

The Surgeon's Tale by Jeff VanderMeer & Cat Rambo

Part I

Down by the docks, you can smell the tide going out—surging from rotted fish, filth, and the briny sargassum that turns the pilings a mixture of purple and green. I don't mind the smell; it reminds me of my youth. From the bungalow on the bay's edge, I emerge most days to go beach-combing in the sands beneath the rotted piers. Soft crab skeletons and ghostly sausage wrappers mostly, but a coin or two as well.

Sometimes I see an old man when I'm hunting, a gangly fellow whose clothes hang loose. As though his limbs were sticks of chalk, wired together with ulnar ligaments of seaweed, pillowing bursae formed from the sacs of decaying anemones that clutter on the underside of the pier's planking.

I worry that the sticks will snap if he steps too far too fast, and he will become past repair, past preservation, right in front of me. I draw diagrams in the sand flats to show him how he can safeguard himself with casings over his fragile limbs, the glyphs he should draw on his cuffs to strengthen his wrists. A thousand things I've learned here and at sea. But I don't talk to him—he will have to figure it out from my scrawls when he comes upon them. If the sea doesn't touch them first.

He seems haunted, like a mirror or a window that shows some landscape it's never known. I'm as old as he is. I wonder if I look like him. If he too has trouble sleeping at night. And why he chose this patch of sand to pace and wander.

I will not talk to him. That would be like talking to myself: the surest path to madness.

I grew up right here, in my parents' cottage near the sea. Back then, only a few big ships docked at the piers and everything was quieter, less intense. My parents were Preservationists, and salt brine the key to their art. It was even how they met, they liked to tell people. They had entered the same competition—to keep a pig preserved for as long as possible using only essences from the sea and a single spice.

"It was in the combinations," my dad would say. "It was in knowing that the sea is not the same place here, here, or here."

My mother and father preserved their pigs the longest, and after a tie was declared, they began to see and learn from each other. They married and had me, and we lived together in the cottage by the sea, preserving things for people.

I remember that when I went away to medical school, the only thing I missed was the smell of home. In the student quarters we breathed in drugs and sweat and sometimes piss. The operating theaters, the halls, the cadaver rooms, all smelled of bitter chemicals. Babies in bottles. Dolphin fetuses. All had the milky-white look of the exsanguinated — not dreaming or asleep but truly dead.

At home, the smells were different. My father went out daily in the little boat his father had given him as a young man and brought back a hundred wonderful smells. I remember the sargassum the most, thick and green and almost smothering, from which dozens of substances could be extracted to aid in preservations. Then, of course, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, tiny crabs and shrimp, but mostly different types of water. I don't know how he did it—or how my mother distilled the essence—but the buckets he brought back did have different textures and scents. The deep water from out in the bay was somehow smoother and its smell was solid and strong, like the rind of some exotic fruit. Areas near the shore had different pedigrees. The sea grasses lent the water there, under the salt, the faint scent of glossy limes.

Near the wrecks of iron-bound ships from bygone eras, where the octopi made their lairs, the water tasted of weak red wine.

“Taste this,” my mother would say, standing in the kitchen in one of my father’s shirts over rolled up pants and suspenders. Acid blotches spotted her hands.

I could never tell if there was mischief in her eye or just delight. Because some of it, even after I became used to the salt, tasted horrible.

I would grimace and my father would laugh and say, “Sourpuss! Learn to take the bitter with the sweet.”

My parents sold the essence of what the sea gave them: powders and granules and mixtures of spices. In the front room, display cases stood filled with little pewter bowls glittering in so many colors that at times the walls seemed to glow with the residue of some mad sunrise.

This was the craft of magic in our age: pinches and flakes. Magic had given way to Science because Science was more reliable, but you could still find Magic in nooks and crannies, hidden away. For what my parents did, I realized later, could not have derived from the natural world alone.

People came from everywhere to buy these preservations. Some you rubbed on your skin for health. Some preserved fruit, others meat. And sometimes, yes, the medical school sent a person to our cottage, usually when they needed something special that their own ghastly concoctions could not preserve or illuminate.

My dad called the man they sent “Stinker” behind his back. His hands were stained brown from handling chemicals and the reek of formaldehyde was even in his breath. My mother hated him.

I suppose that is one reason I went to medical school—because my parents did not like Stinker. Does youth need a better excuse?

As a teenager, I became contemptuous of the kind, decent folk who had raised me. I contracted a kind of headstrong cabin fever, too, for we were on the outskirts of the city. I hated the enclosing walls of the cottage. I hated my father’s boat. I even hated their happiness with each other, for it seemed designed to keep me out. When I came back from my studies at the tiny school created for the children of fishermen and sailors, the smell of preservatives became the smell of something small and unambitious. Even though poor, the parents of my schoolmates often went on long journeys into the world, had adventures beyond my ken. A few even worked for the old men who ran the medical school and the faltering mages’ college. I found that their stories made me more and more restless.

When the time came, I applied to the medical school. They accepted me, much to the delight of my parents, who still did not understand my motivation. I would have to work for my tuition, my books, but that seemed a small price.

I remember a sense of relief at having escaped a trap. It is a feeling I do not understand now, as if my younger self and my adult selves were two entirely different people. But back then I could think only of the fact that I would be in the city’s center, in the center of civilization. I would matter to more than just some farmers, cooks, fisherfolk, and the like. I would be saving lives from death, not just preserving dead things from decay.

The day I left, my father took me aside and said, “Don’t become something separate from the work you do.” The advice irritated me. It made no sense. But the truth is I didn’t know what he meant at the time.

His parting hug, her kiss, though, were what sustained me during my first year of medical school, even if I

would never have admitted it at the time.

The brittle-boned old man stands at the water's edge and stares out to sea. I wonder what he's looking at, so distant. The sargassum's right in front of him, just yards from the shore.

That's where I stare, where I search.

As a medical student, I lost myself in the work and its culture, which mainly meant sitting in the taverns boasting. I had picked up not just a roommate but a friend in Lucius, the son of a wealthy city official. We roamed the taverns for booze and women, accompanied by his friends. I didn't have much money, but I had a quick tongue and was good at cards.

Many long nights those first two years we spent pontificating over the cures we would find, the diseases we would bring to ground and eradicate, the herbs and mixes that would restore vitality or potency. We would speak knowingly about matters of demonic anatomy and supposed resurrection, even though as far as anyone knew, none of it was true. Anymore.

Lucius: They had golems in the old days, didn't they? Surgeons must have made them. Sorcerers wouldn't know a gall bladder from a spoiled wineskin.

Me: Progress has been made. It should be possible to make a person from some twine, an apple, a bottle of wine, and some cat gut.

Peter (Lucius' friend): A drunk person, maybe.

Lucius: You are a drunk person. Are you a golem?

Me: He's no golem. He's just resurrected. Do you remember when he began showing up? Right after we left the cadaver room.

Lucius: Why, I think you're right. Peter, are you a dead man?

Peter: Not to my knowledge. Unless you expect me to pay for all this.

Lucius: Why can't you be a resurrected woman? I have enough dead male friends.

During the days—oh marvel of youth!—we conquered our hangovers with supernatural ease and spent equal time in the cadaver room cutting up corpses and in classes learning about anatomy and the perilous weakness of the human body. Our myriad and ancient and invariably male instructors pontificated and sputtered and pointed their fingers and sometimes even donned the garb and grabbed the knife, but nothing impressed as much as naked flesh unfolding to show its contents.

And then there was the library. The medical school had been built around the library, which had been there for almost a thousand years before the school, originally as part of the mages' college. It was common knowledge, which is to say unsubstantiated rumor, that when the library had been built thaumaturgy had been more than just little pulses and glimpses of the fabric underlying the world. There had been true magic, wielded by a chosen few, and no one had need of a surgeon. But none of us really knew. Civilization had collapsed and rebuilt itself thrice in that span. All we had were scraps of history and old leather-bound books housed in cold, nearly airless rooms to guide us.

Lucius: If we were real surgeons, we could resurrect someone. With just a little bit of magic. Medical know-how. Magic. Magic fingers.

Me: And preservations.

Richard (another of Lucius' friends): Preservations?

Lucius: He comes from a little cottage on the—

Me: It's nothing. A joke. A thing to keep fetuses from spoiling until we've had a look at them.

Peter: What would we do with a resurrected person?

Lucius: Why, we'd put him up for the city council. A dead person ought to have more wisdom than a living one.

Me: We could maybe skip a year or two of school if we brought a dead person back.

Richard: Do you think they'd like it? Being alive again?

Lucius: They wouldn't really have a choice, would they?

Do you know what arrogance is? Arrogance is thinking you can improve on a thousand years of history. Arrogance is trying to do it to get the best of the parents who always loved you.

Me: There're books in the library, you know.

Lucius: Quick! Give the man another drink. He's fading. Books in a library. Never heard of such a thing.

Me: No, I mean—

Lucius: Next you'll be telling us there are corpses in the cadaver room and—

Richard: Let him speak, Lucius. He looks serious.

Me: I mean books on resurrection.

Lucius: Do tell...

For a project on prolonged exposure to quicksilver and aether, I had been allowed access to the oldest parts of the library—places where you did not know whether the footprints shown in the dust by the light of your shaking lantern were a year or five hundred years old. Here, knowledge hid in the dark, and you were lucky to find a little bit of it. I was breathing air breathed hundreds, possibly thousands, of years before by people much wiser than me.

In a grimy alcove half-choked with dust-filled spider webs, I found books on the ultimate in preservation: reanimation of dead matter. Arcane signs and symbols, hastily written down in my notebook.

No one had been to this alcove for centuries, but they had been there. As I found my halting way out, I noticed the faint outline of boot prints beneath the dust layers. Someone had paced before that shelf, deliberating, and I would never know their name or what they were doing there, or why they stayed so long.

Lucius: You don't have the balls.

Me: The balls? I can steal the balls from the cadaver room.

Richard: He can have as many balls as he wants!

Peter: We all can!

Lucius: Quietly, quietly, gents. This is serious business. We're planning on a grandiose level. We're asking to be placed on the pedestal with the greats.

Me: It's not that glorious. It's been done before, according to the book.

Lucius: Yes, but not for hundreds of years.

Peter: Seriously, you wonder why not.

Richard: I wonder why my beer mug's empty.

Peter: Barbarian.

Richard: Cretin.

Me: It seems easy enough. It seems as if it is possible.

One night, Lucius and I so very very drunk, trying too hard to impress, I boasted that with my secret knowledge of reanimation, my Preservationist background, and my two years of medical school, I could resurrect the dead, create a golem from flesh and blood. Human, with a human being's natural life span.

"And I will assist him," Lucius announced, finger pointed at the ceiling. "Onward!"

We stumbled out of the tavern's soft light, accompanied by the applause of friends who no doubt thought I was taking a piss—into the darkness of the street, and carried by drunkenness and the animating spirit of our youth, stopping only to vomit into the gutter once or maybe twice, we lurched our debauched way up the hill to the medical school, and in the shadows stole past the snoring old guard, into the cadaver room.

I remember the spark to the night, cold as it was. I remember the extravagant stars strewn across the sky. I remember the euphoria, being not just on a quest, but on a drunken quest, and together, best of friends in that moment.

If only we had stayed in that moment.

"Preservation is a neutral thing," my mother told me once. "It prolongs a state that already exists. It honors the essence of something."

She stood in the back room surrounded by buckets of pungent water when she said this to me. I think I was twelve or thirteen. She had a ladle and was stirring some buckets, sipping from others. Glints and sparkles came from one. Others were dark and heavy and dull. The floor, once white tile, had become discolored from decades of water storage. The bloody rust circles of the buckets. The hemorrhaging green-blue stains.

"But the essence of preservation," my mother said, "is that it doesn't last. You can only preserve something for so long, and then it is gone. And that's all right."

My father had entered the room just before she said this. The look of love and sadness she gave the two of us, me sitting, my father standing behind me, was so stark, so revelatory, that I could not meet her gaze.

Looking back at that moment, I've often wondered if she already knew our futures.

In the cadaver room, we picked a newly dead woman who had drowned in the sea. Probably the daughter of a fisherman. She lay exposed on the slab, all strong shoulders and solid breasts and sturdy thighs. Her ankles were delicate, though, as were the features of her face. She had frozen blue eyes and pale skin and an odd smile that made me frown and hesitate for a moment.

It will come as no surprise we chose her in part because her body excited me. Although Lucius' presence had helped me in this regard, women, for all our boasting, are not drawn to impoverished medical students. Even on those rare occasions, it had been in the dark and I had only had glimpses of a woman's naked form. The dissections of the classroom did not count; they would drive most men to celibacy if not for the resilience of the human mind.

"This one?" Lucius asked.

I don't know if he still thought this was a lark, or if he knew how serious I was.

"I think so," I said. "I think this is the one."

And, although I didn't know it, I did mean the words.

We stood there and stared at her. The woman reminded me of someone the more I stared.

It was uncanny, and yet I could not think of who she looked like. So taken was I by her that I pushed her hair from her face.

Lucius nudged my shoulder, whispered, "Stop gawking. That guard might wake up or his replacement come by at any minute."

Together, we bundled her in canvas like a rug, stole past the guard, and, by means of a wagon Lucius had arranged—from a friend used to Lucius' pranks—we took her, after a brief stop at my apartment to pick up some supplies, to a secluded cove well away from the city. For you see, I meant to preserve her tethered in the water, in the sargassum near the rockline. It was a variation on an old preservation trick my mother had once shown a client.

The physical exertion was intense. I remember being exhausted by the time we hauled her out of the cart. Her body would not cooperate; there was no way for her not to flop and become unwound from the canvas at times. It added to the unreality of it all, and several times we collapsed into giggles. Perhaps we would have sobered up sooner if not for that.

Luckily the moon was out and Lucius had brought a lantern. By then, my disorganized thoughts had settled, and although I was still drunk I had begun to have doubts. But this is the problem with having an accomplice. If Lucius hadn't been there, I would like to think I'd have put a stop to it all. But I couldn't, not with Lucius there, not with the bond between us now. As for what kept Lucius beside me, I believe he would have abandoned me long before if not for a kind of jaded hedonism—the curiosity of the perpetually bored.

It was hard. I had to think of the woman as a receptacle, a vehicle, for resurrection, not the end result.

We laid her out atop the canvas and I drew symbols on her skin with ink I'd daubed onto my fingers. Holding her right hand, I said the words I had found on the books, knowing neither their meaning nor their correct pronunciation. I rubbed preservatives into her skin that would not just protect her flesh while she lay amongst the sargassum but actually bring it back to health. I had to do some cutting, some surgery, near the end. An odd autopsy, looking for signs of the "mechanical defect" as one of my instructors used to say, that would preclude her reanimation. I cleared the last fluid from her lungs with a syringe.

By this time I could not tell you exactly what I was doing. I felt imbued with preternatural, instinctual knowledge and power, although I had neither. What I had were delusions of grandeur spurred on by alcohol and the words of my friends, tempered perhaps by memories of my parents' art.

Lucius held the lantern and kept muttering, "Oh my God" under his breath. But his tone was not so much one of horror as, again, morbid fascination. I have seen the phenomenon since. It is as if a mental list is being checked off on a list of unique experiences.

By the time I had finished, I knew the dead woman as intimately as any lover. We took her down to the sargassum bed and we laid her there, floating, tethered by one foot using some rope. I knew that cove. I'd swum in it since I was a child. People hardly ever came there. The sargassum was trapped; the tide only went out in the spring, when the path of the currents changed. The combination of the salt water, the preservatives I'd applied to her, and the natural properties of the sargassum would sustain her as she made her slow way back to life.

Except for the sutures, she looked as if she were asleep, still with that slight smile, floating on the thick sargassum, glowing from the emerald tincture that would keep the small crabs and other scavengers from her. She looked otherworldly and beautiful.

Lucius gave a nervous laugh. He had begun to sober up.

"Any suggestions on what we do next?" he said. His voice held disbelief.

"We wait."

"Wait? For how long? We've got classes in the morning. I mean, it's already morning."

"We wait for a day."

"Here? For a whole day?"

"We come back. At night. She'll still be here."

There's nothing in the nature of a confession that makes it any more or less believable. I know this, and my shadow on the beach knows it, or he would have talked to me by now. Or I would have talked to him, despite my misgivings.

I haven't seen Lucius in forty years. My shadow could be Lucius. It could be, but I doubt it.

Part II

In the morning, for a time, neither Lucius nor I knew whether the night's events had been real or a dream. But the cart outside of our rooms, the deep fatigue in our muscles, and the blood and skin under our

fingernails—this evidence convinced us. We looked at each other as if engaged in some uneasy truce, unwilling to speak of it, still thinking, I believe, that it would turn out to have been a hallucination.

We went to classes like normal. Our friends teased us about the bet, and I shrugged, gave a sheepish grin while Lucius immediately talked about something else. The world seemed to have changed not at all because of our actions and yet I felt completely different. I kept seeing the woman's face. I kept thinking about her eyes

Did the medical school miss the corpse? If so, they ignored it for fear of scandal. How many times a year did it happen, I've always wondered, and for what variety of reasons?

That night we returned to the cove, and for three nights more. She remained preserved but she was still dead. Nothing had happened. It appeared I could not bring her back to life, not even for a moment. The softly hushing water that rocked her sargassum bed had more life to it than she. Each time I entered a more depressed and numbed state.

“What's her name, do you think?” Lucius asked me on the third night.

He was sitting on the rocks, staring at her. The moonlight made her pale skin luminous against the dark green.

“She's dead,” I said. “She doesn't have a name.”

“But she had a name. And parents. And maybe a husband. And now she's here. Floating.”

He laughed. It was a raw laugh. I didn't like what it contained.

On the afternoon of the first day, Lucius had been good-natured and joking. By the second, he had become silent. Now he seemed to have lost something vital, some sense of perspective. He sat on the rocks drawn in on himself, huddled for warmth. I hated his questions. I hated his attitude.

Even though it was I who pined for the woman, who so desperately wanted her to come to gasping life, to rise from the sargassum, reborn.

Everywhere I went, I saw those frozen blue eyes.

Once, before I left home, in that time when I was arguing with my parents almost every day, restless with their world and my place in it, there was a pause because each of us regretted something we had said.

Into this silence, my mother said, “You've got to know who you are, and even when you think you've been treated unfairly still *be* that person.”

I said something sarcastic and stormed out of the cottage—to feel the salt air on my face, to look across the water toward distant, unseen shores.

I didn't know that I would one day find so much more so close to home.

The fourth night Lucius refused to go with me.

“It's pointless,” he said. “Not only that, it's dangerous. We shouldn't have done it in the first place. It's still a crime, to steal a body. Let it go. She'll be taken out to sea or rotting soon enough. Or put her out

to sea yourself. Just don't mention it to me again."

In his face I saw fear, yes, but mostly awareness of a need for self-preservation. This scared me. The dead woman might have enthralled me, but Lucius had become my anchor at medical school.

"You're right," I told him. "I'll go one last time and put her out to sea."

Lucius smiled, but there was something wrong. I could feel it.

"We'll chalk it up to youthful foolishness," he said, putting his arm over my shoulders. "A tale to tell the grandchildren in thirty years."

She was still there, perfectly preserved, on that fourth night. But this time, rising from the sargassum, I saw what I thought was a pale serpent, swaying. In the next second, breath frozen in my throat, I realized I was staring at her right arm—and that it was moving.

I dashed into the water and to her side, hoping for what? I still don't know. Those frozen blue eyes. That skin, imperfect yet perfect. Her smile.

She wasn't moving. Her body still had the staunch solidity, the draining heaviness, of the dead. What I had taken to be a general awakening was just the water's gentle motion. Only the arm moved with any purpose—and it moved toward me. It sought me out, reaching. It touched my cheek as I stood in the water there beside her, and I felt that touch everywhere.

I spent almost an hour trying to wake her. I thought that perhaps she was close to full recovery, that I just needed to push things a little bit. But nothing worked. There was just the twining arm, the hand against my cheek, my shoulder, seeking out my own hand as if wanting comfort.

Finally, exhausted, breathing heavily, I gave up. I refreshed the preservation powders, made sure she was in no danger of sinking, and left her there, the arm still twisting and searching and alive.

I was crying as I walked away. I had been working so hard that it wasn't until that moment that I realized what had happened.

I had begun to bring her back to life.

Now if only I could bring her the rest of the way.

As I walked back up into the city, into the noise and color and sounds of people talking — back into my existence before her — I was already daydreaming about our life together.

The quality of the silence here can be extraordinary. It's the wind that does it. The wind hisses its way through the bungalow's timbers and blocks out any other sound.

The beach could be, as it sometimes is, crowded with day visitors and yet from my window it is a silent tableau. I can watch mothers with their children, building sandcastles, or beachcombers, or young couples, and I can create the dialogue for their lives. How many of them will make decisions that become the Decision? Who really recognizes when they've tipped the balance, when they've entered into a place from which there is no escape?

The old man knows, I'm sure. He has perspective. But the rest of them, they have no idea what awaits them.

For another week I went to her nightly, and each time the hand reached toward me like some luminous, five-petaled flower, grasping toward the moon. There was no other progress. Slowly, my hopes and daydreams turned to sleeplessness and despair. My studies suffered and I stammered upon questioning like a first year who couldn't remember the difference between a ligament and a radial artery. My friends stared at me and muttered that I worked too hard, that my brain had gone soft from overstudy. But I saw nothing but the woman's eyes, even when Lucius, without warning, while I was visiting her, moved out of our quarters. Leaving me alone.

I understood this, to some extent. I had become a bad roommate and, worse, a liability. But when Lucius began avoiding me in the halls, then I knew he had intuited I had gone farther, gone against his advice.

Finally, at the end of an anatomy class, I cornered him. He looked at me as if I were a stranger.

"I need you to come down to the water with me," I said.

"Why?" he said. "What's the point?"

"You need to see."

"What have you done?"

From Lucius' tone you would have thought I'd murdered someone.

"You just need to see. Please? For a friend?"

He gave me a contemptuous look, but said, "I'll meet you tonight. But I won't go down there with you. We meet there and leave separately."

"Thank you Lucius. Thank you so much."

I was so desperately grateful. I had been living with this secret in my head for almost a week. I hadn't been bathing. I hadn't been eating. When I did sleep, I dreamt of snow-white hands reaching for me from the sea. Hundreds of them, melting into the water.

I no longer think of my parents' bungalow as a trap. It's more of a solace—all of their things surround me. I can almost conjure them up from the smells alone. There is so much history here, of so many good things.

From the window, I can see the old man now. He seems restless, searching. Once or twice, he looked like he might come to the door, but he retreated and walked back onto the beach.

If I did talk to him, I don't know where I'd begin my story. I don't know if I'd wait for him to tell his or if mine would come out all in a mad rush, and there he'd be, still on the welcome mat, looking at this crazy old man, knowing he'd made a mistake.

Lucius at the water's edge that night. Lucius bent over in a crouch, staring at the miracle, the atrocity my lantern's light had brought to both of us. Lucius making a sound like a crow's harsh caw.

"It's like the movement of a starfish arm after you cut it off," he said. "It's no different from any corpse

that flinches under the knife. Muscle memory.”

“She’s coming back to life,” I said.

Lucius stood, walked over to me, and slapped me hard across the face. I reeled back, fell to one knee by the water’s edge. It hurt worse than anything but the look in the woman’s eyes.

Lucius leaned down to hiss in my ear: “This is an abomination. A mistake. You must let it go—into the sea. Or burn it. Or both. You must get rid of this, do you understand? For both of our sakes. And if you don’t, I will come back down here and do it for you. Another thing: we’re no longer friends. That can no longer be. I do not know you anymore.” And, more softly: “You must understand. You must. This cannot be.”

I nodded but I could not look at him. In that one whisper, my whole world had collapsed and been re-formed. Lucius had been my best friend; I had just not been his best friend. He was leaving me to my fate.

As I stood, I felt utterly alone. All I had left was the woman.

I looked out at her, so unbelievably beautiful floating atop the sargassum.

“I don’t even know your name,” I said to her. “Not even that.”

Lucius was staring at me, but I ignored him and after a time he went away.

The woman’s smile remained, as enigmatic as ever. Even now, I can see that smile, the line of her mouth reflected in everything around me—in the lip of a sea shell, or transferred to a child walking along the shore, or leaping into the sky in the form of a gull’s silhouette.

Maybe things would have been different had I been close to any instructors, but outside of class, I never talked to them. I could not imagine going up to one of those dusty fossils, half-embalmed, and blurting out the details of my desperate and angst-ridden situation. How could they possibly relate? Nor did I feel as if I could go to my parents for help; that had not been an option in my mind for years.

Worst of all, I had never realized until Lucius began to avoid me that he had been my link to my few other friends. Now that Lucius had cast me adrift, no one wanted to talk to me. And, in truth, I was not good company. I don’t know if I can convey the estrangement surrounding those days after I took Lucius to see her. I wandered through my classes like an amnesiac, speaking only when spoken to, staring out into nothing and nowhere. Unable to truly comprehend what was happening to me.

And every night: down to the sea, each time the ache in my heart telling me that what I believed, what I hoped, must have happened and she would be truly alive.

In that absence, in that solitary place I now occupied, I realized, slowly and with a mixture of fear and an odd satisfaction that my interest in the woman’s resurrection no longer came from hubris or scientific fascination. Instead it came from love. I was in love with a dead woman, and that alone began to break me down. For now I grieved for that which I had never had, to speculate on a life never lived, so that every time I saw that she had been taken from me, a part of my imagined life seemed to recede into the horizon.

“The arm grew stronger even as she did not,” I would tell my fellow cast-away, both our beards gray and encrusted with barnacles and dangling crabs. I’m sure I would have practically had to kidnap him to get

him into the bungalow, but once there I'd convince him to stay.

Over a cup of tea in the living room I'd say this as he looked at me, incredulous.

"Something in the magic I'd used," I'd say. "There was a dim glow to the arm. It even seemed to shimmer, an icy green. So I had succeeded, don't you see? I'd succeeded as well as I was ever going to. Magic might be almost utterly gone from the world now, but it still had a toe-hold when we were both young. Surely you remember, Lucius?"

In the clear morning light, the old man would say, "My name isn't Lucius and I think you've gone mad."

And he might be right.

Ultimately, the love in my heart led to my decision, not any fear of discovery. I couldn't bear the ache anymore. If she no longer existed, that ache would be gone. Foolish boys know no better. Everything is physical to them. But that ache is still here in my heart.

It was a clear night. I stole a boat from the docks and rowed my way to the hidden cove. She was there, of course, unchanged. I had with me jars of oil.

I had a hard time getting her from the bed of sargassum into the boat. I remember being surprised at her weight as I held her in my arms in the water for a time and cried into her hair, her hand caressing the back of my head.

After she was in the boat, I took it out to where the currents would bring it to deep water. I poured the oil all over her body. I lit the match. I stared into those amazing eyes one last time, then tossed the match onto the oil as I jumped into the sea. Behind me, I heard the whoosh of air and felt a rush of heat as flames engulfed the rowboat. I swam to shore without looking back. If I had looked back, I would have turned around, swum out to the burning boat, and let myself be immolated beside her.

As I staggered out of the water, I felt relief mixed with the sadness. It was over with. I felt I had saved myself from something I did not quite understand.

"What happened then," old man Lucius would say, intent on my story, forgetting the thread of his own.

"For three days, everything returned to a kind of normal," I'd tell him. "Or as normal as it could be. I slept. I went out with a couple of the first-years who didn't know you had abandoned me. I felt calm as a waveless sea."

"Calm? After all of that?"

"Perhaps I was in shock. I don't know."

"What happened after the third day?"

My guest would have to ask this, if I didn't tell him right away.

"What happened after the third day? Nothing much. The animated right arm of a dead woman climbed up the side of my building and crawled in through the window."

And with that, Lucius would be frozen in time, cup cantilevered toward his mouth, shock suffusing his

face like honey crystals melting in tea.

I woke up with the arm beside me in bed. I tried to scream, but the hand closed gently over my mouth. The skin was smooth but smelled of brine. With an effort of will, I got up, pulled the arm away, and threw it back onto the bed. It lay there, twitching. There was sand under its fingernails.

I began to laugh. It was after midnight. I was alone in my room with a reanimated, disembodied arm.

Her arm. Her hand.

It had come to me from the depths of the sea, crawling across the sea floor like some odd creature in an old book.

What would you have done? I remembered Lucius' comment that the arm displayed the same mindless motion as a wounded starfish.

I took the arm downstairs and buried it in the backyard, weighed down with bricks and string like an unwanted kitten. Then I went back to bed, unable to sleep, living with a constant sense of terror the next day.

The next night, the arm was in my room again, last remnant of my lost love.

I buried it three more nights. It came back. I tossed it into the sea. It came back. I became more creative. I mixed the arm in with the offal behind a butcher's shop, holding my nose against the stench. It came back, smeared with blood and grease. I slipped it into an artist's bag at a coffee shop. It came back, mottled with vermillion and umber paint. I tried to cut it to pieces with a bone saw. It reconstituted itself. I tried to burn it, but, of course, it would not burn.

Eventually, I came to see it meant me no harm. Not really. Whatever magic bound it, it did not seek revenge. I hadn't killed the woman. I just hadn't brought her fully back to life. In return she hadn't come fully back to me.

"So then you kept it locked in a box in your room, you say?"

"Yes," I would tell my shadow. "There was no real danger of discovery—no one came to visit me anymore. And I rarely went to classes. I was searching for answers, for a way out. You have to understand, I was in an altered state by then."

"Of course."

A sip of tea and no inclination to divulge his own secrets.

The sea beyond the window is the source of the biggest changes for me now. It goes from calm to stormy in minutes. The color of it, the tone of the waves, varies by the hour. Over the months, it brings me different things: the debris of a sunken ship, a cornucopia of jellyfish, and, of course, strands of sargassum washed up from the bay.

"I was insane," I tell him.

"Of course you were. With grief."

Youth is a kind of insanity. It robs you of experience, of perspective, of history. Without those, you are adrift.

Back to the libraries I went, and back again and again. But it was as if the floors had been swept and I could not trace my own footprints. In those echoing halls, I found every book but the one that would have helped me. Had my long-ago counterpart, standing there deliberating, thought about stealing the book? No matter now, but I found myself reliving the moment when I had slid the tome back into the stacks rather than hiding it in my satchel with at first horror and then resignation.

I even visited the remnants of the mage's college, following the ancient right wing of the library until it dissolved into the even more crumbling walls of that venerable institution. All I found there was a ruined amphitheater erupting in sedgeweeds, with a couple dozen students at the bottom, dressed in black robes. They were being lectured at by a man so old he seemed part of the eroded stones on which he sat. If magic still remained in the world, it did not exist in this place.

All I had left were the more modern texts and the memory of a phrase among the signs and symbols I had used to animate the arm: "Make what you bring back your own."

Each time I took the arm out of the box, it came garlanded with thoughts I did not want but could not make go away. Each time, I unraveled a little more. Dream and reality blended like one of my parents' more potent concoctions. Day became night and night became day with startling rapidity. I had hallucinations in which giant flowers became giant hands. I had visions of arms reaching from a turbulent, bloody sea. I had nightmares of wrists coated with downy hair and mold.

I stopped bathing entirely. I wore the same clothes for weeks. Her skin's briny taste filled my mouth no matter what cup I drank from. Her eyes stared from every corner.

"What did you do then?" my guest would prod once again. He'd have finished his tea by now and he would be wanting to leave, but ask despite himself.

"Don't you know, Lucius?" I'd reply. "Don't you remember?"

"Tell me anyway," he'd say, to humor the other crazy old man.

"One night, sick with weariness, with heartache, I took the arm to the medical school's operating theater and performed surgery on myself."

A rapid intake of breath. "You did?"

"No, of course not. You can't perform that kind of surgery on yourself. Impossible. Besides, the operating theater has students and doctors in it day and night. You can't sneak into an operating theater the way you sneak into a cadaver room. Too many living people to see you."

"Oh," he'd say, and lapse into silence.

Maybe that's all I'd be willing to tell my Lucius surrogate. Maybe that's the end of the story for him.

One night, sick with weariness, with heartache, I took the arm to the medical school's operating

theater and performed surgery on myself.

It wasn't the operating theater and I wasn't alone. No, my friend was with me the whole time.

Me, tossing the proverbial pebbles from some romantic play at the window of Lucius' new apartment one desperate, sleepless night. Hissing as loud as I could: "Lucius! I know you're in there!"

More pebbles, more hissing, and then he, finally, reluctantly, opening the window. In the light pouring out, I could see a woman behind him, blonde and young, clutching a bed sheet.

Lucius stared down at me as if I were an anonymous beggar.

"Come down, Lucius," I said. "Just for a moment."

It was a rich neighborhood, not where one typically finds starving medical students. Not the kind of street where any resident wants a scene.

"What do you want?" he whispered down at me.

"Just come down. I won't leave until you do."

Again, that measured stare. Suddenly I was afraid.

He scowled and closed the window, but a minute later he stood in the shadow of the doorway with me, his hair disheveled, his eyes slits. He reeked of beer.

"You look like shit," he said to me. "You look half-dead." Laughed at his own joke. "Do you need money? Will that make you go away?"

Even a few days earlier that would have hurt me, but I was too far gone to care.

"I need you to come down to the medical school."

"Not in a million years. We're done. We're through."

I took the arm out of my satchel and unwrapped it from the gauze in which it writhed

Lucius backed away, against the door, as I proffered it to him. He put out his hand to push it away, thought better of it.

"She came back to me. I burned the body, but the arm came back."

"My god, what were you thinking? Put it away. Now."

I carefully rewrapped it, put it back in the satchel. The point had been made.

"So you'll help me?"

"No. Take that abomination and leave now."

He turned to open the door.

I said: "I need your help. If you don't help, I'll go to the medical school board, show them the arm, and tell them your role in this." There was a wound in me because of Lucius. Part of me wanted to hurt him. Badly.

Lucius stopped with his hand on the doorknob, his back to me. I knew he was searching furiously for an escape.

“You can help me or you can kill me, Lucius,” I said, “but I’m not going away.”

Finally, his shoulders slumped and he stared out into the night.

“I’ll help, all right? I’ll help. But if you ever come here again after this, I’ll...”

I knew exactly what he’d do, what he might be capable of.

My parents had a hard life. I didn’t see this usually, but at times I would catch hints of it. Preservation was a taxing combination of intuition, experimentation, and magic. It wasn’t just the physical cost—my mother’s wrists aching from hundreds of hours of grinding the pestle in the mortar, my father’s back throbbing from hauling buckets out of the boat nearly every day. The late hours, the dead-end ideas that resulted in nothing they could sell. The stress of going out in a cockleshell of a boat in seas that could grow sullen and rough in minutes.

No, preservation came with a greater cost than that. My parents aged faster than normal—well-preserved, of course, even healthy, perhaps, but the wrinkles gathered more quickly on their faces, as did the age spots I thought were acid blotches and that they tried to disguise or hide. None of this was normal, although I could not know it at the time. I had no other parents to compare them to or examine as closely.

Once, I remember hearing their voices in the kitchen. Something in their tone made me walk close enough to listen, but not close enough to be seen.

“You must slow down,” she said to him.

“I can’t. So many want so much.”

“Then let them *want*. Let them go *without*.”

“Maybe it’s an addiction. Giving them what they want.”

“I want you with me, my dear, not down in the basement of the Preservation Guild waiting for a resurrection that will never come.”

“I’ll try...I’ll be better...”

“...Look at my hands...”

“...I love your hands...”

“...so dry, so old...”

“They’re the hands of someone who works for a living.”

“Works too hard.”

“I’ll try. I’ll try.”

Part III

I'll try. I'll try. To tell the rest of the story. To make it to the end. Some moments are more difficult than others.

When Lucius discovered what I planned to do, he called me crazy. He called me reckless and insane. I just stood there and let him pace like a trapped animal and curse at me. It hardly mattered. I was resolute in my decision.

"Lucius," I said. "You can make this hard or you can make this easy. You can make it last longer or you can make it short."

"I wish I'd never known you," he said to me. "I wish I'd never introduced you to my friends."

In the end, my calm won him over. Knowing what I had to do, the nervousness had left me. I had reached a state so beyond that of normal human existence, so beyond what even Lucius could imagine, that I had achieved perfect clarity. I can't explain it any other way. The doubt, in that moment, had fallen from me.

"So you'll do it?" I asked again.

"Let's get on with it," Lucius growled, and I had a fleeting notion that he would kill me rather than do it when he said, "But not at the operating theater. That's madness. There's a place outside the city. A house my father owns. You will wait for me there. I'll get the tools and supplies I need from the school."

Desperation, lack of sleep, and a handful of pills Lucius had been able to steal served as my only anesthetics. I had no idea, even with Lucius' help, even with my knowledge of preservation powders, if it would work. In effect, it might have been the equivalent of an assisted suicide attempt. I lay spread out on the long dining room table of that house while Lucius prepared his instruments, knowing that these minutes, these seconds, might be my last among the living.

The pain was unbelievable. I jolted in and out of consciousness to hear Lucius panting like a dog. Lucius sawing. Lucius cursing. Lucius cutting and suturing and weeping, blood everywhere, me delirious and singing an old nursery rhyme my mother had taught me, Lucius bellowing his distress in counterpoint.

"I never want to see you again," he gasped in my ear as he finished up. "Never."

I smiled up at him and reached out with my good arm to touch his bloodstained face, to say "It's all right, Lucius. It's going to be okay." And: "Thank you." The pain burned through my skull like a wildfire. The pain was telling me I was alive.

When Lucius was done, he slumped against the side of the table, wiping at his hands, mumbling something I couldn't understand. It wasn't important. All I knew was that my own right arm had been consigned to the morgue and the woman's arm had replaced my own.

Lucius saw to it that I got back to my apartment, although all I have are vague flashbacks to the inside of a cart and a painful rolling sensation. Afterwards I spent two feverish weeks in bed, the landlady knocking on the door every day, asking for the rent. I think Lucius visited me to clean and check the wound, but I can't be sure.

My memory of that time comes and goes in phases like the tide.

In the end, the same sorcery that animated the woman's arm saved me. Over time, I healed. Over time, my new arm learned to live with me. I worried at first about gangrene in the place where the arm met my flesh, but I managed to prevent that. In the mornings, I woke with it as though it was a stranger I had brought home from a tavern. Eventually, it would wake me, stroking my forehead and touching my lips so delicately that I would groan my passion out into its palm.

It was the beginning of my life, in a way. A life in exile, but a life nonetheless, with a new partner. Lucius had helped me see to that.

So it was that when I went back to my parents' bungalow, I had a purpose and a plan.

They met me at the door and hugged me tight, for they hadn't heard from me in months and I was gaunt, pale.

I did not have to tell them everything. Or anything. I tried to hide the new arm from them, but it reached out for my mother as though gathering in a confidante. What did it say to her, woman to woman? What secrets did it spell into her hands? I had to look away, as though intruding on their conversation.

"What will you do?" my father asked.

As my mother held my new arm, he had run a fingertip across it, come away with a preserving dust.

I wanted to say that I had come to ask his advice, but the truth was I had only returned after I had settled my fate. In the days, the hours, before everything had become irrevocable, I hadn't sought their counsel. And he knew that, knew it in a way that filled his eyes with bewilderment, like a solution of cobalt chloride heated to its purest color.

"What will I do?" I knew, but I didn't know if I could tell them.

My father had his hand on my shoulder, as if needing support. My mother released the arm and it returned to me and tucked its hand into my pocket, taking refuge. She had not yet said a word to me.

I told them: "I've signed on as a ship's doctor. I've enough experience for that. My ship leaves for the southern islands in three days." The arm stirred, but only barely, like an eavesdropper that has overheard its own name.

Lucius' father owned the ship. It had been Lucius' last favor to me, freely and eagerly given. "As far from the city as possible," he said to me. "As far and for as long as possible."

My father looked crushed. My mother only smiled bravely and said, "Three days is not enough, but it will have to do. And you will write. And you will come back."

Yes, I would come back, but those three days—during which I would tell them everything, sometimes defiant, sometimes defeated and weeping—were my last three days with them.

Even in the shallow water near the bungalow, you learn to find shapes in shadow, if you look long enough. Staring into deep water as it speeds past and sprays white against the prow of a large ship, the wind lacerating your face, you see even more.

But I never saw *her*. I never saw her. I don't know why I expected to, and yet on all of the hundreds of voyages I took as a ship's doctor, I always looked. The sailors say mermaids live down there, with scaly hair and soft fingertips and cold, clammy kisses. I cared for none of that. I yearned to see her face by

some strange necromancy, her blue eyes staring up at me through the ocean's darker blue.

Worse yet, whether on deck or in my cabin, whether during ferocious, stomach-churning storms or trying to save a man with a jagged piece of the deck forced through his sternum, I wanted a dead woman to tell the story of her life. I wanted to know if she had been a sister, a niece, a granddaughter. I wanted to know if she played with kittens or tormented them. Did she brew tea or drink coffee? Did she have an easy sense of humor? Was her laugh thin or full? How did she walk? What did she like to wear? So many questions came to me.

Because I had no idea of her personality, I imagined her, probably wrongly, as my double: embarrassed by her parents' eccentricities, a little amazed to find herself touched by life and led as though by the nose to this point of existence, this moment when I searched a hundred flavors of water for her smile.

It wasn't a moot point. I experienced the sweet agony of living with a part of her every day. At first, I had little control over it, and it either flopped loosely at my side, uncooperative, or caused much trouble for me by behaving eccentrically. But, over time, we reached an accord. It was more skillful than I at stitching a wound or lancing a boil. The arm seemed to so enjoy the task that I wondered if the woman had been a thwarted healer or something similar—an artist of the domestic, who could sew or cook, or perform any arcane household task.

Sometimes, at night, it would crawl outside the counterpane, to the limits of its span, and lie in the cold air until the shivers woke me and forced me to reclaim it. Then I would besiege it with the warmth of my own flesh until it succumbed and became part of me again.

"Did you enjoy being a ship's doctor?" my guest would ask, if only to change the topic, and I would be grateful.

"It was boring and exhausting," I would say. "Sailors can injure themselves in a thousand different ways. There's only so much medicine you can carry on a ship."

"But did you enjoy it?"

"When it was busy, I would get pleasure from doing good and necessary work."

Keeping busy is important. My parents taught me that the utility of work was its own reward, but it also fills up your mind, gives you less time to think.

"Sounds like it wasn't half-bad," he'd say, like someone who didn't know what I was talking about.

Would I tell him the rest? Would I tell him about the times on the docks or at sea that I saw the pale white of drowning victims laid out in rows and immediately be back in the cadaver room? That some part of me yearned for that white dead flesh? That when I slept with women now it must be in the dark so that the soft yet muscular whiteness of them would not interfere with the image in my head of a certain smile, a certain woman. That I tried to fall in love with so many women, but could not, would not, not with her arm by my side.

In time, I gained notoriety for my skills. When docked, sailors from other ships would come to me for bandaging or physicking, giving themselves over to my mismatched hands. My masculinity had never seemed brutish to me, but laid against her delicate fingers, I could not help but find myself unsubtle. Or, at least, could not help but believe she would find them so. And, indeed, the arm never touched the other

hand if it could avoid it, as if to avoid the very thought of its counterpart.

I settled into the life easily enough—every couple of years on a new ship with a new crew, headed somewhere ever more exotic. Soon, any thought of returning to the city of my birth grew distant and faintly absurd. Soon, I gained more knowledge of the capriciousness of sea than any but the most experienced seaman. I came to love the roll of the decks and the wind's severity. I loved nothing better than to reach some new place and discover new peoples, new animals, new cures to old ailments. I survived squalls, strict captains, incompetent crews, and boardings by pirates. I wrote long letters about my adventures to my parents, and sometimes their replies even caught up to me, giving me much pleasure. I also wrote to Lucius once or twice, but I never heard back from him and didn't expect to; nor could I know for sure my letters had made it into his hands, the vagaries of letters-by-ship being what they are.

In this way thirty years passed and I passed with them, growing weather-beaten and bearded and no different from any other sailor. Except, of course, for her arm.

At a distant river port, in a land where the birds spoke like women and the men wore outlandishly bright tunics and skirts, a letter from my mother caught up with me. In it, she told me that my father had died after a long illness, an illness she had never mentioned in any of her other letters. The letter was a year old.

I felt an intense confusion. I could not understand how a man who in my memory I had said goodbye to just a few years before could now be dead. It took awhile to understand I had been at sea for three decades. That somewhere in the back of my mind I had assumed my parents would live forever. I couldn't accept it. I couldn't even cry.

Six months later, slowly making my way back to my mother, another letter, this time from a friend of the family. My mother had died and been laid next to my father in the basement of the Preservation Guild.

It felt as if the second trauma had made me fully experience the first. All I could think of was my father. And then the two of them working together in their bungalow.

I remember I stood on the end of a rickety quay in a backwater port reading the letter. Behind me the dismal wooden shanty town and above explosions of green-and-blue parrots. The sun was huge and red on the horizon, as if we were close to the edge of the world.

Her hand discarded the letter and reached over to caress my hand. I wept silently.

Five years later, I tired of life at sea—it was no place for the aging—and I returned home. The city was bigger and more crowded. The medical school carried on as it had for centuries. The mages' college had disappeared, the site razed and replaced with modern, classroom-filled buildings.

I stored my many trunks of possessions—full of rare tinctures and substances and oddities—at a room in a cheap inn and walked down to my parents' bungalow. It had been abandoned and boarded-up. After two days, I found the current owner. He turned out to be a man who resembled the Stinker of my youth in the fatuousness of his smile, the foulness of his breath. This new Stinker didn't want to sell, but in the end I took the brass key, spotted with green age, from him and the bungalow was mine.

Inside, beneath the dust and storm damage, I found the echoes of my parents' preservations—familiar fond splotches across the kitchen tiles—and read their recipes in the residue.

From these remnants, what they taught me of their craft, and the knowledge I brought back from my travels, I now make my modest living. These are not quite the preservations of my youth, for there is even less magic in the world now. No, I must use science and magic in equal quantities in my tinctures and potions, and each comes with a short tale or saying. I conjure these up from my own experience or things my parents told me. With them, I try to conjure up what is so easily lost: the innocence and passion of first love, the energy and optimism of the young, the strange sense of mystery that fills midnight walks along the beach. But I preserve more prosaic things as well—like the value of hard work done well, or the warmth of good friends. The memories that sustain these concoctions spring out of me and through my words and mixtures into my clients. I find this winnowing, this release, a curse at times, but mostly it takes away what I do not want or can no longer use.

Mine is a clandestine business, spread by word-of-mouth. It depends as much on my clients' belief in me as my craft. Bankers and politicians, merchants and landlords hear tales of this strange man living by himself in a preservationists' bungalow, and how he can bring them surcease from loneliness or despair or the injustice of the world.

Sometimes I wonder if one day Lucius will become one of my clients and we will talk about what happened. He still lives in this city, as a member of the city council, having dropped out of medical school, I'm told, not long after he performed the surgery on me. I've even seen him speak, although I could never bring myself to walk up to him. It would be too much like talking to a ghost.

Still, necessity might drive me to him as it did in the past. I have to fill in with other work to survive. I dispense medical advice to the fisherfolk, many driven out of work by the big ships, or to the ragged urchins begging by the dock. I do not charge, but sometimes they will leave a loaf of bread or fish or eggs on my doorstep, or just stop to talk. My life is simple now.

Over time, I think I have forgiven myself. My thoughts just as often turn to the future as the past. I ask myself questions like *When I die, what will she do?* Will the arm detach itself, worrying at the scar line with sharpened fingernails, leaving only the memory of my flesh as the fingers pull it like an awkward crab away from my death bed? Is there an emerald core that will be revealed by that severance, a glow that leaves her in the world long after my passing? Will this be loss or completion?

For her arm has never aged. It is as perfect and smooth and strong as when it came to me. It could still perform surgery if the rest of me had not betrayed it and become so old and weak.

Sometimes I want to ask my mirror, the other old man, what lies beyond, and if it is so very bad to be dead. Would I finally know her then? Is it too much of a sentimental, half-senile fantasy, to think that I might see her, talk to her? And: have I done enough since that ecstatic, drunken night, running with my best friend up to the cadaver room, to have deserved that mercy?

One thing I have learned in my travels, one thing I know is true. The world is a mysterious place and no one knows the full truth of it even if they spend their whole life searching. For example, I am writing this account in the sand, each day's work washed away in time for the next, lost unless my counterpart has been reading it.

I am using my beloved's hand, her arm as attached to me as if we were one being. I know every freckle. I know how the bone aches in the cold and damp. I can feel the muscles tensing when I clench the purple stick and see the veins bunched at the wrist like a blue delta. A pale red birthmark on the heel of her palm looks like the perfect snail crossing the tide pool at my feet.

We never really knew each other, not even each other's names, but sometimes that is unimportant.