire.

"No, I don't think it was me," Dead Girl says, even though it isn't true, and draws another half circle on the floor to keep the first one company. Barnaby has stopped scrubbing at the table and is watching her uneasily with his distrustful, scavenger eyes.

"Their hearts are lying there together on a boulder," and she's speaking very quietly now, almost whispering as if she's afraid someone upstairs might be listening, too, and Barnaby perks up his ears and leans towards her. Their hearts on a stone, and their livers, and she burns the organs in a brass bowl until there's nothing left but a handful of greasy ashes.

"I think I eat them," Dead Girl says. "But there are blackbirds then, a whole flock of blackbirds, and all I can hear are their wings. Their wings bruise the sky."

And Barnaby shakes his head, makes a rumbling, anxious sound deep in his throat, and he starts scrubbing at the table again. "I should learn to quit while I'm only a little ways behind," he snorts. "I should learn what's none of my goddamn business."

"Why, Barnaby? What does it mean?"

And at first he doesn't answer her, only grumbles to himself and the pigbristle brush flies back and forth across the surgical table even though there are no stains left to scrub, nothing but a few soap suds and the candlelight reflected in the scratched and dented silver surface.

"The Bailiff would have my balls in a bottle of brine if I told you that," he says. "Go away. Go back upstairs where you belong and leave me alone. I'm busy."

"But you do know, don't you? I heard a story, Barnaby, about another dead girl named Mercy Brown. They burned *her* heart—"

And the ghoulish opens his jaws wide and roars like a caged lion, hurls his brush at Dead Girl, but it sails over her head and smashes into a shelf of Ball mason jars behind her. Broken glass and the sudden stink of vinegar and pickled kidneys, and she runs for the stairs.

"Go pester someone else, *corpse*" Barnaby snarls at her back. "Tell your blasphemous dreams to those effete cadavers upstairs. Ask one of *those* snotty fuckers to cross him." And then he throws something else, something shiny and sharp that whizzes past her face and sticks in the wall. Dead Girl takes the stairs two

at a time, slams the basement door behind her and turns the lock. And if anyone's heard, if Miss Josephine or Signior Garzarek or anyone else even notices her reckless dash out the front doors and down the steps of the big, old house on Benefit Street, they know better than Barnaby and keep it to themselves.

In the east, there's the thinnest blue-white sliver of dawn to mark the horizon, the light a pearl would make, and Bobby hands Dead Girl another stone. "That should be enough," she says and so he sits down in the grass at the edge of the narrow beach to watch as she stuffs this last rock inside the hole where Gable's heart used to be. Twelve big rocks shoved inside her now, granite-cobble viscera to carry the vampire's body straight to the bottom of the Seekonk and this time that's where it will stay. Dead Girl has a fat roll of grey duct tape to seal the wound.

"Will they come after us?" Bobby asks and the question takes her by surprise, not the sort of thing she would ever have expected from him. She stops wrapping Gable's abdomen with the duct tape and stares silently at him for a moment, but he doesn't look back at her, keeps his eyes on that distant, jagged rind of daylight.

"They might," she tell him. "I don't know for sure. Are you afraid, Bobby?"

"I'll miss Miss Josephine," he says. "I'll miss the way she read us stories."

And Dead Girl nods her head and "Yes," she says. "Me too. But I'll always read you stories," and he smiles when she says that.

When Dead Girl is finally finished, they push Gable's body out into the water and follow it all the way down, wedge it tight between the roots of the sunken willow tree below Henderson Bridge. And then Bobby nestles close to Dead Girl and in a moment he's asleep, lost in his own dreams, and she closes her eyes and waits for the world to turn itself around again.