Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Hideous Creatures

Written by S. E. Lister

Published by Old Street Publishing

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Hideous Creatures

S. E. Lister

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Old Street Publishing Ltd
Trebinshun House, Brecon LD3 7PX
www.oldstreetpublishing.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-908699-56-5

Copyright © S.E. Lister, 2014

The right of S. E. Lister to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by pb print in the Czech Republic.

I with my hammer pounding evermore
The rocky coast, smite Andes into dust,
Strewing my bed, and, in another age,
Rebuild a continent of better men.
Then I unbar the doors: my paths lead out
The exodus of nations: I dispersed
Men to all shores that front the hoary main.

I too have arts and sorceries;
Illusion dwells forever with the wave.
I know what spells are laid. Leave me to deal
With credulous and imaginative man;
For, though he scoop my water in his palm,
A few rods off he deems it gems and clouds.
Planting strange fruits and sunshine on the shore,
I make some coast alluring, some lone isle,
To distant men, who must go there, or die.

Emerson, *The Seashore*

Part One

1

In the Water

With the earthquake came the storm.

Arthur was drenched already. He lay flat on his back, blinking the rain from his eyes. Beneath him the earth rumbled as rock strained on rock, deep in the world's belly.

And he remembered.

"Shelo," said Arthur aloud. He heard stones clatter down the bank behind him, the creak of tree-roots, a curlew shrilling in alarm. "Shelo…"

The ground bucked him with the force of a mule. He was thrown back and sideways, cursing as he scrambled for a hold. The air was strange, dusky, and overhead he saw for an instant what seemed to be a towering figure in the sky, robed in billowing black.

"Shelo!" he cried again, but the figure dissolved into swathes of storm-cloud. His cry became a howl, a thin thing lost in the rising wind. He could not hear himself, could not feel his body shaking because the world was shaking too. The water rose in the lake below, waves swelling and breaking against the banks. Arthur snatched at stones which skittered from his grip, thrown from side to side at the mercy of the quake.

Shelo was gone in the water. His body was sunk now into the silt; face, shoulders, chest, caressed by weeds, tracing along the intricate inked lines which covered his bare torso. He would grow soft there, cold and soft to the touch, his flesh disintegrating like sodden paper. The fish would eat his awful eyes.

Arthur crawled, half on his belly, half on his knees, to the lip

of the lake. The world was still trying to dislodge him from its surface, gouging the skin from his hands as he clung to it. He flung himself forward so that his face was inches from the water.

Weakened, he lay still for a long time. The earthquake finally rumbled itself into exhaustion, reduced to a quiver, and then eventually a desolate hush. The noise of the rain seemed muted, and even birds did not stir. Near Arthur's head a spider clung to a reed, so still it might have been caught in amber.

"Please," whispered Arthur into the silent, iron mass of the lake. "Please… give him back…"

It was his fault. This dawned over the space of the stretching minutes, and slowly Arthur sat back, breathing hard and fast. He closed his eyes.

He imagined that Shelo fell away from him still, limp in the dappled underwater light. Fell away from him through the water, sinking ever deeper, his black eyes open and clear as glass. He was swallowed by darkness.

This will never leave me.

Arthur watched the dim reflections of clouds ripple and distort in the pouring rain. He would stay, he decided, until his body was eroded and washed away.

Lightning lit the world bone-pale, and he saw a human movement in the corner of his vision.

"Arthur! *Arthur!*"

Sliding through the mud towards him was a small shape… not Shelo. He did not raise his head. Her muddied boots and trembling knees soon filled his line of vision.

"Arthur, get up!"

"Go away," he moaned. She bent down to shake him and he snapped at her like a trapped fox. "*Go away!*"

"Please, please get up, you're soaked through, and – " Thunder

drowned her out. She sounded weak, petrified. "Where is he, Arthur?"

"Leave me!" he gasped. He somehow ended up looking at her – boots too heavy and too large, borrowed clothes sodden and bulging where her side was bandaged beneath. Her eyes were round as wagon wheels. He did not intend to catch her gaze, but she forced it upon him, and he could not look away.

"Where's Shelo?" she gasped. "I woke and you was both gone…"

"Gone." His voice did not sound like his own. "Gone in the water." He broke off into a wail. He had heard such sounds from his father's dogs when their pups were thrown in the rain barrel.

The shaking in Flora's knees spread to her whole disheveled outline. She tried to touch him but he pulled violently away from her, scrabbling into a huddle further up the bank.

"It's my fault." He swallowed mouthfuls of rain with sobbing. "We fought. I pushed him."

"You know Shelo like I do," Flora cut across him fiercely. "He wouldn't be drowned in no lake unless he wanted to be, make no mistake."

The water below them seemed to hold a malevolent consciousness, a gaze. It was Shelo's resting place. It was poison, now, through and through.

"Get up, Arthur," Flora said again, with the hint of a plea. He shook his head, biting hard into his knuckles and staring out over the lake. "You can't stay here," she persisted. "You're gonna catch your death, and anyhow…" She cast an anxious glance across the lake, down to where the valley met the woods. "Reckon even now, they ain't stopped searching."

The earth rumbled. As Arthur curled his body over his knees, Flora looked around desperately, hopelessly. Her drenched hair straggled around her face. "*Please*, Art! It's bad enough him gone in the water without you leavin' me as well!"

"Go on," he mumbled. Water spilled from his lips. "Go on with you."

She dragged him, in the end. Cursing like the outlaw she was, she burrowed her hands beneath his arms and forced him up the bank and away from the trees. He staggered, unseeing and uncaring. Arthur knew that the storm was against them, that it would pursue them wherever they ran. And sure enough, the thunder and the lightning drew closer together as they fled the lake, the wind plucking hysterically at their backs.

"It's Shelo's storm!" he screamed. "It's going to destroy us! Let me *go*, devil have your eyes, let me…"

The thunder sounded so close and deep that it seemed the earth was shaking again. He realised that Flora had led him to the cliff face, and he scrambled over the rocks at her prompting.

"Up there!" she gasped. "Looks like a cave!"

She pushed him into a fissure, which widened as he crawled. In the sudden absence of rain and the muffling of the noise, he realised that he was breathing in great, lung-ripping gasps. His feet were searing as though branded.

They tumbled together into the dry inner space and lay panting. Arthur's arms were trembling convulsively with the effort of the climb.

"It's like that place of my daddy's," said Flora, gazing around at the walls of the cave. She was drawing breath with difficulty, clutching at the place left of her heart, where a bullet had lodged just days before. "Back at the great river. You recall it, Art? Where I first saw you."

Slowly, groggily, Arthur sat up. Rain coursed down the cliff face inches away from them, filling the cave with rippling shadows. They lay fighting for breath in their own spreading puddle.

"Your *feet*," said Flora. He clenched his jaw and forced his numb legs towards him, hands shaking uncontrollably as he pulled one foot into view. The flesh of his soles had been cut to ribbons upon the rocks. Crimson blood trickled sluggishly away to mingle with the water.

Flora was watching his face. "It ain't so bad," she ventured. "We can clean it up, and…"

"And what?" he threw at her. Panic was pulling him under. "I won't be able to climb out of here, Flora!"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. "It'll get better," she said dumbly.

He turned his back on her, not easy in such a small space, and let his head sink into his hands. Now that the shock was fading, his body was beginning to remind him of different pains – the heart-deep cold, the rawness of his skin beneath sodden clothes, the agony in his feet. And worst of all, the dull ache in his innards. The pain his body couldn't hold, that shook him loose from himself.

"It won't," he said, and found himself rocking back and forth, hands clawing and clinging at his torso, wailing like a baby again. "It won't… get better. Shelo! Oh, Shelo!"

There was no awkwardness in Flora. She took off her coat and tried to cover him in it, but he resisted. She knew far better than to try and put her arms around him, but she took a grip on his elbow and wouldn't let go, tugging doggedly until he fell still.

"It'll get better," she said again. There was something strange in her voice.

"You are glad," he breathed. "You are…" He could not bring himself to say *relieved*.

"'*Course* not." Flora's freckled face flushed pink. Her small hands clutched at his arm all the more fiercely. "'Course not, it's just that… Arthur, he…"

"Speak it."

"In some ways…" She swallowed. "It's a mercy."

It was right and terrible and unthinkable for her to have said so, and he cursed her with words he'd learned aboard the *Head of Mary*. She flinched at hearing such oaths on his tongue. The absence of Shelo gaped inside him. Finally, when the last spark of energy in his body was spent, Arthur fell back against the cave wall.

"What are we without him?"

Lightning thrust a glare into their dimness, then withdrew again.

Flora whispered, "I don't know."

§

Night engulfed them. It would have made sense to huddle together, drenched as they were, to share what little warmth they had. But neither even made the attempt. When the storm began to wane, what must have been hours later, they were still sitting in torpid silence. Arthur didn't dare close his eyes. Behind his eyelids, Shelo fell away from him in the water, endlessly, his hands outstretched.

Flora was completely still in the shadows, and he thought she was asleep. But then she spoke up, unprompted, as if continuing halfway through a conversation.

"So what's to be done?"

He shifted around, gaze averted from his mangled feet. "Go back," he said dully. "Go back to the freedman-farmer, and never think of me."

"But Art, we…"

"There is no longer any *we*," he said.

With a peculiar gnawing pain, he watched this dawn on her. Her mouth fell slightly open. The steady drip-drip of water from

her hair into her lap continued, one drop poised at the end of her reddening nose. If he did nothing, he knew, she would stay at his side and share whatever dark end awaited. It would not do.

His body convulsed. His tongue spoke words that were not his.

"You are of no use to anyone. Truth be told, you never were."

She gasped, recoiling as though another bullet had just lodged between her ribs. Her eyes were wide as pennies, her hands pressed to her still-bandaged wound. "Art…"

"Shelo cared so little for your life, he would have left you to bleed."

"Then don't ask me why he chose you, neither!" she cried out, spindly arms now hugging her body protectively.

"He needed me." The old refrain. "He called me from across the sea."

They looked at each other through the dark.

"The eyes of Shelo," said Arthur, "saw through us like the eyes of God. It was me he wanted, me he chose and treasured…"

She began to cry, something he realised dimly he had not seen her do before. Her tears were not fathomless and weakened, like Hannah Hallingham's, or stormy and defiant, like Harmony's. Instead they seemed incidental, an inconvenience, rushing silently down her face, more quickly than she could wipe them away.

"There's something so badly wrong with you." Sobs twisted her voice. She was huddled against the wall of the cave, as though the stone itself might be her last hope of comfort. "With both of you. I wish I never met you. I wish my daddy was still alive. I wish I never been born. If Shelo chose you, Arthur, it's 'cos you're the only one he could find who'd gone as badly wrong as him."

There was a pause, in which Arthur turned his gaze back out into the storm-tossed night. Then he asked, "What do I have to say to make you leave?"

"I heard it all," whispered Flora. She wiped her nose on her ragged sleeve. "Ain't nothin' hasn't been done to me, ain't no name I haven't been called."

Far below, the surface of the black lake seethed and writhed. Arthur hardened his resolve, drew breath for the final blow. "And it will always be so, Flora Barber. You will die on some dirt road, or with your neck in a noose. For you will never be another kind of creature."

The silence was deep and severing. Misery had leeched Flora dry of tears, the white tracks stark on her face. Her thin chest was heaving. She got to her feet, bent-backed beneath the rock ceiling, gathering up her sodden coat.

"Oh," she whispered, "Oh, Arthur Hallingham. I know all about what you are, and I never cared. I never thought you was less than human, 'til now. I wish you'd drowned with him."

It was drizzling, now, and a butter-coloured moon was just visible behind the thinning cloud. Arthur watched her climb out of the cave's mouth, and felt the same relief that he had heard seamen experienced as their wounded limbs were sawn away. He was shaking, blood pounding in his ears. Darkness pulsated all around him.

"My feet," he said aloud, to himself. He couldn't climb down, he was entombed here alone. *And the worst of it… the worst of it…* he swallowed, and let his eyes slide closed. Shelo had sunk into the silt, Silas was long gone. Harmony was further than an ocean away, so diminished now with distance that the pieces of her face refused to form together in his mind.

Flora was right to wish him drowned. It would have been a better death.

§

"Arthur."

His eyelids were lead-heavy. He groaned and stirred himself, drenched and frozen still, bruised from lying among the rocks. For a moment, he could not begin to fathom whether he had been here for minutes or weeks.

Then he heard the last choking of the thunder, miles away, and remembered the storm that had been dying outside the cave. He could not have slept for long.

He could see almost nothing. The sky was clearer now, but the moon and pinprick stars barely penetrated the surrounding shadows.

Then white lightning voiced itself, and everything was illuminated.

It was Shelo, made of water and of darkness, made of ashes and of bone. Arthur's whole body leapt as though electrified, limbs flying, scrambling back from the appalling vision. Far below him, outside the mouth of the cave, the lake glimmered silver.

"Arthur," Shelo said. He did not appear faint and ghostly, but real in all his grimy solidity. His smile was a yellow wolf smile. His skin had the sheen of water. He was a drowned man.

Arthur's chest fought to draw in air. He knew that he must be sleeping still, or else turned wholly mad at last. But despite himself, he crawled out from between the rocks, and shuffled inches nearer on his knees.

"I'm so sorry!" he breathed. "So sorry!"

Shelo's tongue caressed the tips of his sharpened canines, one at a time. He seemed to be considering. "Sorry, Arthur? Sorry that I am dead?"

"So sorry!"

Shelo laughed. "I cut out the heart of me," he said, "and locked it inside a tree."

He placed a hand on his bare torso, on the left side of the ribcage,

where a scar contorted the skin. "If you do not believe," he added softly, "then touch me."

"I cannot stand," whispered Arthur. Shelo's gaze fell on his tattered feet, and his lip curled. Slowly he descended, until they were crouched on a level. Arthur trembled. Their faces were inches apart, but he could not feel Shelo's breath.

"If you do not believe," said Shelo again.

Arthur tried to steady his hand as he reached out, but he could not. Neither could he bear to look into that ravenous face. The inked lines that traced Shelo's shoulders, his neck, his chest, were hypnotically intricate. He followed their loops and twists until they led him to the dead blackened bloom of the scar. His fingers hovered fearfully.

Shelo covered Arthur's hand with his own, and pressed it to his chest.

Breath snagged in his lungs like a feather on a branch. The skin was neither warm nor cold, but had an unworldly, sinuous feel; made of water, made of smoke. Behind the ribs there was no heartbeat.

And after all, reasoned Arthur, after all, why should death, why should water, hold him under?

"I never meant for you to drown!" he sputtered, mindless with terror. "Down there… in the dark…"

"I was born in darkness beneath the world," said Shelo. "And crawled from the water into daylight. My eyes first came to see without sun or moon."

His face had become monolithic, sombre. Arthur could see the dirt in his every pore. And yet, he realised, there was no smell. The odour of Shelo, that rich stench of deep-forest earth and the buried remains of things, the musk of crushed powders and drying fungi, the sour note of sweat, was missing.

He pulled his hand away, and Shelo watched him.

For the first time since Arthur had been woken by the earthquake, something else loomed larger even than Shelo's death. He recalled the moments before he had pushed Shelo backwards over the bank of the lake. The reason they had fought.

He swallowed back a baffling tumult of feeling. Shelo's new body dripped like a stalactite. Water formed a skin over his features. He was unreachable. He was silent. Arthur wished that Shelo had a heart, so that he could see into Shelo just as Shelo saw into him. "We did a great thing," said Shelo. "Me and you, Arthur."

"I sent Flora away."

Shelo looked down at him. He did not even seem to have heard. "We did a great thing. For so many. In all the ages of man, who could have dreamed it? Before us, how many died crying out for it?" His head was shaggy with its mane of oiled black hair, heavy and brutal as a lion. "You saw how they came, Arthur. Swarming out of the night like insects drawn to lamplight. Paupers and whores and kings."

Outside, the wind whined against the cliff face. And suddenly, Arthur thought of the Atlantic. It loomed unthinkably huge, and behind it, a half-forgotten life. Footsteps echoing in fire-lit chambers, sugar heaped into teacups, steam rising from a copper bath. Rain on glass panes, and the deep throb of a cello. All drowned now, all sunk in the ocean. Gone in the water.

"I have nowhere," said Arthur emptily. "I have nothing. Now that you are gone."

"Then follow me one last time."

Bewildered, weary beyond words, Arthur raised his eyes to meet Shelo's. "My feet," he whispered. "I cannot walk."

"Show me," Shelo demanded.

Obedient, Arthur shifted from his knees, sticking out his legs

in front of him like a child proffering bootlaces to be tied. Slowly, intently, Shelo knelt. Arthur did not dare to breathe. Shelo's hands touched his soles. He felt nothing; he felt the damp chill of mist. Shelo's fingers covered his wounds.

"Close your eyes," said Shelo.

2

Breath of the Almighty

The New World had first been suggested to the minds of men, so Arthur had heard, by two corpses washed up on the western beach of a Portuguese isle. Their raft had been made from bamboo pieces of extraordinary size, and their decayed faces were unlike anything that had been seen before. They were clothed in strange skins. They had perished drifting upon swift currents from their native shore, journeying outwards from their known world. Even in death, they told of a country beyond all maps.

He himself came to Virginia on a tide of blood, on the boat called the *Head of Mary*. His sister had once shown him an experiment in which two magnets were drawn irresistibly together, flying with urgency across the table until they collided. The continent beckoned him in this way, with ever-strengthening force.

By the time the *Head of Mary* came to harbour, he knew that its every timber was rotten to the core. There were worms in its wood, and a thousand barnacles clung to its belly. But despite everything, the sight of land finally rising up towards him from out of the low fog brought a choked hope to his throat. Through all the terrors of the crossing, one thought had sustained him. If there was any place that held life for him still, it must be this.

§

Three thousand miles before, the crew had gathered round him as the ship left its African port, exclaiming and handling his strange

body as they might a beast at market. He was of far more interest to them than the cargo below deck, whose colour and form were no longer any novelty. Arthur was whiter than the whitest of the crew, and not proportioned, somehow, like other men. His limbs did not know when they ought to end, and his hands and feet were too large. His rust-coloured hair grew in uncertain tufts.

The sailors murmured to one another that he was stricken by a curse or contagion. They demanded an answer from him until he offered the only one he had.

"Since I was a boy," he whispered, "something has been amiss." Arthur had tried to speak of it once before, to his sister, but on that occasion too, language had failed him. It was only that his skin had never seemed to fit his frame; that from his earliest hours, the sickness in his spirit had entered his flesh. He was certain that no physician could put a name to what ailed him, much less cure it.

When he spoke, the English crewmen laughed aloud. *What are you doing here?* they demanded of him. *What are you doing here, your Lordship? Did you fall out of your carriage and land on our deck?*

Before boarding, he had never so much as lifted a cloth or a broom. His hands were softer than fish-flesh. But he had traded the promise of labour for his passage, and was set to work with a bucket and mop, with heavy ropes he did not know how to tie. He quickly lost all sense of night and day, subject instead to the rhythms of his bewildered body and the demands of the duty roster.

He tucked a crumpled handful of letters into the frame of his bunk, and cocooned there at some odd hour, dreamed of what awaited. Outside a storm cradled the ship and fires flashed down from heaven, whilst Arthur dreamed of jungles. He had been told that there was a country in Spanish territory, far south of where the *Head of Mary* was to drop anchor, where the trees grew with such speed and vigour as to resemble animal life, rather than vegetable.

In his dreams, green tendrils sprung up from the earth to wind themselves around his limbs.

Disturbed by the ship's rolling motion, he sweated and cried out, thrashing in his bed like a drunk. His cabin-mates tied his wrists together while he slept, the better to spare themselves from his fists. As he was too long for his own bunk, they bound his ankles to the next man's headboard, and stuffed a cloth into his mouth. He awoke in choking confusion, cold and soaked and surrounded by chaos.

He soon learned that the *Head of Mary* never slept. The ship was a breathing organism, ever feeding, ever defecating and crawling forwards on its belly.

§

Standing watch in the salt-swept darkness, he half-thought he heard his brother's wrathful cry on the wind. Months before, the sound had rung in Arthur's ears as he fled into the night from Harcourt Hall. Now he turned his head and found that it had faded from his hearing at last, drowned out by the lapping of the waves at the prow.

He looked up at the shrouded stars. He thought of taking a new name, and for a moment felt hope rise in his chest like an anchor from the deep.

Somewhere far beyond in the water, a great shape stirred. Its bulk sent out ripples which rocked the *Head of Mary*. Arthur's breath whitened the air as he gripped the side of the ship and craned forward. The beast sent a spout of water high into the black sky, and on the other side of the deck the crew cried out, leaping to their feet and calling for lanterns. Arthur did not move. He wondered if it might be a devouring fish, sent from God to swallow him down into its belly for daring to think he might escape. The

great fish, like the crew, knew that he did not belong here.

The creature followed close by them for the course of many days and nights. It groaned along with the living cargo, as though it felt the same pain. The noise was deep and wide and terrible, like nothing Arthur had ever heard before. The groaning of the great fish and of the cargo shook the timbers of the ship, vibrating through it from below, and stealing into his sleep.

Sailing into a blood-red sundown, they passed some distance from a ship that had been set ablaze. Flames devoured its sails and darted down the mast like devils. Smoke poured into the scarlet sky. The stricken ship listed in the waves, its reflection writhing beneath it. Aboard the *Head of Mary*, a cry went up as the crew dashed for a closer look, gawping and hanging off the side of the deck. Some shouted to the captain, calling out for him to turn closer and look for survivors.

He would go no nearer, and as the *Mary* left the burning boat in her wake, Arthur saw why. Shadows of men leapt out of the flames, legs flailing, suspended in the glowing air before crashing into the waves below. Their heads were thrown back and their arms thrown wide, welcoming the deep. Their skins were black as ash.

Arthur stood on deck as the wind rained cinders down around him. They landed on his shoulders and in his hair. The scene before him seemed to blur and recede, and he felt himself swaying, his legs weak as saplings.

He thought that he would fall. But a hand steadied him, pressing between his shoulders until he stood straight again. Night gathered, and the light of the mutiny-fire shrank into the distance. Arthur's comforter, an old sailor with a league-long face, did not say a word.

§

Silas, like most of the *Mary*'s crew, was a jailbird. Thirty years for his debts had gnawed his youth away, and no other employer would have him. His whole free life he had known nothing but the ships along the sugar routes, which he had sailed more times than he could count. His hands were hard as leather. He had few friends among the crew, and no family back on shore.

He had not been amongst those who gathered around Arthur to examine his curious body, that first day aboard in the scorching sun. The old sailor kept to his own company. When others followed Arthur across the deck, mimicking his awkward movements, or his silver-spoon speech, Silas watched from the sidelines. He whittled birds and fish out of driftwood with his pocket knife. These hung from the low ropes of the rigging, a grainy, mismatched shoal, swaying gently in the wind.

One early watch when the roster had twinned their names, they paced together for many hours along the back quarter of the deck. The sailor seemed to be ruminating on something: and it struck Arthur that he had been forming the same question for the past thousand miles. Silas pushed the words around his mouth, testing them with his tongue, making certain that they had ripened.

"You'll forgive me," he said, at last. "But what need has a man of your breeding to labour his passage on such a ship?"

Arthur's swollen tongue filled his throat. He had scarcely spoken a full sentence since first departing his home shore for Africa, uncounted weeks ago. Had any other asked it of him, he would have made no reply.

He licked his salt-cracked lips. "I am unwelcome in England," he said hoarsely. Cold dawn light stung his eyes, and he closed them, feeling the dipping motion of the deck beneath his body. "In the house of my father."

"Is that so?"

"There was a night… my brother, he might have killed me with his own hands…"

"You must have given dreadful offence."

Arthur barely heard him. "Fled by moonlight," he said. "Rode to the land's end in the rain."

He could not have gone on, had Silas pressed him – could not have told more of Harcourt Hall, or of his time in the unsleeping African port, living in the refuse beneath the harbour. But he was questioned no further. The old man rested his elbows on the side of the boat and chewed at a mouthful of tobacco.

Days after he had stood with Silas and watched the mutinied ship sink into the dusk water, Arthur found a tiny carved statue in the bottom of the water-barrel. It was made from a beast's claw, and crowned with bright feathers. It did not look like Silas's work, but nevertheless Arthur sought him out, finding him scrubbing dishes below deck.

"Witch-work," said Silas. "From the cargo's hands, not mine." He muttered and shook his head. Veins pulsed in his rough forehead. "Seen it before. They think it'll bring a curse down on all who drink it."

"A mutiny?" asked Arthur.

"Of sorts. Toss it overboard, seaman, and say your prayers."

"Should I tell the captain?" he said.

Silas looked at him sideways. "There's powers in this world much to be feared. Spare them in the hold another beating, won't you?"

In the dead of night, Arthur cast the tiny statue into the waves. He did not pray, as he had no wish to draw the attention of the Almighty. But he trembled with holy fear. He dipped his hands feverishly into the washing bowl, afraid that the little idol had left some stain upon his skin. He went back to Silas, who seemed sure to know of such things. "Is there truth in tales of witchery?" he asked.

Silas looked at him, eyes sunk like wrecks into his face. "Oh, your lordship," he said softly. "Ain't their witchery we got to dread."

Arthur did not dare ask him what he meant, and did not find out until some weeks later, when an outbreak of sickness in the hold took more than thirty of the cargo, young and old alike. Their bodies were rolled across the deck and into the waves without ceremony. Even the grown men were so starved as to weigh almost nothing. The children were all bellies and limbs, flies settling on their still-warm skin. Once the last of the dead had been swallowed into the deep, Silas rested his elbows on the railing again, and took his cap from his head. When Arthur drew alongside him, he rubbed one filthy hand slowly across his face, and did not speak for a long while. Finally he muttered, "We shall be damned for what we have done."

"What?" Arthur's body was gripped by a chill. He had heard these exact words in his own home not so long ago, on another man's lips.

"It occurs to me," said Silas, whose voice was so low now as to be almost inaudible, "that this here work has sealed His judgment. That these poor beasts – that they do have in 'em the breath of the Almighty, after all."

Arthur shivered. Beads of sweat appeared on Silas's forehead, and ran down his cheeks.

§

The *Head of Mary* set a course through miles of featureless ocean. Many days passed without any glimpse of an island or a distant ship, or so much as a cloud at the horizon. Heat lay thickly over them, and no rain came. The crew panted and sweated and grumbled at the skies, while a sour stench rolled onto the deck from the

hold below. Soon it became so unbearable that no crewman could stomach it without growing faint. They drew lots to decide who would feed the cargo, then bound their faces with rags dipped in rum. They staggered back up the steps again, babbling fearfully.

Arthur dreaded the day that the lot would be his. From below deck, reddened eyes gazed silently upwards. Silas muttered of a sickness he had seen on past voyages which stole men's sight away, passing first amongst the cargo and then spreading to the crew.

"It began this way," he told Arthur. "With the reddening of the eyes. And in ten days the captain bade us cast half of 'em overboard, unsaleable as they were. In twenty days, five of the crew was entirely blind, and ten half-sighted…"

Arthur's hands flew to his own eyes.

Silas shook his grizzled head. "I might tell you of the time," he said, "when I was aboard the *Blackbird*. We passed through a fog so thick that no one could see his own hand before his face. From the heart of this mist came upon us another ship, unexpected at our starboard side. We couldn't see nothing but its shadow." He shuddered. "We were afeared that it was some foe come to board us. They had no such intention, but by heaven! The terror their tale struck through us, I would rather they had fired cannons."

Arthur leaned in to listen, despite himself.

"We heard their voices through the mist," said Silas. "Driftin' to us from their deck to ours, though we never once saw their faces. To my knowledge they may have been wicked spirits sent to taunt us, things without bodies nor any form at all. Their cries was horrible to hear, more pitiful than lost lambs. *Sailors!* they cried, *sailors, won't you take pity on your fellow men? We are the crew of the most accursed ship* Temperance. *Won't you drop anchor beside us for a while?*

"Natural, our captain called back, askin' what their misfortune had been, and what we might do to bring aid. But after they gave their answer, he hauled up anchor and threw wide our sails to catch the fastest wind he could. *Oh,* they cried to us, *oh we have been struck by a terrible contagion! Some red plague has taken from us that which is most precious, and now we are at the mercy of the blowing winds. Oh mercy, oh our fellow men, not one soul upon this cursed ship can see!*"

The *Head of Mary* swayed on the crest of a wave. Below deck, the eyes of the sweating cargo blinked slow and hopeless.

"Oh, you can be sure, we made good speed from that ship," said Silas. "You may think we was at fault not to take pity on them poor devils, but it was never in question. Sailors know when something unnatural's afoot. We made haste away from that cursed vessel, and never again did I hear of the *Temperance,* or what became of it."

The old sailor looked out to sea. "I'm half-minded to believe it's still out there somewhere, lost upon the seas with its cargo of the blind."

§

The day that Arthur drew the shortest straw, his body descended downwards into the hold, though the rest of him did not seem to follow. He remembered little, afterwards, of that place. He remembered dark bodies with reddened eyes. He remembered bodies stacked one beside the other, and the floor slippery with blood and waste.

He remembered the living shackled to the dead.

§

The weather broke at last with violence, scattering hailstones like

the seventh plague. They tore through the sails and hammered down onto the deck. The *Head of Mary* reeled drunkenly, and Arthur was crippled by nausea.

Confined to his bunk, he drifted through scattered thoughts of the shore that awaited him. In the library, a lifetime ago, wind had caught the pages of Lucas's book and turned them frantically, scattering maps and paintings, showing glimpses of thick tree roots and the scales of sliding reptiles. It was these pictures which returned to Arthur now, unfolding in the recesses of his head. He thought that he smelled the fruits of strange trees, unpeeled green skins with his fingernails. He grew ever more certain that a dark winding form moved towards his bed. A pair of awful eyes blinking in the dimness.

"Silas," he gabbled, staggering out onto the deck with his boots on the wrong feet and his shirt unfastened, his panic overcoming his sickness. "Silas, there are beasts down below…"

The storm washed his words away. Arthur bowed his head beneath his shoulders and yelled into the shrieking wind. The cry rattled in his ribcage. Waves towered on every side, tossing the *Head of Mary* between them like cruel children. When the hail died away, the air grew thick with a pulsing charge, and lightning pierced the clouds.

§

Arthur's stomach lurched independently of the ship's motion.

That night in the library, the breeze had blown open the window, scattering dead leaves among the dusty tomes. It had brought the scent of deep-forest earth, of a sour, ancient musk. It was in that moment, before there had yet been any cause for flight, that Arthur had first known where his running must take him.

"The continent called out to me," he whispered, later in the night when the wind had calmed and the *Mary*'s crew sagged, exhausted, onto the sodden deck. The old sailor looked askance at him. "That I might have some fresh purpose there. Some new beginning."

"Yes, your lordship. If you say as such."

The air felt heavy and hot. When a fiery glow descended from the heavens to rest upon the mast, the crew fell trembling to their knees, save Arthur, who could not have moved for all the world, and Silas, to whom no wonder was new. *The Holy Ghost*, cried the crew, *the candles of the Ghost!* The water beneath, far stiller now, shone with weird luminescence. Fish weaved and flickered, their shadows elongated. The blue fire sputtered like an Indian signal, and it seemed to Arthur in his feverish thoughts that it was meant for him.

In the wake of the descent of the Ghost, the crew grew ever more subdued. The captain tried to talk them round, but they knew what they had seen, and there was no turning their mood. A large parcel of the cargo had perished during the storm, suffocated by the closing of the portals or finally succumbing to the red-eye contagion. When it came to putting the bodies overboard, all were suddenly afraid. What power from on high, or from the African shore they had left behind, might be watching?

In the end, the captain threatened beatings, and they obeyed. The ocean swallowed the dead as though they had never been.

§

Arthur's body, always a stranger to him, worsened as they neared shore. He lost control of his limbs, noises escaping him like flies. The crew crossed themselves and murmured nervously to one another. They no longer followed behind him, flailing in

imitation as they had done during his first days at sea, but gave him a wide berth.

In his bunk he drifted in black liquid spaces, cold and alone, curled in on himself like a thing unborn. All sound was muffled, and all light was far away. He scratched through his shirt and dug scarlet welts into his own skin. He bled onto his blankets.

Flesh dropped from his frame, until he crouched at the ship's bow like a leper, scabbed and skeletal, unshaven and unwashed. His tongue thickened, and for days at a time he forgot how to form words. He lapped rank water from a bowl, and spooned down grey gruel. When the cargo began to refuse food, he found that he could stomach nothing either. They sat in their filth and clenched their mouths tight shut as they were beaten. Arthur shuddered and picked absently at the scratches on his body.

In the end, fearing that he was in the throes of some madness, the crew looped a rope around his wrists and bound him to the mast. He sat with his back flat against the sturdy wood, his eyes searching the sky, straining to recall the thought of the new green country which awaited.

"Your lordship," said Silas in his ear, when no other would come near him. He slipped him a flask of water, hard bread wrapped in cloth. "Your lordship. Don't be going too far from us, now."

In the deepest watches of the night, Arthur heard himself howling. He rocked back and forth to try and break his bonds, but they would not loosen. He glimpsed a solitary sailor creeping below deck to where the women of the cargo were held.

His howls were answered by a muted echo, and he shuddered in the sickly moonlight. Faintly, he grew certain that if the ropes around his hands and feet didn't hold him, he would hurl himself headfirst into the sea. It might, after all, be a better death.

Before he sailed the Atlantic, he had not imagined that there

could be a place on earth as appalling as the confines of his own body. He had been wrong. Aboard the *Head of Mary* he had found a horror without which surpassed the one within.

The groaning from the hold continued long and low. To Arthur, it sounded like the familiar sobbing song of a cello.

§

By the time the New World rose before them out of the west, his body had exhausted itself into stillness. His limbs fell motionless, and his throat grew too hoarse for crying out. He hung from his ropes, all his struggling spent, and looked towards the oncoming land.

It was Silas who eventually cut him free, in the dull dawn before they put down anchor, hacking through the cords with his pocket knife. Fog lay thick over the *Head of Mary*, obscuring the tip of the mast and turning the approaching shore into a mass of shadows. Silas helped Arthur to his feet and across the deck, where he promptly leant over the side of the ship and vomited into the waves. Arthur's eyes followed the drifting progress of the scum in the water, until his gaze was drawn gradually upwards, and he caught his first near glimpse of the new continent.

Gulls passed overhead, with their scythe wings and hoarse screams. They gathered at the *Mary*'s prow and cut a curving course through the air. They squabbled over fish scraps and defecated on the deck. The ship arced around green islands

Silas watched Arthur from the corner of his eye, his mouth slightly open, questions clinging to his tongue like barnacles. They stood together at the edge of the deck, salt spray whitening their faces, and watched the horizon. Arthur found that he was trembling as though he had awoken from a long fever, and leaned weakly forward onto the railing.

"You got letters, your lordship?" asked Silas, at some length. "Names, addresses. Some place to head for when we land?"

"Nothing of that kind," he whispered. Crumpled in his bunk were notes from Lucas, addressed to men in Africa who might have welcomed him. Arthur turned his eyes to the coming horizon, and for a moment his heart strained towards the New World, gripped in a vice, threatening to burst from his chest with its pounding.

As the fog parted to reveal the sails of twenty more ships, all tethered at the harbor and letting off a stench so thick that it was almost visible, Silas laid a hand upon his shoulder. Neither of them moved, though the captain had begun to shout orders. Arthur closed his eyes, and wiped his mouth weakly on his sleeve. A choked hope caught in his throat.

"Silas," he asked, "will you leave me when we land?"

"No, your lordship," said the old sailor quietly. "Not if you don't wish it. I shan't leave you."