

The book cover features a dark, moody background with a textured, almost painterly quality. In the foreground, there are stylized, branching structures resembling coral or seaweed, rendered in a light, golden-brown color. Behind these, darker, more complex branching forms are visible. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somewhat somber. The title and author's name are printed in a bold, sans-serif font in the upper right quadrant.

THE BONE AND THE BODY

LAURA KOCHMAN

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BatCat Press
One Lincoln Park
Midland, PA 15059
www.batcatpress.com

ISBN: 978-0-9963827-0-0

1st Printing
Bound and numbered by hand.

Produced in cooperation with Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter
School in Midland, PA.

for 109 South Knight Street

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The Bone and the Body

In the interest of full disclosure, this is the bad end of the beach. Sea wall's too small, too swollen with oysters and rot, too slippery to climb. At night, my feet still skip from rock to rock, finding the shallow holds too late and twisting into the sand, crushing oysters underfoot. All right—the oysters are only a symptom of storms, and I may have planted some for company, bone and hard as night. I've come to love their stale shells, their crusted hinges. Don't listen when I sit on the rotting balcony and cry over invisible horses, their rhythm the only evidence, their hooves turned from birth I am sure, *if only* I cry *if only* someone had noticed, their feet could have healed and straightened. *If only* in the sea. Sometimes I will open the stain you call garage and unfold the folding chairs. Sometimes they will block the sun. Sometimes the fabric will twist into the metal tines, sometimes rust will catch the hinges and they will crack down the middle. At night I will turn on the spray hose, twist the laundry line until it snaps against the siding. The buckets in the laundry room are for soaking, for the soft frog of a horse's foot to rotate down into. Salt stings but it keeps the floors from creaking, keeps the hoof beats on the boardwalk. This house is sunburn. Don't change the light bulb in the living room—you might see my glowing hand, my fingertips burned and indistinctly seared into the glass.

Before it burned in the sun, before I cured and striped its steps with salt, before I ate its floors and scratched its papered walls, before the storm came tearing and I let it, before my fingers dragged down the laundry lines, before my feet fell from the third floor to the first, before the wasps planted a nest in the garage and stung us all like salt, before the rotation of the hoof occurred, before I was unsound, before any paint flecked, before the nails removed themselves from the premises, before founder became inevitable, before I smelled only of night, before a wave ever came to know it, this house was yellow.

Out back, behind the house, I planted a garden once. I gave the seeds a chance, spilled their hinged bodies into pots, gave them dirt from a bag. I watered them with buckets filled from the sea, tiny sea bugs squirming on the dirt face. They burrowed into the garden like they burrowed into wet sand. Feet first. I stood over the pots in the darkness. I tapped a sea code into their bones. I made miniature houses of sea glass. I crushed the sea glass. I told the seeds a story about a woman in the woods and a house that walked through the forest and stamped its feet on all the ferns. I waited. I crushed the sea glass. One day I dumped too much water from the bucket and knocked them over, let my fingers rampage through the dirt and found no seeds, no growing pods but one mangled brown root system, a dank and dirty claw.

If there really is a woman in the woods, she haunts a house on gilded chicken legs. If there really is a house, if there really is a form, a shell, an owner in the home. In my dreams, I find it and it turns away, a funnel of cracked skin and old shingles. A blackened forest. A crowd of fiddleheads. The bony legs extend as if to let me stroke them, but I wait too long and they whirl away, a spinning top, helix of dirt and scabs.

You chose dirt. You took the woods. I speak of you now as though I knew you once, or maybe I always spoke of you gone. It was your fault—the way the wind shattered all the plaster pots, the sharp sidewalk of glass and broken siding under my feet, the playing cards scattered in the sea. Your fault. I eat dirt when I can find it, scratching at the neighbor's tires in the night, digging at the distance between woods and water. My arms hang too long. Clear a path through the wind. I drag them down the road and back to the sea wall, the same segment of gravel, back to the sea wall, the same stretch of sand-dusted road, back to the sea wall, and my hands are never scraped.

In the interest of full disclosure, there is a woman in the woods. Sometimes through the trees she teases me, the tail end of a chimney disappearing in a flicker, the dark smell of her fading, just the *scritchscratch* of talons eating through the air. I tell myself the house is not empty, but honest—I cannot know. I've lost it too many times, the chipped paint on the exterior windows and the sheen of the doorknob under my hand. Or I never touched it. All right—I never touched it. It runs away on bony legs, tucks itself white through the trees. Somehow it is all shrinking, shuddering under, the trees darker than a closed mouth. All right—I say this to the sand. I say this to my empty hands. These days, I feel a half shell. Sometimes I call to the woman in the woods and she pours out of my mouth. Sometimes she stinks of my salt. I find myself sniffing along the sidewalk, but I'm only following my own bright tail. I bury my feet in the sand, and the salt water takes them, and takes them again, and takes them again. I turn away from the woods, but cannot stop myself from turning, betraying my ends, and the salt knows it, and I turn again.

This is the science of hooves: the frog, the coffin, the bone and the body. It is a softer center, and a delicate wall. Then to scrape around the edges is to follow the hard curve, the always-open mouth. It all goes down in a spiral, the soft foot sinking to scrape against rocks and shattered shells. To bruise. To plaster the site of trauma. And the body turns back to itself, founders on the rocks. And the sea scrapes out a hollow.

If you are my bright protector. If water can ever meet wood. If a coastal forest. If I lived there. If I made a trail of salt to follow. If it did not dead-end. If the windows of your house opened on a bay. If its legs did not gain ground so quickly. If I knew the words to make it stop and face me. If there were words. If I did not find, after a long line of years, that the salt was my own, that it streamed behind me as though burst from a sack. If trails did not loop back to their beginnings. If lines could be broken. If the woods were full of words. If I sat another day in the wind on my rotten balcony, watching the lines of breakers chase the waves away. If I sat another day. If I sat another day.

Where are the feet I left here? In a bucket at the base of the stairs, the oysters open and close their frilled mouths. Where are my wet footprints? I thought to expect tension, but a washing away? A fleet upheaval? In the shade of the rocks, at the feet of the pylons in the sea, the oysters open and close. Don't bring them in the house. I will spoil the wine for steaming, rot all the shallots for flavor, turn over the boiling pot while you cook, watch the tops of your feet bubble like a toad's back. It will be you in the bathroom, you in the bucket, you with your toes curled into salt water. I will tap their shells to coax them closed and plant them in the sand near the tide line, watch them wade away, let my feet follow into the water.

Close up the garage. Put away your bucket of shells. I have been, outside, in the night light of the sea, watching. And over the sea wall it came—a comet. The oysters shuddered in their shells, and my feet quaked in the sand as I watched it. Red marrow through a black sky. Rock in place of a moon, no moon, no moon, no witness but me and the oysters, and it shook the water. And it drove a line through the sky, a red welt. I felt it on my own skin. All right—I wanted to feel it on my own, old skin. *If only* on my skin. *If only* to touch. I was a wet witness, a well of eyes, and I saw it break apart into four red lines like a chicken's foot, and it shone on the water, and it walked on the waves.

I said, *my feet slip from rock to rock*. I said, *I am found, founded, foundering*. The sand grains sift through my foundations. Don't laugh. I have no hidden chamber, no hiding place in the rocks. The oysters plant themselves for miles, the bed a clacking, a clattering of hooves. I said, *the rotation has already begun*. I said, *to place a hoof into a bucket of salt*. To limp through the house in the night. Sometimes my feet betray me, my turning, the soft frogs sinking down to the road surface they should not touch. I said, *my feet are sinking in their shells*. The oysters shake in their bones. The oysters shudder in their beds.

When the wave came, I was watching. When it came I was twisting my fingers around the balcony railing, trying to make your strung-up holiday lights pop. The comet stirred up the waters and made them sick, and they tumbled out onto the beach, first a pulling-back and then a gallop of waves. My hands twist for the oysters, the miles of middens, for their feet uprooted and torn to shreds. For my own house, for the water surrounding it. For my house has no hands to block the water. For my house has no feet to run from the sea.

When the wave came, where were you? When I tapped my fingers against the floorboards, when I made a secret code, where were you? This house peels like a scab in the sun. Like a book left out on the beach. It took in the salt water, and now the siding is shrinking. Now we become smaller. The skin on my feet peels against the rough stone steps to the sea, and I climb them every day, waiting for the sea to make amends. There is no echo, no sound. No one is yet sorry.

Would you come away from the woods if I set out a lure? If I left a trail of oysters, false rocks, glowing with salt? If I left their empty bones for divining? All right—if your house crushed them underfoot. If they stuck into its feet like glass. If a house could founder. In my dreams your house has been lamed and its feet rotate down into the dirt, snapping through tree roots. Its feet flatten, stretching out fingers, and they point all the way to the sea. Or they point at me.

If a skeleton came, would you take it? Would you let the bones in? If you calcified. Huddled behind it. If you made of your back a hard shell, a traveling suit. Would you case it in shingles or siding? I am asking for help. I am looking for your answer. I am sinking, turning slowly, a little less every day. The salt pours from one shaker into the other. I can still hear the oysters behind the quiet waves, their old chatter. That old landscape.

If the gray bone of the beach did not tease the sea. If salt did not form crystals. If a body was not made of water. If it had not left behind traces of itself, a white web through the house. If a storm. If a staircase. If plants could twist their feet between the cracks in my sidewalk. If the wave had not salted the earth. If water contained only itself. If it left a dead line behind. If I could not be planted. If my feet crumbled into the waves and left for distant lands. If solution. If I dissolved and evaporated, crusted a green leaf in the canopy. If in transit. If I spied from my nest a pair of dancing feet. If I captured them and boiled them down to suck out their marrow. If sweat were evidence of skin. If moisture. If solution.

There is a man in the sea, a man with a whale bone spine for a back. His boat was far away, and I thought I heard him speak, thought he told a story about the boat, how he found it washed up down the beach. The wave had clotted its beams with sea urchins, spines out, plugged all the little wood-beetle holes with their mouths to swallow the water. I thought he said your name. I thought the boat was full of oysters. I thought he had come to plant them again, to rub the soft slabs of their pink feet against his palm, to place a cool hand down into the water, to place their feet into the shell-bitten sand, to form a rock warren, a bone garden. I thought he said all this far out on the water as the boat bobbed up and down in the rip tide, the motion jostling his spine, setting off a clattering of bones.

This is the science of bodies: the shape and the frame, the altogether. The not. The soft part stretching over the hard form. Leaving a little bone behind, the body the occupied or the body the occupier. Who takes up this space inside of me and who has cleaned the rafters? The both of them. The bone of them inside or outside, the breath through the space a fragment. The breath, the body, the bone, the yellow skin of the word in your mouth. That a breath cannot be a space, and I hide my life in the sound of it.

We are dealing with an invasive species. Would you call a man a whale? Would you come up behind him in the water, drape yourself along the spines on his back, leave your feet dangling? Would you leave your feet behind? Would you meddle? Would you rub salt into the bottom of his boat? Would you cup your hands around his head like two halves of a shell? All right—I have done all this, and I have done nothing. Every morning, the man with the whale bone spine rows out into the waves, and I lay myself onto the skin of his wet back, and he does not feel it. Or he does not show it. I do not feel his spines bursting through my skin, as though sinking easily into a sack of salt.

I believe this may be the truth: out there in the ocean, there is a whale without a spine. The Whale Bone Man opened its back like a zipper, removed its chittering vertebrae and left it to float limply along. There was no blood in the water, but the salt content did increase. Or the whale did taste salt in its mouth. Or the whale did sweat a crust of salt around its eyes, did gather salt in the heavy crease between fin and torso. Or the whale did rise above the water and float away on a hidden riptide, leaving its spine behind.

I believe this may be the truth: out there in the ocean, there is a dark hole. It is the graveyard of the sea. There are many bones inside. The Whale Bone Man went fishing one day, threw in his bait and felt the ocean shimmy. Or he felt nothing. Or he indicated nothing. After some time passed, he drew up the bait and found a clean spine wrapped around his hook, the chinks waterlogged, all parts included, the bones unable to bear the loss of each other. The smallest bone the size and shape of an oyster.

I believe this may be the truth: after the wave came crashing, after it wrapped its sodden hands around the posts of my balcony, after it snatched up all the oysters, out there in the ocean it made itself a nest of bones. Every filament of hinge and foot. Every juncture smooth, and the bowl of the nest was mother-of-pearl, and it laid upon the waves, and it made itself ready to hold such things as an egg, or a dark red rock fallen from the sky. From this the Whale Bone Man makes his methods. From this he learns secret arts.

If I sat a spell. If I could remove my feet from their casings. If I could strip them down, saplings. If a forest grew of my body. If I let my feet loose, wound them up and set them going in a cheerful circle. If uprooted. If a house could be uprooted. If cement did not clog the foundations. If I had not, in my anger, set cement throughout the house, made it heavy, a paperweight. If tractable. If tenable. If the water table rose and this paper house drifted away. If a tent flap. If a house flapped. If a house with feet and a beaked nose walked past. If a house could wander. If I could ever leave the rooms of my youth, could ever find new feet for walking. If I could rend myself. If I could rent myself. If intruder. If in truth, I was telling a lie. If I lay there. If my body could lay down its bones anywhere else. If, once the corner stones had been laid, once my sunburned skin had shed into the chinks of the sea wall, once salt had reeked its way under my nails. If sand did not harden like cement around my buried feet.

I have come to doubt your intentions. I have seen your suitcases. I have listened through the door, clung to the underside of the rotting balcony. My rotten woods. My salt-ribbed planks, splintering into my hands. My cold faucet, the lonely bathroom in the back. The unattended laundry room. Have you no heart? Have you no hands for stroking? Have you never felt as though your feet reached through the floor, and the floor held your splintered feet, and you stood upright by the force of a structure larger than yourself? Have you never rubbed a support beam like a stiff foreleg? Go pack your baskets in the garage. I will line your suitcases with sea slime. You will track sand away from the house, and it will carefully burn the crevices of your feet.

If you call this number, I will tell you a story. The story has two rooms, and one of them is in ruins. One of them is waterlogged. One of them rusts, or sheds sand. Or etches itself with seawater. One of them curdles. One of them sinks lower, holds tight to itself and turns in, cannot look at anything else. Or it has salt in its eyes.

I am here. In dreams you suck sugar from your fingertips, you chew rustic sandwiches in a green clearing. I said, *I am here*. In dreams you are a dark wood. You have no rings. You are at the center of the trunk and there is no light, nothing gets in, not even salt from the soil. You are a dead wood. I send wasps toward you and they will not roost. I claw at your bark. You are disintegrating, and wet. *I am here*. I find more chips in the kitchen tile. I eat your footsteps. I check for you under the bed. I stand on the balcony in the way that you stood on the balcony, in case you have left a secret message for me to find in this way. I reach a slim finger between every stone in the seawall. Where are the notes you must have left? Where are your belongings? I said, *I am here*, and you heard me. Or you never heard my feet padding in the sand. Or the clip-clop of my feet on the wood floors kept you up, and you never slept. Or you ate all there was to eat. Or the wave washed you away, and the Whale Bone Man searches for your body. Or he searches for my body. I am certain.

If you call this number, I will tell you a lie. The lie has two legs, and it runs away. It runs in circles and digs itself a dry moat. It is dry as a bone outside the body. Or it is dry as its own old siding. The lie is full of leaves, cracking and settling and falling to pieces all over the floor. Each leaf has a thin stem, a hair down its center and by this hair all the leaves are connected, and from somewhere hidden the hair grows. Or it dies at the root. Or there are no leaves, and the lie is empty. The floor is cold. You can see nothing of this from outside, from the windows boarded up and the keyhole full of teeth.

I dreamed of calloused feet, pads of yellow skin folding over, making new landscapes. I dreamed the oysters. I dreamed chicken feet wading through gray water. I dreamed a new spine. I dreamed a fence of spikes and skulls, their eyes peeking through the trees. I dreamed I had been left behind, and all that was left, and all was left.

Lost my letters

rolled away in the night

beached somewhere

I imagine

they roll to the feet of a house in the woods

shuffle-step

shedding sea glass

a dead wasp

bits of oyster shell

from the crevices of tide pools

the noise of the wave that carried them

Would you make a man a gift? Would you show a sign of life? Would you open the forest gate? Every morning the Whale Bone Man puts his head atop the whale bone spine and rows away from the beach. He has hidden his true self away from his body, in a nest of bones at the center of the ocean. It rocks in the waves, slides up and down the walls of mother of pearl, a smooth red rock in the bottom of a basin. A bassinet. I consult with the oysters, or I consult with the empty spaces where they used to clamp their feet, and they have come to the same conclusion. Every morning he goes out to guard the shell of his body, stuck like a rock in the underside of a hoof. Every morning he watches from the water. I watch him from the balcony. He watches from the water.

Would you answer a question? Would you send a helping hand? When the wave came, it came sweeping. Or it came searing. Would you build a house of bone? It brushed the sand away. Would you build a house of wood? It swallowed up the street. Would you build a house of flesh? It salted my feet, and drew the water from my skin, and took the water for its own. It ran away as fast as it came, turned its back, retreated. Repeated.

■ If you call this number, I will tell you a trick. The trick has hinges, half one thing and half another. Both are rotten. Or both are sopping wet, and twisted up with seaweed. Or they are tied together with a hank of hair. Or they do not know each other. They do not trust each other. One has stolen the other, and tied together they sink into the sea.

I try to remember my feet

because I need their curved edges

to carry to kick.

I remember their bones inside

pieced together sinewed

and small beneath the surface drowning

shrouded in skin yellow?

Was I ever

made of brick?

Did a woman

or a whale?

Every day, the Whale Bone Man embraces the pylons under the boardwalk, keeps one hand steady and rubs the other up the wood, checking for splinters. Or he checks for breakages. Or he puts pressure on the beams, bends them gently at the knee. They will kneel in the sea, and the salt water will heal their cracked and battered planks, knit their painted skin back together. Whole, they will march away with the Whale Bone Man riding atop. They will paddle across the silver waves, gathering seaweed to stream like fetlocks. Or barnacles, to crust their heavy feet with bone.

I have been burning you in effigy, your frame in words and full of myself, an ember for each watching eye. Or I have been burning your house. All right—I never touched it. I have built a small house, the size and shape of an oyster shell, and I have set it afloat on the waves. I waited until the sun stopped its watching, and I set it off. It sailed away, and then it came back, a hole bored through it by some hungry animal. All right—I bored the hole myself, an eyepiece, a blowhole.

I remember the story
about the woman in the woods in a house
with chicken feet. I remember the horses on the beach
I thought I saw
horses running
a house running away. The beams of my house rolling away in a flood
of sand, crabs carrying splinters
from each rotten room.
Each crab is a key to each room each splinter a tooth
that has fallen from my mouth
the gaping doorway

Would you send a message? Would you write a letter? I am drowning. Or I am not drowning. Before you left, the house was yellow. Before you got here, the house was yellow. Would you make a man a message? I am sodden. *I am salted*. The Whale Bone Man makes a mess of things, and I am turning, and I leave small eddies behind me. The water rotates. The ocean founders. It is all a cipher and it gallops away. I leave my life where you cannot find it. I am drowning. I am not drowning.

I believe this may be the truth: I have driven you away. Or the wave has driven you away. Or I am not a force of nature. I am not a load-bearing wall. From the balcony, you might have seen so many things, heard the whistle of marine animals in the night. You might have felt a warning. Or you warmed to it, licked all the salt off yourself before climbing into bed at night. Rubbed sand into your teeth, tiled the walls with sea glass. I believe this may be the truth: your suitcase is full of sand. The sand is full of ground-up shells, which will echo as the suitcase swings in your hand. You will hear the Whale Bone Man calling, remember the trail of his fingers in the humid air as he made strange signs, drew in his nets. You will slide across the sea to him as though the water had turned to glass, or was slick as shell. Or you will sink. Or you are spineless. You have left your bones behind.

My feet dream the dream of my head

each a house and together I walk down to the beach dark rollers

if I could see from underneath

the wooden arch above

the plank seam

the hinge of a barn ceiling

a sea of houses their pitched peaks

traveling I cannot find

their ways in.

My toes touch the sill

a thin line lapping

edged in foam

the inside, a set of sturdy rooms

the outside, the sound around a hoof beat

as my feet dream a footpath into the sea

I do not think you know the importance of touch. I lay a hand on my house, I lay a hand on the seawall. I place my hands above the seawater and let my palms down. I wrap my hands around the Whale Bone Man like wet washrags. I drag my hands along the rocks, the ones the sea left sharp. I cut my fingers on empty oyster shells. I shred my skin and soak it in salt, and I wait. My hands grow tougher and I wait. In my dreams I have found the right words and I have tied the feet of your house together, and it kneels for me to climb the steps. It does not creak. It does not open. Instead of a doorknob, there is a mouth, and I long to feel the contours of its dry teeth.

The connection between hose and spigot tight seal of door and doorframe.
I am missing the order of things oysters packed in a bed

one kidney tight against another curled inside a shell
a nose wedged into the chimney and one foot poking out the window

The water moves higher
or I walk in to my waist
or I was already in the sea and I emerged at the base of the pier where the Whale Bone Man
spends his days
in conspiracy with the wood beams
picking out splinters as though brushing out a tail

This is the science of beaches: that they are between the land and the sea. That out on the water you may sink, and lying on the beach you may sink into the sand. That a hole, as it is dug, will fill. The beach extends under the water, holds the water up, and becomes the tongue of the ocean floor. Spreads under the sidewalk in front of my house and creeps up the steps to sleep in my bed. You may live on top of or under the sand, where there is always more space to bury. There you may build a city. Or there you may lose a city. There you may find curtains of seaweed, or houses on stilts. They do not balance, do not walk. The smooth bones of empty houses wash up there and wash away, and you may crush them beneath your feet, and they will become part of the surface you walk on.

As I have seen most days the man in the waves from my balcony
as I have felt for my own limbs

I reach one hand out to clasp the boardwalk's wooden leg
to squeeze where I imagine to run my hand down it in a whisper
the strings of tendons might sit
and it lifts

bends above the water makes an elbow, slick with moss

Three legs now the pylons shake under the pier I hold
no foot in my palm the leg falls from my hand

The water takes it back
Under the surface I can see the sand holds the leg in place
a long stretch of stump buried
where a hoof should be

If I had no head. If no one raced ahead of me. If I could complete the task, finish the thought. If I had a horse to take me there. If my feet were not fastened to the ground. If I received instruction, or a letter, or an empty envelope. If imprinted. If I could make myself a mirror. If I could make a mirror an ocean. If I could make an ocean a forest. If I could find the pass, the pasture. If a fleet foot. If an ocean-going vessel. If the boat could be bailed. If I could find the mouth of the whale, the fibers of its dry teeth. If I drowned. If I did not drown. If I swallowed seawater and filtered out foreign bodies. If my mouth were so large I could not see my feet. If I had no feet. If a house had no footprint. If I slid along a glassy surface to a yawning doorframe, fast, made fast, fastened.

I had heard in my dreams
 I thought I thought
 their soft skin a trick
 the noise of sea glass knocking on rock
the spine of a whale in the water
 bone on bone, noisy hinges
 The Whale Bone Man has hidden the mouth of himself
 The wave left shells
 around the shoreline
the oyster's gifts I hold
 each half shell in a hand
 I rub the nacre warm curry their smooth surfaces
the inside becomes the underside each wooden leg receives a foot each foot a clench
so the pier stands its broad back waiting

Every day, the lifeguards leave their boat on the sand, and the Whale Bone Man takes it for his own. He lies down, matches his spine against the bottom of the boat. He chips its blue paint, leaves secret messages that I cannot read from the balcony. The sides of the boat stretch around like a pair of baleen, the blue inside, a mouth I think has found its way out. The boat, on the waves, swallows and swallows, looking for the drowned.

Astride my feet hang one forward and one back
with the motion of the wooden horse

swimming in the salt
deadened water phantom krill surround us

empty crab shells bobbing in our wake
in the ocean swells the skeletons of sea bugs

their softened legs scuttling
as the water moves us along

This is the science of waves: that they break. That they wash away your trinkets. You may watch them from the house, take the measure of their timing. You may find them in booming hollows, running into a slick rock face, throwing thunder away and throwing it again and throwing it again. You may track the motion of tides. You may paint buoys. You may pitch old bottles into the ocean and wait for the glass to come back soft. You may cup your hands to wash your cuts in the salt water. You may cup your hands and plant a colony of shells, open-mouthed. You may increase the surface area of the ocean's bottom, give the waves a place to rest, to sink a foot in, and still they will break. The balcony will splinter. The pages of your journals will soak into a pulp, but still your skin will only sweat. You cannot dissolve. Only break.

A sandbar reaches out to hold my horse's feet
 too far from the beach
 the sand too white but we stand atop it

looking down to

 the eye of the ocean
 at the center of the sandbar where it funnels down to a dark hole.
The sand knows us
 it shakes itself out of the water
 becomes a valley of glass beneath us
 opens wide the mouth the eye the open door

I dreamed that I woke up and found you standing on the beach. A storm was coming in purple and you watched it. Your back to me, your matted hair stuffed with sand. Then I knew it was a dream. You were caked in it, as though buried and unburied. As though an animal, rolled in some strange smell. I said, *I am where*. You said the liminal. You drew a line in the sand, and four lines branching out a claw. You marked the spot. Behind us the houses and before us the sea, and between us the sand. The bones. The footprints into the water I had not yet made. I asked you to turn around and you did, your face empty as a keyhole, toothed and missing.

We should slide down the smooth funnel we should tumble into the dark spot
but my horse's feet clamp to the glass.
Beneath the shells of his feet
the ghosts of their oysters hold us fast
fastened so my horse may pick his way down the slope
Slow circles my guide

The line of land and sea does not seal
saltwater and freshwater
wet sand shines as it dries

the silty meeting of ocean and river mouth
looking solid before a foot arrives

Through the eye mouth

we go to the underside of the ocean

The land of bones before us another dark valley diving
A road stretches out white under a black sky the bone road
between fields bounded in bone
bone fences with space to let wind through if wind came here
but there is no wind to tease my horse's mane

we are dead
we are not dead

Bone not bone at the coronet band a circle of chalk where leg becomes hoof
the short soft hairs at the edge to mark the line between body and bone
the hard foot the closed foot the hidden soft center
where the anatomy tells a ghost story
splitting hoof wall the turning drain of soft tissue
a horse drafts his own death

When storms come in the clouds gather like oysters, white shell after white shell above us. Bedded and breaking. I have poked holes in the spray hose, the pressure gone plugged in sand. Cracked cement in the spigot. Only when waves break do you see their insides, choppy kelp and dark particles riding the spine of the water. Away from the water, how will you keep from drowning? The clouds part into scales. The fish flexes. At night, the telephone poles walk dragging wires. Clouds gather and foam.

On one side of the road a field of sunflowers bone petals
again a wheat field shafts of bone
 stalks thin as whiskers
again a plowed field chalky rows of bone dust
 stiff corn silk
 The land knows us the fields know us
At attention the bone stalks my horse runs

The foul house is littered with you. Though you are not here, you have been, and I can still hear you cleaning in the corners. My feet begin to resemble yours. The bed takes your shape. A new light bulb in the living room, and clean sheets. Your music still echoes faintly through the halls, and every shadow seems a suitcase. All right—I may have plastered the lampshade with shapes, planted them there for company.

Beyond the wooden horses a silver trough flashes at the fence
 from it I smell a familiar sound
 salt nosing up against its neighbor
ocean water a tide pool in the basin.
 The water rips he knows I am here
in the pool starfish huddle
 I reach in
below the starfish a cloud of barnacles hides an old brick
 he knows I am here the air feels faster
I pick the barnacles off and the brick crumbles
 inside a white-spined sea urchin
I crack it open like a gull would

and inside the hollow
 a vision bellows: *A skull floating like a buoy,
bleached and softening under the sun. Waves tangling my lost
trinkets up with seaweed and dead jellyfish. I make a cup of my
hands to hold the sea. The cold cavity of the body left behind to
float up. A gray whale in a white canyon with steep walls. A
bubble forms under the surface of the water, the waves disturb
and below them the sand. A ring of bubbles seen from above. An
eye in the water, drowning. A whale eye winking.*

Cupping one half of the urchin in each hand

I did not notice

each spine opening a door

into my skin

my hands growing hard and white

my hands are ghosts

smooth white palms

to match the man walking toward the pasture

his bone tail snaking on the bone road

I know

I have found his life.

My hands belong to me.

He stands at the edge

ringed with bone white as salt

stops each of his dead feet

I hold my hands up to show him
two halves of an empty body

and the Whale Bone Man knows his end

I dig a toe into the soft ground slowly

I draw the foundations of a house

I draw the house a doorframe

I let myself in
and close the door behind me

Last night I heard hoof beats from the balcony. Or I heard a drumming in my own head and followed it down to the sand. It was a black and white dream, a black and white footfall. Where the sand slides under the water, the Whale Bone Man waited with his back to me. The vertebrae gleamed, dragged along behind him in the sand. The bones clicked against each other in a rhythm like running. No horses there. I could feel sand shifting between my joints as I ran. Or I was not running because I had only one leg. Or I rolled down the angry dunes. Or I flew in a small wooden ship. The sand rowed the ship along, beach singing, showers of sand blocking out stars and small light points and the already-dim windows of my house because I had cried *if only* and sat sad over the twisted hooves and if only it is all a bedtime story.

I go to the beach and it is a black and white night
again the Whale Bone Man again.

No moon
no moon but the white skull of the whale
shining still on his shoulders his long back to me

My hands cup the head he does not show it I have crushed the bone
that curved under my fingers he does not show it
 the whale knows this man has no head

Between bits of bleached fracture
cracks in my fingers
a key.

The bone broken

gray shaft and teeth
the head of the key like a ball joint.

I have stolen

what belongs inside a body I could cut
into weathered wood

the planks of the pier

messages, myths

from which fall shards of the story

numerous as sand

Headless he stands
 though I have spoken still, the space
between his shoulders waiting
 as though the dip of a dun line
 where croup meets haunch
as though a horse, from behind
 head down to eat the beach grass

Passing close I press my hand to his shoulder here I am behind you.

I have crushed
 I am crushed
 I will crush

This is the science of shells: the hinge and the turn, the bone and the body. In the beginning, the soft thing spins a skeleton, turns and turns until a hard thing grows. Stamps a foot down to mark the spot. A door of two leaves. They meet, bivalve. They close against the sea.

Here, behind
my house there is a spray hose
To twist full of water
To coil
at my feet to clean
to lineate the water
to hold solid with my hands as though the cord belonging to a back
but I stand on the beach
a bone between every finger.
I find no sand
between the vertebrae
From this I learn to clean
is to care
is to take a hoof pick to each crevice
is to smooth each white crest
is to keep house.

Strange the bone man has done nothing for me
but I miss the soft white shape of his skull

the chalk I imagined on my fingers the flash of his head like a beacon

always leading to the water the smell of salt

rubbing between my fingers a grain

the shell builds itself
around the irritant

I fill the space between his shoulders

my own head the occupant

I become two-spined

draped across his stiff back

his skin shifts crumbles

piled on the shore

he becomes the beach

buries my feet

If a shell clamps shut
then the filter begins to work the foreign body expelled
then the feet turn
then the solid body then the closed circuit
then the seal of the hinge
then the frame
then the storm makes no matter
then the rooms unrented
then my house belongs to me.

The key becomes a headless fence
The key becomes a twisted foot
The key becomes glass a burned-out bulb
The key becomes a long nose
The key begins to sing

 All of these are true
 in my warming hand where the key waits quiet
 becomes a talon between my fingers

In the gray morning
the sand shifts where my feet sink in
my back to the beach I find the street
the sea wall
the splintered staircase
the jutting corner of my house
my cheerful doorframe
underneath the house settles
as though onto a nest its tired legs
its yellow siding ruffled

I check all the windows the empty garage
 through the kitchen window a clean white sink no tenant
 the spray hose coiled out back behind
I remember the key in my hand
 the lock's missing tooth
I place the key where it belongs
 the lock mouths along the edges
 a clean fit
 the lock licks its teeth

The spray hose coiled out back behind
as though nesting wrapped around a body or a house
a boundary becomes the space within it

I have been a line drawn down by the water

I have turned the water on to clean the sand from between my solid toes
I wrap the water around my solid form
to occupy the space
to create a space to occupy

these deathless places the tenant the door I walk through

The nest uncoils
Or I have pulled it apart No
I have pulled it apart

Thank you to the editors at the following journals, in which some of these poems first appeared:

alice blue review, Bayou Magazine, CutBank, Coconut, elimae, Jellyfish Magazine, The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, [PANK], Sixth Finch, Spittoon, Tarpaulin Sky Magazine, treehouse.

And thank you to everyone who read and thought about these poems, especially Brandi Wells, Emma Sovich, Freya Gibbon, Katy Gunn, Joel Brouwer, Kellie Wells, and many others in Alabama; to my parents and sister, for my hands and my feet; to Berry Grass, who knows what I mean.

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