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Opening Extract from...

The Museum of Cathy

Written by Anna Stothard

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An elephant skull and a swallow rested on a cabinet of moths, all specimens of natural history that didn't have a place in the museum downstairs. The bird was particularly beautiful, three inches tall, with an ochre neck tapering down into forked blue wings. It had glossy black eyes that Cathy could have sworn just blinked at her.

A few corridors over, a gallery the size of a tennis court contained thousands more stuffed birds so if this one was magically twitching back to life perhaps the matronly pelicans were also preening, the flamingos stretching their legs, the penguins sneezing and the two hundred hummingbirds rustling their feathers ready to seek revenge for the decades in which they'd been prodded and observed. Cathy smiled at the thought and then caught her breath when the swallow chirped twice, its feathered throat vibrating: it was not a specimen, after all. It looped down from the shelf and sailed past a cabinet of dragonflies to land on a pile of science journals.

Cathy was not easily spooked. She would walk first into fairground haunted houses and swear on people's lives without blinking, yet as the swallow looked for an escape route her hands were shaking. Trapped birds, her mother would say, were a warning.



"He likes you," Tom said from the doorway. She didn't immediately turn towards him, instead reaching over a desk to open the window for the swallow. A low hum of jazz music and laughter lifted up from a party in the museum's public galleries two floors below.

"He's not in a position to be choosy." Her face was still tilted away from Tom as he stepped into the room. The bird remained poised and stared directly at Cathy from its shelf. Tom adjusted his glasses and did the same. She looked new but familiar in her green silk evening dress, as if she'd discarded a layer of herself and climbed out raw. Her hands were shaking and when she eventually shifted her face in Tom's direction she revealed a bruise forming on her eye and a little blood on her mouth.

The swallow darted off across the room again, making them both flinch, still not heading for the window but soaring down from the table to a cabinet full of Monarch butterflies, where it shat a pool of white that dribbled down the glass.

The creature flapped its wings while treading air, its body curled into the shape of a comma. Cathy's skin had a feverish sheen to it. She licked a droplet of blood off her top lip with her tongue.

"Are you going to tell me what happened to you tonight?" said Tom. "I've missed you."

A Kissing Beetle

THE PAST IS not stable. The act of remembering changes us, and our whole lives can be re-written in a day. First thing the morning before the party she had paused in the doorway of the Berlin Natural History Museum and smiled good morning to a *Brachiosaurus* skeleton, his long neck skimming up to the atrium's glass ceiling. Cathy's dress for the evening's party was already dry-cleaned and hanging up at work but she carried high heels past fossils and polar bears across the marble floor.

It was going to be another humid day. Botanists, technicians and research fellows plodded through the museum while a cleaner dusted a glass case of dodo bones. Cathy turned left from the atrium into the darkness of a solar system exhibition with nine football-sized planets around a sun that was, misleadingly, exactly the same size as the planets. A day on Venus takes 243 earth days, a poster said. Jupiter takes 9.8 hours. Teenagers in particular congregated excitedly at the bottom of these stairs every day to kiss in the darkness. Cathy liked to imagine the teenagers aroused by the idea of their entire universe once being contained in a single, unimaginably hot point in space, but they probably just liked sneaking off into the dark.

Cathy wore a white shirt, tailored trousers and ballet slippers, her long auburn hair tucked neatly behind both ears. She twisted a coiled snake engagement ring on her left ring finger

as she paced up a curved staircase towards the locked doors of various laboratories and collection rooms. Gallery and corridor windows were flung open in this uncanny summer heat, trying to dilute the smells of hot fur and preservation chemicals. She pushed into her office, a long room with a low ceiling cluttered with furniture and an ever-changing array of specimens that did not fit downstairs. Semi-broken office chairs were piled in the same corner as a stuffed owl while an elephant skull was perched on one of the many green cabinets arranged around the room, packed with everything from Atlas Moths the size of a baby's head to Pigmy Moths smaller than a comma in this sentence.

She sat down at her desk in front of the cedar wood tray of Deathshead Hawkmoths with orange underwings and skull shapes on their abdomens, bad omens throughout time. Cathy loved her rows of tidy pinned bodies with their fragile costumes, but she was equally besotted with the empty spaces in between each specimen. It was in these gaps that order existed. She believed the beauty of museums, like maps and human relationships, was in distance as much as connection.

She'd woken up next to Tom that morning and left him sleeping in their one bedroom flat with white floorboards in the south-eastern part of Berlin, Neukölln, an area full of battered launderettes and Turkish cafés where they'd lived for the last four years. She was English and Tom was American, part of the tapestry of exiles and drifters that made up the city. When Tom was asleep he looked like some evolutionarily superior species with his white teeth, square jaw and tanned face, his thin eyebrows giving him a perpetually amused expression. The moment he woke up he would start fiddling

with his often-broken spectacles, shifting his weight from foot to foot and chain smoking, but asleep he was pristine. The flat had the empty atmosphere of a holiday cottage. The centrepiece was a wrought iron bed that was more of a disorderly pet because it made such a noise. Tom slept without moving but Cathy conducted nightly conversations with it. The frame groaned when she stretched, the mattress squeaked when she wriggled. Sex was a threesome, with the bed the most vocal participant. It seemed to mock them when they got off rhythm. They'd roll onto the floor but it still felt as if the bed were collaborating somehow.

As she sat down at her desk she saw a cardboard box about the size of her hand in the far corner, next to a microscope. The brown package must have come in early this morning or after she'd left work last night. She was glad that there was no one else in the room just then, or she was sure her colleagues would have been disturbed by the sound of her heartbeat.

Cathy slid the package nervously towards her body. She had published two journal articles on hawkmoths, so people did occasionally send specimens for her to identify or add to the museum's collection, but instinctively she knew the brown box wouldn't contain a moth. Her hands shook. Saliva filled her mouth. She slit the duct tape lengthways and twice horizontally with the end of a pair of scissors, opening the flaps to disclose polystyrene. She reached her right hand in to find a white box, nudging the lid off with her thumb: something padded in newspaper.

She unwrapped the layers to reveal a one-inch nugget of luminous amber that felt cool between her thumb and forefinger. She held it up to the light. Inside the amber sat a

Panstrongylus megistus, a Kissing Beetle, its slender head suffocated in resin. One antenna appeared to twitch as if reacting to Cathy's warm skin. Timeless creatures, shiny bullets of time, they were called Kissing Beetles because their habit was to bite sleeping humans in the soft tissue around the lips and the eyes. There was no label or letter of explanation, but she knew who this message was from.



Daniel clenched and stretched his fingers, chlorinated water slicking down wrist hairs under the cuff of his hotel dressing gown. He had arthritis and enjoyed swimming more than fighting now, yet when he looked at his hands he thought fondly of hushed air and the sting of glove-burned flesh. A first punch that hit the ridge of his opponent's cheek, the sound of split bone but no time to be pleased about it. He ran fingers through his damp hair.

On the table was a fossilised sea eagle claw, an inch of chocolate brown bone neatly attached to a shard of finger. The claw had a little restoration at its tip but was otherwise immaculate. Cathy had told him once that a mouse's forelimb, a whale's flipper, a bat's wing and a human arm share almost the same pattern of bones. His own gnarly hands were as much ancestors of the raptor as a bat's wing.

Daniel's throbbing knuckles gave him a sense of unease. He was probably anticipating the breaking of the city's heat wave, maybe a storm after days of humidity. He was not used to this new freedom available to him, the knowledge that he could move around as he pleased. He touched the tip of the claw with his forefinger and thought of Cathy's lithe and bony

hands with a seashell ring at the base of her middle finger. *For a decorative fuck you*, she'd once said.



Cathy unfolded the newspaper pages that the Kissing Beetle had been wrapped in and studied them. It was yesterday's copy of the German newspaper *Die Welt*, with half an article on how motorway tarmac was buckling near Abensberg in Lower Bavaria because of the heat. A school bus had hit a crash barrier, killing twelve children. In the torn left corner of the page, pasted on top of the newsprint, was a fragment of a sticker that said:

ments of
Shiro,
eakfast!

Cathy lifted this bit of information to get a closer look at the words. A complimentary newspaper with breakfast. There was a chain of hotels called Shiro; several were in Berlin. The hairs on her neck stood on end. There was no postmark on the cardboard box, but she ran her fingers across the deep grooves he'd made while writing her name on the top. It had been four years since Daniel had sent her an object like this. The palms of her hands were sweating.

Windows were open around the room, but none appeared to let in much of a breeze. Her office was right at the top of the museum, looking out on the front lawn. Peaking up above hotels and blocks of flats to her left, she could just see Berlin's TV tower glinting like a giant disco ball in the sky. Most of Berlin's old museums were trapped on their own island in the

city centre, but the Natural History Museum was a lone wolf up near the university and the central train station. It was a long building with a flat roof, the façade decorated with arched windows and pollution-grey sculptures that hid a puzzle of old and newly renovated wings behind. She could hear tourists and children outside the window, plus the chants of protesters who had been lingering on the front lawn recently, objecting to the museum's acceptance of sponsorship from an oil company. Inside the office there was just a focused hush of curators bent over trays of ladybugs or computer keyboards. She closed her eyes and moth wing-patterns, colourful circles and zigzags, danced on the back of her eyelids.

Cathy removed a little brass key from the pages of her *Encyclopaedia of Insects* on the shelf and slipped it into the cedar wood doors of a cabinet underneath her desk. This department of the museum had been modernised a few years ago and most of the antique storage units had either been sold off or warehoused to make way for the green steel that currently filled the office. Cathy had saved one old cabinet for herself, four feet wide and two feet tall with a splintered crack down its panelled double doors. She kept it underneath her desk, but it had never contained the articles on phylogeny, biogeography or wing polymorphism advertised on the labels.

The doors creaked open and Cathy paused to make sure her colleagues were all busy pinning wings or dissecting abdomens, making tiny cuts between heart pulses in their own thumbs. One of the many things she loved about working in natural history museums was that she would never be the only person with strange archiving habits. There was a man in the whale storeroom who had a drawer marked 'string too small for further use'.

Inside Cathy's cabinet were drawers full of more than two hundred small memory-objects she'd been collecting since she was a child. The archive began the winter before she turned ten, in coastal Essex where she was born, with a pristine mouse skull she found near the beach. It was a perfect specimen, almost entirely intact and bleach-white, with a delicate jaw that still opened. The collection spanned all the places she'd lived: Essex, until she escaped to Los Angeles age twenty-two, and now four years in Berlin with Tom. It ended a few days ago with a sketch of her mouth that Tom had made on a restaurant napkin. Her mouth was wide open, the slight gap between her front teeth exaggerated by the perspective. Between these two edges of her life were birthday candles, train tickets and childhood dolls. She did not like the turmoil of memories constantly poised in her mind, synapses and chemicals shifting their weight according to new moods and often threatening to collapse or disband. She could exert control over her memories here, and close the door on them.

She had a number of objects that, like the Kissing Beetle, were connected to Daniel. She had a molar tooth that he knocked from her mouth when she was twenty, which made her smell blood each time she looked at it. She had a clump of her hair in a matchbox that had been pulled from her head when she was twenty-one. She had a seaside-arcade stuffed white tiger with wonky eyes that didn't just allow her to remember being in love for the first time but performed some alchemy of time and place, so that she tasted Mr Whippy ice cream and stubble against her lips. Other objects were threats, which she'd been sent in the post after she left him. She had auk and gannet skulls, starfish and carved boats and seagull feathers. These objects made the hairs on the back of her neck

stand on end and her skin heat up. The last gift she'd been sent before the Kissing Beetle was over four years ago, an angel shark jawbone with teeth sharp as nails, after which the gifts had stopped.

Her private museum's purpose was not to escape her past, but to control it. Cathy had grown up near a bird sanctuary in one of twelve holiday chalets that were relics of an ill-advised Essex holiday camp from the Fifties. A *floating caravan park*, her mother called their street. She spent her childhood exploring coastal marshland full of migrating terns, salt stiff grass and North Sea tides. She spent it trawling bracken, crunching salty white grass under her Wellington boots in search of twisted driftwood and gems of sea glass. The twelve chalets on her street all had shaky insulation and noisy plumbing, not built for winter living, yet at some point her father had decided he didn't want to belong to any form of society other than The Essex Bird Watching Society. So they'd lived in this isolated landscape all the year round, from before Cathy could remember. She'd grown up tracking the tides on a chart in her bedroom, mindful of her nervous mother's theory about how all the buildings on their street would one day just lollop over the shrubby wall of marsh and out to sea in the middle of the night. It was never silent in Lee-Over-Sands. Even the word sounded like a bad incarnation, the O forced your mouth open but then you had to hiss and finish off the name. In the wrong mood, when birds appeared to hang from the sky and mist fell too quickly over the shifting tides, it made you think of spirits. It was a place where nature ruled. Cathy would scream her bike down the gravel road over the seawall between the sea and the town and float the high tides in her orange rowing boat that washed up in front of her deck when she was eight.

At first her objects were curiosities from the natural world around her, rather than the anchors to specific emotions or memories that they became. Everyone collected things in Lee-Over-Sands. Window ledges all down the street were laden with driftwood, bones and glass jars of seashells. Even in the many near-derelict houses where nobody came for years and years at a time, mounds of sea glass and bird skulls still sat on ledges and decks, along with feathers and mouldy twists of rope. Scavenged things were just curiosities for Cathy then and memories were absorbed inside her. A dirty rabbit's foot on a gold key chain did not sum up her mother's essence. Her father was not epitomized by a small pair of binoculars with smudged lenses and two empty miniature bottles that had once contained Bombay Sapphire gin. Cathy was merely a hoarder before she turned ten; she was just a beachcomber then, a filler-upper of drawers and pockets.

A Snake Ring

TOM PUT A paper cup of black coffee and a fistful of sugar packets down on her desk and adjusted his glasses, which were held together with tape at one side. He kissed her warm neck and inhaled the smell of shampoo and sweat. She touched the engagement ring on her finger as he kissed her, as if checking it was still there.

"It's too hot again," Tom said, and tucked a strand of hair behind Cathy's ears. Cathy wasn't good with heat, she became sullen and veins rose to the surface of her skin. She was designed for rainy English summers.

"Morning," she smiled and kissed his left hand where it now rested on her shoulder. She began to pour sugar packets into her coffee. She did it almost haughtily, as if daring him to stop her or tell her it was unhealthy.

She arrived at work hours before he did, because he was incapable of being on time and she was incapable of being late. As he cycled towards the museum his creased shirt would flap out behind him and an unlit cigarette hung in the side of his mouth, ready to be smoked the moment he parked his bike. He usually took his feet off the pedals as he drove over a canal at *Hallesche-Tor Bridge*, talented at finding pleasure in small moments. He tried not to sound his bell at tourists near Checkpoint Charlie and continued on up over the river Spree. He smoked his first cigarette of the day on the museum's lawn and then bought coffee from the cafeteria to take to Cathy.

She was his favourite subject to sketch, parts and pieces in countless notebooks along with whatever whale ribs or spikes of a Stegosaurus's backbone he was studying at the time. They'd been together five years, four years in Berlin and one before that in Los Angeles, where they'd met, but still he didn't feel he'd ever entirely captured her likeness. Her perfectly symmetrical eyes and thin lips were not immediately pretty. It was a blank-canvas face, only visible when she was animated or engrossed. When something interested her, she abruptly became beautiful but she could never fake this kind of engagement. He always worked quickly: the curve of her ears, her high forehead with its inch-long scar from slipping in a pile of construction material when she was twelve. Her body was covered in lingering flaws from tumbling into gravel and playing red rover with older boys as a child. She'd been in a car crash when she was a teenager, one of many examples of a shitty childhood she didn't like to talk about much. The marks and misalignments had shocked him when he first saw them, but now fascinated him: lines on her shoulder from diving into a bramble bush, scars on her knuckles and elbows and forehead from the car accident, her past quite different from Tom's careful urban upbringing. She'd fractured her metatarsal bone jumping off a wall as a kid and had a tiny bump on the outside of her right foot that made her flinch if you touched it. When he sketched her feet he could never get that bump exactly right.

"The adult body contains over 100,000 miles of blood vessels," Tom said as she continued to insert pins around the moth on her desk, pursing her mouth while contemplating the truth of his statement. She spent her days spreading moth wings, running pins through their thoraxes and trapping them in perpetual low flight.

"Fact. The largest diamond in the world is ten billion trillion trillion carats," she offered. She took the next moth body from an envelope, ready to pin it.

"Sounds unlikely." They played this game in supermarket queues and over dinner, on public transport and in bed, fact or fiction, teasing each other and storing up details of life to share.

"It's true, scout's honour. It's a star named Lucy, after 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds', 50 light-years from the earth," she said.

"You were never a scout. You don't have any team spirit." He touched the vertebrae on her neck, peaking up like islands after a flood. "The tongue of a blue whale weighs the same as a fully grown female African elephant," he said. Because Cathy's hair was dark red you would have thought her eyes would be brown, but in fact they were blue and they illuminated in flashes. Tom joked that she made an excellent *seventh* impression; she was a subtle thing that snuck up on people.

There had been a group of acrobats practising nearby when he'd asked her to marry him last week in the *Hasenheide* Park opposite their flat and gave her his grandmother's ring, a snake with a ruby in its head. A passer-by offered to take a photo of them afterwards. The resulting image chopped both their heads off, but they got the photo developed anyway and it was currently propped up on their kitchen table. You can just see their decapitated bodies and a child acrobat doing a handstand in the background.

"True," she said. "A flock of starlings is called a murmuration."

"True. A crow can remember human faces and hold a grudge," he said.

"False. Legend," she said. She smiled up at him. "Nowhere in the Humpty Dumpty nursery rhyme does it actually say that the character is an egg."

"False. It must say he's an egg. It's true about the crows, though. Never piss off a crow."

"They don't teach nursery rhymes in California? Philistine."

"Lunch at 2.30 today?"

"Perfect," she said, taking another sip of sugary coffee. She turned her head to kiss his hand again. "And I would have made an excellent scout, thank you."

"You would have led a meticulous regiment."

Sometimes Cathy would go through his sketchbooks after he'd drawn something, and neatly label the anatomy of his messy drawings. The lack of structure in his books worried her. She liked order. That her own pelvis and the toes of an *Ankylosaurs* shared the same A4 page went against her instinct for cataloguing life. So she would sit at the little table they used as a desk in their flat and frown as she labelled her own *ear canal, pinna, cartilage*. Neat arrows. The same with a hummingbird's skeleton: *ulnar, radius, thoracic, caudal, lumbar vertebrae*. She said the names as she wrote them. She labelled the sketches he made of her long legs, tangled amongst cheap sheets on their bed. *Tibia*, she printed. *Cathy's fibula. Cathy's femur. Cathy's coccyx, Cathy's sacrum.*



When Tom left her office, Cathy slipped the Kissing Beetle safely into a top drawer next to the sketch of her half-open mouth. She kept her private museum at work because Tom couldn't see a drawer or a notebook without opening it;

he was insatiably curious, which she loved about him, but not in this particular instance. She had never shown him her objects because she had no desire for her past and future to mingle. The oppressive pleasure and stillness she found in the indexed memories was not something she wanted to share, even with someone she loved as much as Tom. Her respect for objects was almost spiritual, but not communal.

One of her favourite objects in the cabinet was a green cocktail umbrella, which she'd been spinning in her hand the first time she ever spoke to Tom. They'd been sitting on a wall looking out on Venice Beach in mid-December, just before Christmas, their bare feet in the Californian sand. She'd been in Los Angeles three months then and had not yet reinvented herself since leaving Daniel. She was soft around the edges, newly hatched and unsure. She'd thrown away all her damp-seeped clothes, her marshy tracksuits and oxidised hoop earrings that smelt of home, then bought new clothes from a charity shop on Hollywood and Western. She could go for weeks without speaking about anything much except what sort of Starbucks coffee she would like. For months didn't touch anyone or, it seemed, anything. Concrete and plywood and metal all had the same texture for her in Los Angeles, the same level of heat and wetness. Her concession to human contact was going to these cheap massage parlours that smelt of dumplings, where she'd lie naked on futons in rooms cordoned off by fraying curtains. She allowed Thai women to unbutton her pressure points, twisting their elbows into knots between her shoulder blades and opening up her joints with their small fingers. They did not mention her scars. She missed wading into mud with the tide licking her toes, as if

her body was physically detoxing from the glut of sensation that had marked her life until then.

Her university in Essex had arranged for her to do a work placement at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum, cataloguing ice age insect fossils dug up from the La Brea tar pits. She had begged for one of the few jobs they offered abroad but once she arrived, she'd made no effort to make any friends. It shouldn't have been a great surprise that nobody spoke to her when she turned up at the museum Christmas party in Venice Beach three months into the job. Regretting the numerous buses it took her to get there, she bought a cocktail and sat outside on a low wall at the beach's edge, sipping her drink and twirling her cocktail umbrella. Eventually a blond man with wide perfect teeth and blue eyes came and sat down next to her, lighting a cigarette and offering her one.

She declined. He smelt of beer and started rambling tipsily about how he was spending Christmas with his family in Palm Springs, about all its complicated dynamics involving disapproval and love affairs and money. Cathy had smiled politely and wondered why he was talking to her. She expected that he'd just wanted to sit down for a smoke, and she happened to be there. When he asked about her Christmas plans she lied and told him she was going back home to Essex for Christmas; she didn't want to say she had nowhere to go. She and this first incarnation of Tom watched the Santa Monica Pier in the distance, a Ferris wheel's pink and blue light reflecting a puddle of sherbet colour onto the otherwise dark water. Soda cans were skimming the pavement as hot air sprayed down into Los Angeles from Nevada and Utah, spreading wildfires and anxiety, then exhaling into the sea. The atmosphere was static. People smoked cigarettes on fire escapes and the

balconies of seaside apartment buildings, watching the stormy sea, and the sidewalk cafés were crowded.

Homicides and suicides spike during Santa Ana winds, Tom had said after a pause, in his Californian drawl. Her sundress kept spilling up in the hot blustering air and she kept tucking it under her thighs. She took off her baseball cap and then regretted it, because he might ask about the scar on her forehead. It went from the far edge of her right eyebrow straight up to her temple and she always covered it with make-up before she left the house, but it was still visible, one of the mementos from her old life that she couldn't put in a box and close the door on.

That's what these are, Santa Ana, he said of the wind, and appeared not to notice her face.

Cathy spun her little green cocktail umbrella and took a sip of her drink. It tasted of gin and cinnamon. Three elves and a man dressed as Mrs Claus spilled out of the bar behind them. Tom lit another cigarette from the last but did not appear nervous, merely overflowing with energy. He moved constantly, his foot tapping the floor, his thumb rolling over the lighter in his hand. She'd seen him around the museum: he was a successful palaeontologist who'd already published various papers. He had a square jaw and a thin mouth that was often smiling. His glasses usually had some tape around one of the arms to keep them together. A cheer went up in the crowd behind them, so Cathy and Tom turned to watch the scene. A drunken man with dreadlocks had fallen off his skateboard, but Cathy's gaze immediately landed on three older men drinking beer at a crowded sidewalk café nearby. One of the men had a side parting and thick eyebrows; another was deeply tanned, with a three-inch beard. This bearded

man appeared to be staring in Cathy's direction. The third man in the trio had his back to her, but his perfectly still, uncommonly broad shoulders and curly black hair brought a lump to Cathy's throat. It couldn't have been Daniel, but she still felt sick.

He had found out where she was almost immediately, within weeks of her leaving Essex. She didn't know exactly how he managed it. He didn't come for her but he continued to give her gifts, as he had done when they were together. First a tropical shell had arrived at The Los Angeles Natural History Museum for her, three weeks after she arrived in her new city. From a white box full of tissue paper, she'd unwrapped a pretty Ramose Murex shell with three jagged Mohawks of solidified flesh sticking out from a coiled body. Turning it over, she saw that the shell's open underside was so shiny it appeared wet, the lips much pinker than her skin as she ran her fingers along the slit. She pretended to herself that it must have been delivered to the wrong person. A week later the skull of a seagull had turned up, neatly wrapped in chocolate brown paper with a blue label from an expensive shop called Deyrolle in Paris that they'd once visited together. The seagull's head was smooth, but its beak reminded her of a dagger.

There was never a note, but other objects followed, sent to the museum and then also – more worryingly – to her flat. A fish spine, a Trapezium Conch, a carved rowing boat. She was insane to have accepted a single one of these objects, yet she did. Daniel had no business fastening her to him with voltaic things, changing the external brain of her archive. She should have thrown them away, but she placed each gift in her shoeboxes and suitcases. He knew her devotions, after all, and despite the fear each object brought with it she obediently

added these gifts to the narrative of her life.

In the Santa Ana winds, sitting next to Tom, tears had pricked up in Cathy's eyes. She didn't think the older man with curly hair in the sidewalk café was actually Daniel, but tears came into her eyes because the thought occurred to her. These mixed feelings almost made her want to turn to the lazy-limbed and confident near stranger to her right and tell him how sounds used to echo on the marshes where she grew up, and how tides reinvented the landscape every morning. How, if you sang a song or shouted, birds would wheel up from the ground right into the sky and start scavenging. How she would stand naked on the marsh and scream, because there was no one around for miles. How it was never the same world twice and the tides marched like ghosts up and down the marshes. How pleased she was to have got away from the landscape of her past. She wanted to tell him how her childhood had been ruled by the moods of the sea and the sky.

But she didn't tell him anything, just tried to unclench her jaw and breath deeply. She was a new person now, she told herself. Although at that point her objects were still all jumbled together in shoeboxes with little order to them, Cathy was beginning to see that she could keep her past locked up and out of sight if she wished. She could put a lid on the guilty girl: lock her up in a drawer like a specimen. Instead of pouring out her secrets to Tom, Cathy just swallowed hot desert air from the Santa Ana winds, as they merged with the salty beach air of the ocean in front of her. She held her tiny green cocktail umbrella tight between her thumb and forefinger.

A flamboyance is a group of flamingos, she had said to Tom,

instead of baring her soul to him. She then cringed at the randomness of the phrase. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand as she used to do as a kid. Tom replied:

That's not true.

It is.

A flamboyance? Seriously?

I never joke about flamingos. She tried to smile, but only wanted to be alone in her flat again now. She'd wash her hair, dry it before she slept. She'd fall asleep looking out on laundry-lined rooftops and palm trees from the window above her bed.

Nearly 50% of the bacteria in your body live on the surface of your tongue, offered Tom. Cathy had stuck out her tongue into the salty air.

I think that's true. And the human body contains three times more bacterial cells than human cells.

Is this a game? He'd smiled sideways at her.

Sure. She unclenched one fist, then the other, and tried to relax her shoulders.

The groove in the middle of the place above your lips is called a tragus.

False, that's this bit, Cathy touched the button of skin-covered cartilage on her ear. *The philtrum is above your lips.*

Tom shifted his lanky body, hesitantly, as if about to reach out and touch the groove above her lip, but then he didn't and they both looked away from each other. Cathy turned her head to check behind her and the men who had been staring were no longer there. She smiled with relief. Her heart was beating fast.

I didn't know that about flamingos, Tom said.

Cathy opened a low drawer of her cabinet, a childhood drawer, and picked up a toy lead soldier wearing a scuffed red jacket and a pointy black hat that shadowed his pinprick eyes. She put the lead soldier in the palm of her hand and wrapped her fingers around it. Small noises kept making her jump and her hands weren't steady enough to pin moths. She couldn't concentrate and even broke a wing, so had to stop. She was being awarded a prize that evening, for her research into the metamorphosis of hawkmoths, but would have to practise her speech later: she couldn't focus with the Kissing Beetle nearby.

She left the beetle in her cabinet but still had the lead soldier in her hand when, a few hours later, she walked out of the museum's wrought iron door into the humid Berlin sunshine. She thought it would be cooler out there under the museum's big birch tree than upstairs in her office with the chemicals and dust, but sweat continued to prick her skin. She sat down on a stone bench under the tree and put her thumb on the toy soldier's face.

The area outside the museum was busy with construction work. Cement mixers and diggers were everywhere that summer, stomping out the city's incidental monuments, turning its bullet-scarred buildings and graffiti-caked façades into boutique hotels and shopping malls. Great pink pipes snaked for miles, meandering past art galleries and building sites and directly in front of the museum, carrying water sucked out from under the city's surface. Perhaps it was because Berlin was built precariously on a marsh that Cathy felt so connected to the place. Below the pink pipes a girl in a denim skirt and a boy in board-shorts were eating sandwiches,

while members of a gang of Japanese tourists were taking photos of each other. Sparrows were jumping around the lawn eating lunchbox crumbs; she tried not to watch the tight little shivers of their muscles. It was so hot that they burrowed their tummies in earth under the shrubs around the sandstone foundations of the building. A group of students were giving away flyers protesting against the museum being sponsored by the oil company. The protesters wore loose cotton trousers and tie-dyed skirts, their skin incandescent from conviction and sunshine.

Cathy typed 'Hotel Shiro' into Google on her phone. A map of central Berlin came up on the screen, with a red dot near *Alter Jüdischer Friedhof*, about twenty minutes' walk from the Natural History Museum. She knew that cemetery, she and Tom had walked through it a few times to see the ivy-covered stone angels. It was near a knotted junction of hotels and coffee shops at *Rosenthaler Platz* U-bahn, a mecca for coders bent over their Macs. She looked up and watched a few of the protesters sunbathing on the lawn outside the museum, taking a break to sit on the dried-out grass. One blonde teenager had her eyes closed and her claret-coloured mouth a little open, chin tilted to the sky as if drinking in the sunshine.

She pressed the 'call' button and rang Hotel Shiro.

"Good morning," said a voice on the phone. Cathy could hear the woman's fingers tapping on a keyboard and a baby crying. Cathy was sweating and had the impression that she could smell cottony laundry detergent and deodorant from under her arms, as well as stale sandwiches from kids eating lunch nearby. Whenever she was nervous, her sense of smell heightened.

"Do you have a Daniel Bower staying with you, please?"

More tapping. “Doesn’t look like it. Have you got the right branch of Shiro? There is one in the centre of town.”

A siren went off in the distance. Just to be sure, Cathy said: “How about Dan Green?”

The woman checked, fingernails clacking on the keyboard as she typed this name. “Yeah, shall I put you though?”

Cathy paused. For a moment, she felt as if something was stuck in her throat and that she wouldn’t be able to speak, but then she heard herself say:

“Yes. Please.”

The phone seemed to ring forever. She rubbed the angular limbs of her toy soldier between her fingers for comfort. Before the thirteenth ring, a raspy voice picked up:

“Hello?”

She recognised his voice. He sounded sleepy. Her body stiffened and a strong taste of acid, of vomit, arrived at the back of her mouth. She swallowed it back down again, a pattern of taste and revulsion that occurred repeatedly through the rest of that day. Almost immediately, more awake, he said: “Cathy?”

She fumbled and pressed ‘end’ on her phone as quickly as she could. She put the phone down. She wondered how he could have known it was her on the line.